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**Shelter and Resistance in the Structure of Oppression: Examining
the Practice and Meaning of Transgender Women's Shelters in
China from a Social Justice Perspective**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the practice and meaning of grassroots transgender women's shelters in China as spaces of social justice and marginal resistance within an oppressive socio-cultural and policy structure. Drawing upon Iris Marion Young's "Five Faces of Oppression," Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional social justice framework (redistribution, recognition, and participation), and feminist agency theory, the study explores how a highly vulnerable group navigates systemic marginalization. The research methodology employs qualitative fieldwork, participant observation, and semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted over two weeks in the summer of 2024 at a transgender women shelter, supplemented by follow-up online contact.

The findings indicate that while transgender women experience severe structural oppression across employment, housing, education, and healthcare, the shelter functions as a crucial mechanism for material redistribution, cultural recognition, and socio-political participation. By providing stable housing, shared hormone medications, identity validation, and collective decision-making, the shelter allows residents to transform from passive victims into active agents of resistance. However, the study also highlights significant limitations, including internal tensions—such as hidden power imbalances between core managers and regular

members, and friction between long-standing and new residents—alongside severe external constraints like police harassment, landlord evictions, and institutional pressures. Ultimately, the thesis underscores both the transformative possibilities and the structural boundaries of informal queer mutual aid networks in post-socialist China.

Keywords: transgender women, oppression, social justice, agency, shelter

Popular Summary

An Invisible Crisis In contemporary China, transgender people—particularly transgender women—face multi-layered social, institutional and familial challenges. Traditional cultural expectations rooted in strict gender binary roles, coupled with a lack of anti-discrimination policies, often push these individuals to the very margins of society. Research indicates that the vast majority of transgender women have experienced domestic violence or been completely abandoned by their families, often leading to homelessness, forced withdrawal from education, and severe mental health crises. Furthermore, as changing one’s legal gender marker requires a full course of gender reassignment surgery, many are trapped in a legal grey area where their official documents do not match their physical identity. This discrepancy excludes them from the formal labour market, forcing them into precarious informal work where they frequently face blatant exploitation and wage arrears, yet are unable to seek redress through legal channels.

In the absence of institutional safeguards, grassroots mutual aid networks have emerged within the transgender women’s community. This article provides an in-depth analysis of an independent shelter for transgender women in China. Although operating in a legal grey area, the shelter has become a vital refuge by directly alleviating material deprivation through the provision of free accommodation, meals and essential oestrogen medication to its residents. More importantly, as a rare ‘safe space’, the shelter actively resists traditional gender norms and social oppression. Within the shelter, residents are addressed by their chosen names, their gender identities are fully recognised, and they receive psychological care and support through shared collective narratives and an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The core of this study lies in emphasising the ‘agency’ of transgender women—that is, their conscious choice to act, rather than merely being victims. Although the research describes and analyses the multiple forms of oppression and hardships they endure, it focuses on how these transgender women actively practise social justice. Within the shelter, they have established democratic decision-making mechanisms, with both daily rules and emergency actions determined through collective, fair voting. The shelter also serves as a crucial first line of defence against mental health crises. Given that shelter members commonly suffer from deep-seated trauma, they have spontaneously organised internal psychological support and crisis intervention. In the event of severe depression or self-harm, the shelter intervenes promptly to protect and safeguard the lives of its members.

However, this study also reveals the fragility of such grassroots mutual aid networks. Externally, the shelter faces structural and social pressures. Landlords frequently breach tenancy agreements and evict residents due to social stigma and frequent police scrutiny, forcing the shelter to relocate repeatedly. Internally, there exists an implicit power imbalance between core managers, long-term residents and ordinary members.

By living alongside residents for several weeks as a participant-observer, this study captures the lived reality of resistance among marginalised groups. This study emphasises that whilst grassroots shelters cannot single-handedly eradicate deep-rooted structural inequalities, they provide an indispensable space for survival, dignity and collective empowerment. It calls for public recognition of the agency of sexual and gender minorities, and highlights the significant gaps that

remain in Chinese society regarding policy reform, social acceptance and institutional protection for transgender communities.

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If I could speak to my past self, I would go back 12 years and tell the 16-year-old who had just started her first year of sixth form: 'You did it.' From the age of 16, when I first developed an interest in the social sciences and set my sights on studying them at a prestigious overseas university, through my first year of university when I studied relentlessly to achieve the highest mark in the whole faculty in the transfer exams and secure a place on the sociology programme, to working tirelessly after graduation to save enough for my tuition fees, to those countless nights spent writing my thesis at Lund University, through to completing my dissertation and successfully defending it, and now as I type these words of acknowledgment, this journey has taken me a full 12 years. Sociology is not a popular discipline; unlike computer science, engineering, finance or law, it is not widely recognised, nor does it offer easy employment or high earnings. Yet I find it the most romantic of disciplines.

For every person like me who is willing to devote years to the social sciences, the motivation stems from a simple yet romantic aspiration: I hope society can become more equal.

We are willing to devote our youth and our passion to this aspiration. Although, over the course of my studies, I have become increasingly aware that attempting to change society with nothing but passion and my own efforts is almost a pipe dream, the process of studying and researching sociology still allows me to feel that I am engaging in a form of participatory justice.

I like to liken academic research to a relay race with no finish line in sight. Each of us participating is merely one leg of the relay; though we cannot experience the

thrill of sprinting towards the finish line amidst the cheers, every stage of the journey holds its own significance. I believe that one day, we will reach the victorious finish line—the shore of equality.

Therefore, first and foremost, I would like to thank the social sciences. Thank you for the existence of this discipline in our time and space; thank you to the scholars and students of the social sciences who, under the institutional oppression of a capitalist system where money, materialism and power run rampant, still harbour sincere hopes and simple ideals. We deserve a round of applause.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the suicide rate among transgender people in China has been very high. According to the Suicide Ideation and Attempted Suicide among Transgender People in China study, in which a total of 1,309 participants from 32 provinces and cities in China participated out of 2,060 valid questionnaires, the lifetime prevalence of suicidal ideation and attempted suicide in the transgender community was 56.4% and 16.1%, respectively (Wang et al., 2022). This data has drawn my attention to the situation of transgender people in China. Unfortunately, the Chinese government's policies and actions in various fields continue to view transgender people as pathological, reinforce traditional binary gender roles, and lack respect and support for diverse gender identities, which creates a heavy barrier to transgender people's rights and social status (UNDP, 2018). According to the UNDP (2018) report, transgender people in China face multiple systemic dilemmas at the policy and social levels, including institutional prejudices in healthcare services, bureaucratic hurdles in changing legal gender identity, and forced school dropouts driven by campus discrimination and bullying.

At the family level, according to the 2017 Chinese Transgender Population General Survey Report, nearly 90% of birth families are unable to fully accept their transgender children, and of the 835 transgender respondents, 38.9% said that they were completely rejected by their parents or guardians, and only 10.9% were fully accepted. The most likely to be rejected were transgender women, with 48.5% of transgender women being completely rejected and opposed to transgenderism by their parents or guardians (Department of Sociology Peking University, Beijing LGBT Center, 2017). Not only that, a study by the Department of Sociology at Peking University and the Beijing LGBT Center (2017) shows

that transgender people in China suffer from widespread domestic violence because of their gender. Shockingly, only 6 out of 1,640 respondents reported that they have never suffered domestic violence from family members.

Furthermore, transgender people face extremely limited options when trying to seek help after experiencing abuse. More than 40% of individuals received no support of any kind after being abused by a parent or guardian(UNDP, 2016). Crucially, respondents noted that local communities and government departments were the least likely to provide them with any assistance.

Conservative attitudes toward transgender people in China's government, society, and family raise questions about how transgender women in China construct their social lives in the face of multiple structural oppressions from government, society, and family. When trans women lack support from the policy environment, social environment, and family environment, how do trans women support each other within the community to build, defend, and advocate for their own social justice?

The emergence of shelters as a “social response” mechanism answers this question. In China, there is a shelter for transgender women, which is not a governmental organisation, but was initiated and set up by a trans woman H. The shelter's daily operations are funded by wealthy members of the transgender community, and the shelter houses transgender women in need of help, living together to help and support each other.

Shelters not only provide transgender women with stable housing, emotional support, and the strength of a community of their own kind but also encourage transgender women to use their own initiative to fight against the injustices they

experience. Although they are a marginalised group in society, they are not willing to passively endure injustices, rather they actively resist and fight for their rights. In past studies, researchers have tended to focus on the injustices suffered by the transgender community, treating them as objects enduring suffering while ignoring their subjective agency. Trans women are not willing to submit to injustice, they form shelters on their own initiative, they encourage each other and unite their collective strength to cope with injustice and discrimination, and they are also the subjects fighting against suffering, they are both the wounded and the fighters. In my encounters with them, I felt this power deeply, and this power drove me to write this study.

This study analyses the specific forms of social injustice faced by transgender women in China: unequal labour relations and conditions of exploitation, the lack of housing rights, and marginalisation in access to educational and healthcare resources; the specific forms of support, assistance and social justice practices actually provided by shelters to transgender women; how shelters, as spaces of marginal resistance, utilise agency to practise social justice and resist injustice; and the limitations of shelters' practice of social justice under the combined influence of internal tensions and external constraints. The significance of this study lies in: understanding how transgender women in shelters cope with structural inequality, discrimination and violence; analysing the significance and limitations of their practices within a social justice framework; and deepening sociological understanding of how marginalised groups in the Chinese context resist injustice and actively practise social justice.

The research question I am trying to answer in this study is: How do transgender women's shelters serve as spaces for social justice practice in China's

socio-cultural and policy contexts? At the same time, how do trans women in the shelter exercise their subjective initiative to practice and respond to social justice through action?

2. Literature Review

The literature search for this review was primarily conducted using major electronic databases such as Google Scholar and CNKI, with Google Scholar used to search for English-language literature and CNKI for Chinese domestic research. The search terms primarily utilised combinations of keywords such as ‘trans women’, ‘transgender’, ‘transphobia’, ‘sexual minorities’, ‘marginalised groups’, ‘social exclusion’ and ‘community support/shelters’, with searches conducted across three major regions: globally, in Asia and in China. The focus was primarily on papers and institutional reports published from 2000 to the present.

The selection of literature was based on the manifestation of the marginalisation of transgender groups at the macro-structural, institutional and cultural levels. In addition to the core literature analysed in this paper, reference was also made to broader research in related fields—such as queer geography, which explores spatial resistance and safe spaces (e.g., studies on the evolution and transformation of gay spaces in China from a queer geographical perspective), and postcolonial gender studies, which examine the similarities and differences in gender binary dynamics across different regions. This approach places the regional variations observed within the socio-political frameworks of Asia and China into a broader context.

2.1. Analyses of Trans Women in Global Gender Studies

Within global gender studies, discussions regarding the situation of trans women have shifted from an early focus on ‘individual psychological adaptation’ towards a structural critique of ‘macro-structural stigma’ and ‘institutional exclusion’. Serano (2007) first introduced the key concept of ‘transmisogyny’, pointing out that the violence and discrimination faced by transgender women do not stem

solely from transphobia, but are rather a toxic product of the intertwining of misogyny and transphobia. Mainstream socio-cultural attitudes devalue and penalise biological men who voluntarily relinquish male privilege and embrace feminine traits. Consequently, transgender women endure immense violence in everyday interactions and within online social symbols (Serano, 2007).

Meanwhile, Namaste (2000), from an institutional sociological perspective, argues that the core predicament facing transgender women lies in ‘institutional erasure’. This refers to the fact that the healthcare, labour market, education and legal systems are designed from the outset to default to cisgender and binary gender norms, thereby fundamentally severing transgender women’s legitimate place in the day-to-day functioning of society (Namaste, 2000).

2.2. Structural Paradoxes in Asian Gender Studies

In Asia, the situation of transgender women presents a unique structural paradox: whilst they possess a long history and high cultural visibility in certain regions, there is a severe lack of substantive legal and institutional protection at the systemic level. In her research on gender diversity in Asia, Peletz (2009) notes that although deeply rooted transgender cultural traditions exist within the indigenous histories of South and Southeast Asia (such as India and Thailand), these traditions are largely viewed by modern bureaucratic societies as ‘cultural spectacles’—symbols of cultural curiosity—and have not been translated into substantive social justice.

Conversely, Asian countries have generally established strict binary gender registration systems. This institutional ‘social closure’ deprives transgender

women of opportunities to receive formal education and enter the legal labour market (Winter, 2012). Whilst transgender women in South and Southeast Asia are gradually becoming highly visible cultural symbols, they lack legal and institutional agency. This structural void forces a large number of Asian transgender women into the entertainment industry or the informal sex work sector; this, in turn, exacerbates the moral stigma borne by the transgender community, trapping them in a vicious cycle of institutional exclusion and marginalised existence (Winter, 2012).

Even in Thailand, where ‘ladyboy culture’ is ubiquitous, transgender people still face systemic social exclusion in core areas such as healthcare and employment (Johnson, 2022). Although Thailand enacted the Gender Equality Act as early as 2015, the lack of robust enforcement mechanisms has rendered the legislation largely symbolic (Johnson, 2022). Meanwhile, in regions governed by Sharia law (such as Malaysia), transgender behaviour is even directly criminalised under religious edicts, leading to frequent physical violence and human rights violations against this group at the hands of both the state and society (Perera, 2014).

2.3. The Chinese Context: Post-Socialist Transition and Familism

In China, the survival struggles of queer communities and transgender women are the result of the combined effects of post-socialist transition and traditional Neo-Confucian familism (Bao, 2018; UNDP, 2016). In her research on queer politics and activism in China, Bao (2018) demonstrates that the expansion of spaces for sexual minorities in China is a process of seeking micro-resistance within institutional cracks and informal networks, whilst transgender women often find themselves on the ‘margins of the margins’.

A country report published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2016) further reveals the unique pathways of oppression faced by transgender women in China: the most direct and brutal violence they endure does not come from strangers, but from within their own families. Within the framework of traditional familism, which emphasises blood ties, the continuity of the clan, and strict filial piety, transgender women's reconfiguration of their bodily agency is often viewed by their families as a fundamental betrayal of the family lineage (UNDP, 2016). This has led to frequent domestic violence, economic exploitation, and even forced 'conversion therapy'.

This micro-oppression directly undermines the physical and mental health of China's transgender community. Empirical data confirms that transgender women in China face extremely high levels of anxiety, depression and suicide risk (Liu, Li & Wang, 2021). However, these extremely high mental health risks are compounded by a systemic lack of specialised medical services and psychological interventions, creating a multi-layered predicament (Xu & Pan, 2021). Furthermore, current legislation imposes strict mandatory prerequisites for changing one's legal gender marker—namely, the completion of a full course of gender reassignment surgery (UNDP, 2016). These high financial, medical and legal barriers result in the vast majority of transgender women who are in transition or have not undergone surgery being trapped in a legal limbo where their 'legal gender does not match their physical characteristics', leading to widespread exclusion from employment and access to legal remedies (Guo, Li & Stanton, 2020).

This institutional 'delegitimisation' translates directly into widespread

employment discrimination and severely hinders their ability to seek redress through normal legal channels. For example, when transgender women experience intimate partner violence (IPV), they are often marginalised by the judicial and support systems because their legal status is not systematically recognised (Guo, Li & Stanton, 2020). Filling the void left by the absence of formal institutional safeguards, transgender women are compelled to establish informal peer support networks based on shared identity to obtain emotional and material support; an example of this is the subject of this study: shelters for transgender women. However, as previous research has revealed, due to the lack of foundational protection from macro-level policies and laws, any grassroots mutual aid initiative faces immense challenges in surviving amidst significant policy uncertainty and existential risks when confronted with multiple external constraints and structural dilemmas.

The literature review outlined above provides an indispensable theoretical and empirical framework for understanding the multidimensional realities of transgender women's survival. This study does not treat mental health crises, institutional erasure, Confucian family dynamics and legal marginalisation as isolated phenomena, but rather integrates them into a systematic analytical matrix. The literature cited in this review will be used to address the following core questions:

How do informal grassroots mutual aid networks, such as shelters for transgender women, struggle to operate and carve out a space for survival amidst the multiple dilemmas of legal vacuums, a scarcity of specialised medical services, and marginalisation from judicial recourse, as highlighted by Guo et al. (2020) and Xu & Pan (2021)?

To what extent can these grassroots mutual aid spaces function as a form of micro-resistance to counteract the ‘spatial marginalisation’ identified by Bao (2018) and to alleviate the intra-household displacement and violence resulting from traditional familism, as documented by UNDP (2016)?

By bringing our empirical findings back to and contrasting them with the academic frameworks established by scholars such as Serano (2007), Namaste (2000) and Bao (2018), this study’s conclusions go beyond mere phenomenological description to offer a critical theoretical assessment of the ‘structural limitations’ and ‘potential’ of contemporary informal queer mutual aid organisations in China.

2.4. Research Gap

Current research on transgender women largely portrays them as passive recipients of oppression, emphasising their victimhood, whilst paying scant attention to how they actively seek out spaces, survival strategies and pathways of resistance within complex social realities. Particularly against the backdrop of limited support for transgender issues within China’s social and legal environment, there remains a lack of sufficient research exploring how transgender women demonstrate agency in daily life, build supportive communities and create dignified living spaces. Previous research on transgender women in China has primarily focused on the difficulties and injustices they face in specific areas of social life, portraying them as victims of social injustice who can only passively endure discriminatory treatment from the outside world. Previous research has paid scant attention to how transgender women resist injustice in real life and carve out their own paths amidst the cracks of social marginalisation.

Consequently, this thesis aims to explore how transgender women actively practise social justice.

3. **Theoretical framework**

This paper adopts a theoretical perspective centred on feminist agency theory and social justice theory, exploring how shelters for transgender women exercise agency to achieve social justice. By examining feminist agency theories developed by scholars such as Nancy Hartsock, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood and Bell Hooks, this study offers diverse perspectives on understanding the mechanisms by which marginalised groups operate both within and outside power structures. This approach is particularly relevant for analysing how transgender women in China respond to social oppression and practise social justice through their everyday actions. Furthermore, by reviewing the core concepts of Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice—redistribution, recognition and participation—the study provides theoretical support to elucidate the significance of transgender women's shelters as spaces for the practice of social justice.

What is 'agency', and where does it come from? Hartsock (1983) emphasises that women are not merely victims of patriarchal oppression, but possess the potential to develop resistance and transform social structures through concrete social practices. Hartsock's theory of agency stems from her Feminist Standpoint Theory, a key theoretical framework for understanding how oppressed groups develop unique perspectives and subjective agency. Hartsock (1983) argues that the core of agency lies in the social standpoint, which determines an individual's perception of the world. When women are oppressed and marginalised, the social experience of being in a disadvantaged position may spark intense resentment towards structural oppression, thereby giving rise to agency that resists patriarchal power structures.

In contrast to Hartsock's view that agency is the resistance of marginalised groups

against structures based on their own social standpoint, Butler (1990) argues that agency is not a direct confrontation with structures, but rather is created through the process of repeating socially constructed gender norms. Butler's theory of agency stems from her performativity theory, which posits that gender is not an inherent attribute of the individual, but rather a pre-established, socially constructed gender identity. Individuals construct what is termed 'gender' through countless repetitions of social practices, behaviours and language that conform to gender norms (Butler, 1990). On this basis, agency arises from disruptions to gender norms during the process of repetition; Specifically, no repetition of gender norms is ever exactly the same, and these subtle variations accumulate to constitute a prying and fracturing of gender norms. The agency demonstrated by groups such as transgender women and gender non-conforming individuals through their identity claims and practices is precisely a challenge to and a reproduction of established gender norms (Butler, 1990). Taking China's transgender women's shelters as an example, within constrained socio-cultural structures, transgender women 'disrupt' the dominant gender structure through bodily practices, emotional support and collective collaboration, thereby demonstrating the dynamic nature of gender discipline.

Among the various scholars who have explored agency, Hooks's understanding of agency really inspires me to see the shelter as a space for social justice practices. Hooks (1984) argues that agency is not an individual choice outside of the social structure, but rather a powerful resistance through critical consciousness, voice, and community practices within the oppressive structure, and that the margins are not just passive places of exclusion, but rather spaces that nurture resistance and reconstruct self and collective consciousness. Hooks (1984) emphasises the need to redefine feminist discourse from the margins and to give legitimacy to the voice

of marginal groups. Hooks (1989) refers to talking back as a gesture of resistance, which is not simply expressing an opinion, but rather, in the face of conditions of repression and marginalization. Daring to speak in one's own language, to name the world, and to question hegemony is a profoundly political act of agency. Talking back as proposed by Hooks (1989) does not refer to a mere linguistic expression, but to a practical action of making one's own voice heard, of assertion, and of resistance in the face of structures of oppression. Talking back means the awakening of self-consciousness of marginalised groups, turning them from objects to subjects, challenging oppressive power structures, resisting intellectual authority and cultural hegemony, and making their voices heard on the margins of race, gender, and class. The establishment of shelters by transgender women on their own initiative is a space for marginalised groups to establish a collective voice, reconstruct their identities and participate in society, and for transgender women, the shelters are a space for transforming from passive victimisation to active resistance.

Fraser and Honneth had a heated debate about the core of social justice. In the 1990s, with the emergence of new forms of structural inequality in post-cold war societies, such as identity politics, gender, race, and cultural diversity, the traditional redistribution-centred theories of social justice were challenged. Honneth (1996) argues that the core of modern social justice is the recognition of people as equal moral individuals in social relations, and the self-realisation of individuals depends on the recognition of others at three levels: love, rights and social respect. Love, rights and respect are of course very important, but Honneth believes that all social injustices, including economic exploitation, are problems caused by a lack of recognition, that economic inequality is also a manifestation of the fact that people are not treated as equals, and that the realisation of justice

needs to rely on positive recognition in interpersonal relationships rather than purely distributive mechanisms, and criticises Fraser for focusing only on cold policies and systems - ignoring the interpersonal level of emotion and dignity claims - and over-technicalising the issue of social justice (Honneth, 1996) . Fraser (1995) does not ignore the importance of recognition, but discusses social justice from three perspectives: economic, cultural and political participation, and proposes a three-dimensional justice model of redistribution, recognition and participation. Fraser (1995) recognises that recognition is a dimension of social justice, and that respect for and recognition of individual and group identities is an important way for minority groups to in gaining cultural dignity, but unlike Honneth, Fraser does not see recognition as the only or the most important way to achieve social justice. Fraser (1995) emphasises that economic inequality is one of the core issues of social justice, and that unequal economic treatment can leave disadvantaged groups and minorities impoverished and marginalised. For example, in the case of transgender women, gender identity transformation is often accompanied by employment discrimination, income disparity and lack of social security. Transgender women are often rejected on the basis of their gender identity during the job-seeking process, which makes it difficult for them to obtain a stable source of income, and in addition, the lack of healthcare and unequal distribution of social benefits further exacerbate their economic hardship. In addition to redistribution. Fraser (1995) argues that true social justice requires ensuring that all people can participate equally in social and political life. However, trans women are often marginalised and underrepresented in political and social decision-making, and this lack of participation not only deprives them of the opportunity to express their own needs and rights, but also makes relevant policies and laws lack consideration of their particular circumstances, for example, trans women's voices are often ignored in the formulation of policies that relate to

gender equality, resulting in policies that fail to effectively address the specific issues they face (Flores, Herman, & Mallory, 2015; Hines, 2010). Fraser's three-dimensional theoretical model of social justice, which emphasises the need to focus simultaneously on the three dimensions of economic redistribution, cultural recognition and political participation, is highly relevant to the social injustices faced by trans women. In summary, the theoretical framework constructed in this study comprises 'feminist agency theory' and 'three-dimensional social justice theory', providing a robust analytical pathway for examining the micro-political practices of shelters for transgender women in China.

4. Research Background

Transgender studies in China began as early as the 1970s and have gradually evolved into an independent academic field over the following decades. In his book *Transgender in China*, Howard Chiang (2024) offers a systematic review of the historical trajectory of transgender studies in the Chinese context. He argues that while transgender issues have only gained significant visibility in academic and public discourse over the past twenty years, their ideological foundations were already forming during the 1970s and 1980s. This period saw major shifts in China's social structures, political ideologies, and cultural values. Within this changing environment, discussions surrounding gender and sexual orientation began to move beyond the traditional frameworks of the women's movement and gay politics, entering a more critical, fluid, and intersectional space of inquiry. This intellectual shift not only created new possibilities for the acceptance and understanding of transgender issues in China, but also brought local discourse into theoretical resonance with the rising global prominence of queer theory, which challenges normative structures of gender and sexuality. Chiang (2024) emphasizes that the emergence of transgender studies in China was not merely the result of isolated efforts by individual scholars, but rather the outcome of broader interdisciplinary and collaborative academic engagement. This spirit of intellectual collaboration is exemplified by joint publications such as *PoMosexuals*, a collection of writings that critically interrogates gender binaries and heteronormative dominance. Deeply influenced by postmodern theory, the text highlights the potential of cultural studies and identity politics to deconstruct normative gender frameworks. Moreover, Chiang points to the 1998 publication of the "Transgender Issue," edited by Susan Stryker in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, as a landmark moment. This was the first time a major queer

studies journal dedicated an entire issue to transgender topics, signifying the formal recognition of transgender studies as an autonomous academic discipline. This milestone not only reshaped how transgender issues were understood within Western academia, but also provided a critical reference point for Chinese scholars seeking to develop a localized transgender epistemology and to push the boundaries of gender studies in China.

In contemporary China, transgender women face multifaceted and layered challenges that span key areas such as health, employment, education, legal recognition, and policy support (Asia Catalyst, 2021). Health concerns include not only access to basic medical services but also more complex issues related to physical and mental well-being (PubMed, 2020). Due to long-standing social marginalization and institutional neglect, transgender women often struggle to obtain medical care that affirms and respects their gender identity (Department of Endocrinology, Peking University Third Hospital; Beijing LGBT Center; Department of Plastic Surgery, Peking University Third Hospital, 2021). Employment discrimination is also widespread: many transgender women encounter rejection, harassment, or pressure to conceal their identity in the job market, pushing them further to the margins of the formal labor economy (Li & Dong, 2024). As a result, a significant number are forced into illegal sex work as a means of survival, which in turn exposes them to heightened health risks, violence, and social stigma—creating a vicious cycle of marginalization (The Guardian, 2015). The 2021 National Transgender Health Survey, one of the most comprehensive reports to date on the lives of transgender people in China, collected data from 9,390 participants, with a final valid sample of 7,625 individuals. Among them, transgender women accounted for 37.2% and transgender men 19.2%. The report examined various dimensions including

access to healthcare, mental health, family support, and public participation, revealing the complex social conditions in which transgender individuals live. One of the most alarming findings was the widespread prevalence of involuntary “gender reversal therapy” within the transgender community. These coercive treatments—often initiated by family members and based on pseudoscientific practices—aim to “correct” an individual’s gender identity and represent a grave violation of bodily autonomy and psychological well-being. This issue is further confirmed by findings from another significant study. According to a report jointly published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Asia-Pacific Transgender Network (APTN) on the status of transgender people's right to education in China, 11.9% of 1,640 surveyed transgender respondents reported being forced by parents or guardians to undergo so-called "conversion therapy" due to their gender identity. These treatments may take the form of psychiatric consultations, involuntary institutionalization, or forced medical interventions—all of which constitute a form of gender-based violence rooted in fear and prejudice. During my fieldwork at a shelter for transgender women, many residents shared stories of individuals they knew who had been forcibly sent to gender correction institutions. For example, S recounted the case of a transgender woman friend who had a stable job and a committed partner, but was abducted on her way home from work by a conversion therapy center hired by her family. This case starkly illustrates that even transgender women who manage to attain a degree of social stability remain vulnerable to familial control and systemic violence. Chiang (2024) notes that such phenomena reflect a broader cultural climate in which negative public perception and the denial of transgender identities persist as dominant forces. The widespread use of gender reversal therapies is deeply embedded in this cultural terrain. As Hooks(1984) has argued, mainstream discourses often strip marginalized individuals of agency, denying

them the right to define their own identities and life paths. In the Chinese context, addressing the plight of transgender women therefore requires not only legal and institutional reforms but also a profound cultural reckoning that challenges heteronormative assumptions and restores agency to those whose voices have long been suppressed.

The report *Public Perception of Transgender Rights: China* delves into the attitudes of Chinese society towards transgender individuals and their rights (Luhur, Brown, Liu, & Shaw, 2021). It offers an in-depth analysis of data derived from the 2017 Global Attitudes Towards Transgender People Survey conducted in China, providing fresh perspectives on societal perceptions of transgender individuals (Luhur, Brown, Liu, & Shaw, 2021). The findings of this report reflect a complex landscape in which certain aspects of transgender issues are accepted, but overall societal acceptance remains low (Luhur, Brown, Liu, & Shaw, 2021). The data highlights that 57.6% of respondents expressed negative attitudes towards the acceptance of transgender individuals within families. This statistic points to the significant social resistance faced by transgender people in the family environment, where support remains limited (Luhur, Brown, Liu, & Shaw, 2021). More than half of the survey participants reported that their families did not support or accept transgender family members, underlining the deep-seated stigma still prevalent in Chinese society regarding transgender identities. In the context of education, the report also reveals that approximately 70.8% of transgender individuals experienced violence at school, emphasizing the urgent need for a shift in attitudes within educational environments (Luhur, Brown, Liu, & Shaw, 2021). This violence points to an alarming lack of understanding and acceptance of transgender identities, which contributes to a hostile atmosphere for transgender students (Luhur, Brown, Liu, & Shaw, 2021). Additionally, the report

sheds light on the legal vulnerabilities of transgender individuals in China. The country's legal framework does not offer robust or comprehensive protection for transgender rights. A key area of concern is the absence of effective anti-discrimination laws, which leaves transgender individuals exposed to systemic inequalities, especially in critical sectors such as employment and education. The report highlights the bureaucratic challenges transgender people face when attempting to update their gender markers on official documents. Transgender individuals are often required to submit extensive medical and legal proof, which can be difficult or impossible to obtain. This requirement severely limits their opportunities for personal and professional advancement. The report also explores the broader implications of these legal obstacles. While transgender individuals may be able to amend their name and gender marker on identity documents with appropriate documentation, they continue to face significant challenges when attempting to change these markers on other important records, such as academic transcripts and professional qualifications. These difficulties create barriers to opportunities for further education, employment, and career development. The social and professional discrimination transgender individuals face is compounded by the emotional and psychological toll it takes on them. The report notes that transgender individuals are at an elevated risk for mental health issues, including a significantly higher risk of suicide attempts compared to the general population. This heightened risk is closely linked to the rejection and discrimination they experience within their families, schools, and workplaces. The report concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for social, legal, and institutional reforms to reduce discrimination and improve the overall quality of life for transgender individuals in China. This comprehensive examination of transgender rights and public perception in China underscores the critical need for greater acceptance, legal protection, and social support for transgender individuals.

Without these changes, the challenges faced by transgender people in China will continue to hinder their ability to fully participate in society (Luhur, Brown, Liu, & Shaw, 2021).

Transgender individuals face significant challenges in obtaining support across multiple aspects of their lives, including within their families, the public sphere, schools, the legal system, and society as a whole. These challenges have led to the marginalization of many transgender people, preventing them from accessing stable employment and forcing some into sex work as a means of survival. However, this situation has given rise to additional social problems, exacerbating the already precarious position of transgender individuals. A survey report focusing on the survival experiences of transgender female sex workers in Beijing and Shanghai provides a detailed exploration of their living conditions, working environments, health management, and the level of social support they receive (Zhang & Li, 2023). According to the survey, many transgender women in these cities are compelled to enter the sex work industry due to the discrimination and rejection they face because of their gender identity (Zhang & Li, 2023). As a result, these women often experience significant hardships while navigating the difficulties of survival in this stigmatized profession (Zhang & Li, 2023). The report highlights that many of the transgender female sex workers interviewed heavily depend on sex work for their financial needs, yet at the same time, they face a stark lack of access to essential healthcare services and social support networks, this lack of support not only jeopardizes their physical health but also raises serious concerns about their mental well-being, the report notes that the mental health of these individuals is often neglected, with high levels of psychological distress reported among them, further compounding the difficulties they face in their daily lives (Zhang & Li, 2023).

In conclusion, the survey emphasizes the urgent need for enhanced support systems, healthcare services, and legal protections for transgender individuals, particularly those in the sex work industry, to address their physical and mental health challenges and reduce the socio-economic inequalities they face (Zhang & Li, 2023). To improve the plight of transgender women in China, the most crucial step is to provide direct support for this group through legal and policy reforms. However, the current policies and laws in China remain insufficient to fully protect and support transgender individuals. An important report titled *Legal Recognition of Gender Identity of Transgender People – An Assessment of Relevant Laws and Policies in China* was jointly prepared by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and China Women's College (CWC). This report systematically analyzes the recognition of transgender people's gender identity and the protection of their rights within China's existing legal framework (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018). The report highlights the legal and social challenges faced by transgender individuals in China, underscoring the risks posed by the lack of legal recognition and protection, as well as the persistent social stigma and discrimination they face, calling for wider attention and reflection. The report begins by providing a legal background, outlining China's current human rights protection framework. Despite the constitutional guarantee of basic human rights in China, there are significant gaps in laws and policies regarding the recognition of transgender people's gender identities. A particularly concerning issue is the strict requirement in the *Technical Management Code for Gender Reassignment*, which mandates that transgender individuals must undergo gender affirmation surgery before they can change the gender marker on their ID cards. This requirement places many transgender people in a difficult situation, as they may not be able to access or afford the

surgery, leading to the legal disregard of their gender identity. This legal “invisibility” results in severe social exclusion and contributes to heightened mental health issues. Furthermore, the report mentions the complex and often burdensome application process for gender affirmation surgeries, particularly those based on pathological diagnoses, which creates additional barriers for transgender people in healthcare and employment. These bureaucratic challenges make it difficult for transgender individuals to access necessary medical care and secure stable employment, further exacerbating their marginalization. In the workplace, the report emphasizes the need for greater gender equality in employment and recommends stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and effective prevention of sexual harassment. Transgender individuals continue to face significant inequality in the workplace, as well as in healthcare, education, and social services. The report cites relevant statistics and studies reflecting the unequal treatment of transgender people in these areas and highlights the urgent need for changes in laws and policies to safeguard their basic human rights. In conclusion, the report strongly advocates for the reform of China’s current legal and policy frameworks to provide transgender people with the recognition, protection, and equality they deserve. Legal reforms, along with greater social awareness, are critical to improving the lives of transgender individuals. Only by ensuring that transgender people are not only legally recognized but also treated with dignity and respect, can they live lives of equality and dignity (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018).

5. Method

5.1. Epistemology

Epistemologically, this study is grounded in interpretivism and social constructionism, drawing upon an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates feminist epistemology and critical theory. It rejects the academic paradigm of traditional positivism, which seeks to completely separate the researcher from the research subject and pursues absolute neutrality and reproducibility. From a positivist perspective, social phenomena are often reduced to cold, objective data indicators; however, this does not apply to the present study. In this research, the researcher and the research subjects have formed a certain degree of overlap and integration during the fieldwork and participatory observation, with the researcher becoming an integral part of the research itself.

For research subjects such as Chinese transgender women's shelters—which exist on the absolute margins of society, subject to stigmatisation and situated in a legal grey area—the objectivity of traditional positivism struggles to foster empathy with the subjects, thereby failing to address the essence of oppression; indeed, it may even constitute 'epistemic violence' against marginalised groups.

Consequently, this study adopts Haraway's concept of 'Situated Knowledges', which posits that all knowledge production is embodied and partial. In other words, transgender women's understanding of society is forged through the physical suffering they have endured—such as domestic violence within their families of origin, rejection when seeking employment, and physical injuries. Their knowledge is 'embodied'. As a researcher (myself), a 'cisgender woman', my female body made it easier for me to establish trust with them, and even to participate in their activities and accompany them to hospital; yet at the same time,

my 'cisgender woman' body also signifies that I possess a different biological identity from theirs. The transgender women and the researcher (myself) jointly determined the interview data collected for this study. I acknowledge that my research is partial. My 'partial perspective' has captured the most authentic micro-struggles within this shelter, which is in itself of immense value.

5.1.1. Feminist Standpoint Theory and Strong Objectivity

This study further draws upon the Feminist Standpoint Theory of Sandra Harding (1993, 2004) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990). At the core of standpoint theory lies the recognition of the existence of 'epistemic privilege'—that is, groups situated at the bottom and on the margins of social power structures, in this study, transgender women facing domestic violence, exclusion from the labour market and institutional erasure—tend to possess a deeper and more critical insight into existing power networks, such as cis-heteronormativity, patriarchy and the mechanisms of capitalism, precisely because they bear the brunt of exploitation and violence from dominant structures.

Consequently, treating the subjective experiences of shelter members as the starting point for knowledge production actually constitutes what Harding terms 'strong objectivity'. By starting research from marginalised lives, this study is able to reveal the micro-resistance practices and survival tactics of marginalised groups that are rendered invisible or erased within grand statistical data or official narratives.

5.1.2. Knowledge Production as Co-construction

From a social constructivist perspective, this study posits that social reality is not

an objectively fixed entity passively awaiting ‘discovery’ by the researcher in the field, but is instead continually created by actors within the field through daily interactions, narratives and the attribution of meaning; in this study, the researcher is also an actor. Consequently, the production of knowledge in this study is a process of ‘co-construction’ between the researcher and the research subjects within a specific spatio-temporal context. The researcher’s deep involvement means that both the researcher and the research subjects jointly shape the boundaries of the interview data, the blind spots in observation, and the depth of emotional connection. Therefore, the epistemological stance of this study incorporates a distinct element of reflexivity. This study regards the asymmetry between researcher and research subjects, ethical conflicts in the field (such as the conflict between ethical codes and personal convictions in crisis intervention situations), and practical shortcomings in the research process as integral components of knowledge production.

5.2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology with the goal of gaining an in-depth understanding of transgender women's daily experiences, identity negotiation and social interactions in the shelter. The main research methods used in the study are fieldwork, participant observation, in-depth interviews and group work. The fieldwork was conducted in June 2024 for two weeks in a sheltered institution specializing in serving transgender women in central China. I entered the shelter a female researcher who has an interest in researching transgender individuals. I participated in the daily activities of the shelter, including meals, outings, discussions and chats, as well as dealing with crises in the shelter, such as assisting and accompanying trans women to psychiatric hospitals and dealing with self-harming incidents. The transwomen knew I came to them as a researcher, and

they were aware at all times that everything that would happen in my research and field work process would be noted and ethically reported. I observed and recorded transgender women's social behaviors, emotional connections, life patterns and emotional expressions in the shelter. In this process, I intervene from a position of 'limited participation', participating in the field activities and capturing the natural interactive situations without interfering with the daily status of the interviewees as much as possible. In addition to participatory observation, I also conducted unstructured interviews and semi-structured interviews. Unstructured interviews took place during the fieldwork period when I lived with the shelter members. I seized every opportunity to chat with the transgender women and learn as much as I could about their lives, such as when we ate together, went shopping, and rode on transportation. Every evening until late at night, in the living room of the shelter, I conducted semi-structured interviews and group work with trans women. Interestingly, the trans women at the shelter did not like to stay in their own rooms; they liked to stay in the living room and gather with the group, even if they were doing their own things, they liked to stay in the living room as a communal space, which not only provided me with more opportunities to observe their collective interactions, but also facilitated me to carry out the group work, in which the number of participants ranged from three to six people.

After the fieldwork was completed, I continued to keep in touch with the transgender women at the shelter, conducting online interviews to supplement my research data, and S would often take the initiative to tell me about her life and update me on new happenings at the shelter. To be specific, S was the shelter resident with whom I had the closest relationship. After the fieldwork concluded, whenever something significant happened at the shelter, she would tell me about it. For instance, it was S who later told me about the incident where a resident's

parents had called the police, falsely claiming that the shelter had abducted their child, leading to a confrontation between the police and the shelter residents. S placed a great deal of trust and reliance in me; she shared details of her life, emotions and work situation with me on numerous occasions. For instance, she told me in great detail about her girlfriend's release from prison, how she found a job but her wages were withheld, and how she left the shelter to move to another city to live with her girlfriend and work. The most recent instance was on 26 June 2010, when S told me she had gone for an interview at a bookshop with a construction theme. S became the conduit through which I continued to understand the circumstances of transgender women after concluding my fieldwork; through our frequent interactions, we developed a deeper friendship and trust, and she provided further authentic supplementary material for this study.

The reason for choosing this shelter for fieldwork stems from knowing S. In May 2024 I was introduced to S, a trans woman, by a friend, and we gradually built familiarity through online contact via WeChat. S was living in a trans women's shelter at the time. She told me that after her girlfriend was arrested by the public security authorities on charges of gathering a crowd to commit obscenity, she was unable to continue living in the original city because of the PTSD she had developed from the incident. It was then that the Transgender Shelter, led by H, took her in, and S told me a lot of stories about what happened at the shelter. My contact with S has made me intensely curious and interested in the situation of the shelter, and I hope to open a window to the current situation of transgender women in China through my fieldwork and participatory observation of the shelter.

Fieldnotes were taken daily and included reflections, contextual details, and

observed dialogues. Given the high sensitivity of participants' identities and the protective nature of the shelter environment, full fieldnotes are not included in this thesis to ensure confidentiality and personal safety. However, all empirical materials cited in the text are drawn from systematically documented and carefully curated field data. All quoted material has been anonymized, with identifying information removed or modified for ethical compliance.

5.3. Researcher's Positionality and Reflexivity

A central tenet of qualitative research is the recognition that the researcher is themselves part of the research field, and that the researcher's social identity and actions profoundly influence the generation and interpretation of research data. In this study, as the sole cisgender female academic researcher within the research field, my identity oscillates and is pulled between the roles of 'outsider' and 'insider'.

Reflections on power asymmetries: My cisgender identity means I am naturally spared the institutional discrimination faced by transgender women. Consequently, I maintained a high degree of vigilance in the field, scrutinising the 'cisgender privilege' I carried. When designing an 'equal, open and fluid dialogue structure', I proactively relinquished control of the discourse, adopting more the role of a 'listener' to avoid a condescending gaze towards marginalised groups.

The Expanded Roles of "Collaborator" and "Companion": I do not act as a detached, objective observer; I am also a deeply involved participant who engages with and responds to the daily crises at the shelter. During my fieldwork, I assisted in handling urgent self-harm crises (such as member W's sudden self-harm

episode), and when accompanying member B to a psychiatric hospital, I was collectively chosen to negotiate with doctors and family members, as my cisgender female appearance was least likely to provoke resistance from her relatives. Although this high degree of physical and emotional involvement breached the traditional boundaries of anthropological neutrality, it was precisely through this shared risk-taking that I earned the profound trust of the transgender women's community within the field, thereby ensuring the authenticity and depth of the empirical materials.

5.4. Observed Limitations

The following unavoidable shortcomings were revealed during the fieldwork and the writing of this study:

The researcher's (my) ethical dilemma: although my status as an actor-participant allowed me to gain the trust of my research subjects, the coexistence of my roles as both an outsider and an insider also presented certain ethical dilemmas during the fieldwork process. When I observed certain behaviours within the shelter that I did not condone based on my personal values, I was conflicted as to whether, in my capacity as a researcher, I should speak out and express my views. For instance, there were widespread instances of drug overdose within the shelter, as well as promiscuity; some transgender women sought to use their transgender identity to migrate by applying for political asylum in Western countries, and so on. Based on my personal values as a researcher, I did not agree with some of their practices; however, from a researcher's perspective, I was unsure whether I should speak out or intervene, as I feared that voicing my opposition might make them feel subject to top-down discrimination and moral judgement. Furthermore, in our correspondence following the conclusion of the fieldwork, shelter resident S displayed a great deal of reliance on me; she frequently sent me messages to

confide in me and share her thoughts. However, this also left me feeling uncertain about how to maintain an appropriate social distance with my research subjects.

Limitations of the temporal and spatial dimensions: Due to objective constraints, the on-site fieldwork in the physical setting lasted only two weeks (June 2024). Although intensive round-the-clock accompaniment yielded a wealth of micro-level data, it remained difficult to track the organisational evolution of the shelter over a longer timeframe—such as changes resulting from shifts in core management, tightening external policies, or the disruption of funding sources. Although long-term online follow-ups and supplementary interviews were conducted subsequently, the level of engagement in online interactions was, after all, limited.

The emotional toll of crisis intervention on the research focus: Frequent outbreaks of self-harm and suicide crises during the fieldwork—such as the group interview on the third night being interrupted by W’s self-harm, or H stating that F was dangerous whilst F and I were sharing a room—placed immense psychological and emotional strain on me. The frequent switching between the roles of ‘rescuer’ and ‘researcher’, coupled with the complex environment within the shelter and the multiple traumas experienced by its residents, required me to absorb a high volume of distressing information during the research period. The psychological strain this caused disrupted the originally planned systematic research rhythm to some extent, and certain conversations had to be set aside in the face of the urgency of crisis intervention.

5.5. Ethical Considerations

The study focuses on the experiences of transgender women in shelters. Due to the high level of vulnerability of this group in the context of homelessness, discrimination and gender-based violence, special attention was given to the observance of ethical norms throughout the research to ensure respect and protection of the interviewees. The following are the ethical measures adopted for this study:

5.5.1. Informed consent

All participants were provided with a clear and understandable explanation of the purpose, methodology, and potential use of the study prior to their participation in the study, which was completely voluntary for all participants. Participants were also clearly informed of their right to withdraw unconditionally at any stage of the study without giving reasons and without any adverse consequences.

5.5.2. Anonymity and Confidentiality

Considering the sensitivity of transgender women's gender identity and the special and private nature of transgender women's shelters, anonymity is strictly enforced in this study. All content that may involve identity information has been deleted or blurred. All the names of the interviewees and trans women mentioned in the study are pseudonyms, not the real names on the identity documents, and the specific locations and names of the shelters are not mentioned in this study. The original fieldwork diaries, interview transcripts and audio recordings were kept in password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

5.5.3. Avoidance of exploitation and power sensitivity

The research process was fully cognizant of the power imbalance that may exist between the researcher and the participants. In order to mitigate this imbalance, the interviews were designed as an equal, open and relaxed conversation rather than a one-way questioning. Participants were encouraged to steer the direction of the conversation as they wished, and the researcher avoided leading language or eliciting responses. During those sensitive moments, I participated in their daily activities in my capacity as a researcher, and I repeatedly sought their consent, particularly when accompanying them to hospital and during late-night conversations. The participants were always aware of my role as a researcher. I explained to them what would be included in the thesis and obtained their consent.

5.5.4. Trauma-informed principles

Because trans women in the shelter generally experience trauma (including physical, gender, and psychological violence), the research interview process followed a trauma-informed approach, including: allowing respondents to skip questions or discontinue the interview at any time, providing psychosocial support or information about relevant resources at the end of the interview, and the researcher paying attention to respondents' moods at all times, and suspending interviews immediately if obvious discomfort is detected. Interview.

6. Analyze

This analytical section adopts a systematic structure designed to explore two core aspects: the first part examines how transgender women in China experience multi-layered structural oppression both within and outside grassroots spaces; the second part assesses the potential and contributions of transgender shelters in practising social justice and promoting agency within the transgender community, whilst analysing the inherent limitations of transgender women's shelters from a critical perspective. It thus addresses the question: How do transgender women's shelters serve as spaces for the practice of social justice within China's socio-cultural and policy contexts? At the same time, how do trans women in the shelter exercise their subjective initiative to practise and respond to social justice through action?

To ensure theoretical consistency and transparency, the interpretation of empirical data is not limited to describing participants' life experiences; rather, it strictly adheres to the conceptual framework established in the theoretical chapter, transforming raw narratives into structured academic insights.

This study's analysis is divided into two main sections, linking empirical data with core theory:

Part One of the analysis: Deconstructing structures of oppression. This section applies Iris Marion Young's (1990) 'five faces of oppression' (exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence) to the oppressive circumstances faced by transgender women. These categories of oppression are deeply interwoven with Nancy Hartsook's (1983) 'feminist stance theory' to reflect the epistemological stance of shelter members; whilst integrating Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of 'gender performativity' to analyse how oppression compels or restricts the everyday 'performance' of gender identity.

Part Two: Assessing social justice, agency and their limitations. This section employs Nancy Fraser's (2003, 2008) three-dimensional theory of social justice (redistribution, recognition, representation/participation). Fraser's model does not reduce participants' agency to a romanticised narrative of open resistance, but rather engages in a critical dialogue with Saba Mahmood's (2001, 2005) theory of agency, thereby elucidating how transgender women construct their selves within an environment characterised by extreme constraints and uncertainty.

6.1. Social injustice experienced by transgender women in China

6.1.1. Unequal labour relations and conditions of exploitation

Through field research conducted at a shelter for transgender women, this study found that the social injustices currently faced by transgender women in China are primarily manifested in unequal labour relations and exploitative working conditions. These unequal labour relations are reflected in widespread instances of wage deductions, the absence of employment contracts, and a lack of recourse for workers to defend their rights. As illustrated by the experience of interviewee S in this study, in March 2025, Shanshan told me that she had previously worked at a shop, but her wages were not paid on time. Interview S recounted her experiences as follows: My performance-related pay has only been paid out in part and has not been issued on the stipulated date. I was previously employed at a shop and left in early March. The salary that should have been paid on the 14th was delayed, with the explanation that the nationwide stock-taking had not yet concluded and the payroll had not been processed. (Interviewee S, 2025) Meanwhile, S was not the only transgender woman to have experienced wage arrears. During the fieldwork, shelter resident Y worked as a delivery rider for a food delivery company, which failed to pay her the standard wage and was only willing to pay a very small portion of her salary. This was not the first time Y had experienced wage arrears.

H, the shelter's manager, once described to me the circumstances of Y's wage arrears:

“Y had previously worked as a delivery rider for a food delivery company, and that company had failed to pay her wages. At the time, all of us at the shelter gathered together intending to go to the company's premises to make a scene and help her reclaim her wages. However, just as we had arrived at the company's entrance, Y, out of timidity, stopped us. This time, she switched to a different food delivery company but still faced wage arrears; however, due to the previous experience, nobody wanted to help her protest this time.” (Interviewee H, 2024)

Wage arrears are extremely common among transgender women, which has led some to turn to the grey economy to earn money quickly; for example, H, the shelter's manager, previously engaged in sex work to raise funds for the shelter's establishment and operation. When I asked H how she secured funding for the shelter's day-to-day operations, she replied: “The shelter has quite a bit of influence now, so we receive funding from some wealthier transgender women. But when I first started raising funds a few years ago, I had to sleep with men with specific fetishes to make money. I had no choice; it was the quickest way to get the cash.” (Interviewee H, 2024)

In addition to facing wage arrears, transgender women commonly encounter a lack of employment contracts and have no avenue for redress. For example, whilst working as a food delivery rider, Y did not sign an employment contract with the delivery company, so she was unable to seek redress through formal labour arbitration. I once asked Y why she hadn't joined a larger, established food delivery company. Y replied,

“Large food delivery companies have more requirements and vetting processes for employees. Only small delivery companies are willing to hire people like us (trans women), but these small firms operate illegally, refusing to sign employment contracts with us. That’s why they dare to withhold wages so brazenly.” (Interviewee Y, 2024)

Precisely because no employment contract had been signed, Y was unable to seek redress through legal channels such as labour arbitration after her wages were withheld; she could only rely on spontaneous collective protests organised within the transgender women’s community to demand payment. When Y’s wages were withheld for the first time, all members of the shelter went together to her company to advocate on her behalf. However, as Y is introverted and timid, she backed out at the last minute during the first attempt to claim her wages and refused the collective support. When she later faced another instance of wage arrears and actively sought help from the shelter, the majority of members chose to refuse. Ultimately, the shelter held a collective vote on whether to assist Y; although the manager, H, strongly advocated for helping her and tried her utmost to persuade the others, the vote resulted in a majority decision to refuse assistance. Y’s predicament is a typical case: due to systemic discrimination, transgender women are unable to work in formal companies and are forced to seek employment in informal ones. Without written employment contracts, they face wage arrears and ultimately find themselves with no avenue for redress; this is by no means an isolated incident within the community.

Trans women such as Y find themselves in a highly precarious socio-economic position; they are forced into ‘informal work’ in the food delivery industry and are unable to secure formal employment contracts. Hartsock (1983) argues that the

position of the oppressed is not merely a perspective, but a privileged epistemological stance capable of revealing the true, destructive nature of power relations that the ruling class strives to conceal. The experiences of transgender women in shelters reveal a unique position: they are entirely excluded from the formal labour market (Guo, Li & Stanton, 2020). This exposes how contemporary Chinese state capitalism and traditional Confucian familism collude to create institutional erasure, demonstrating that the market economy relies on the systematic production of a gendered, disposable and legally unprotected underclass.

Field research conducted by this study at a transgender women's shelter reveals that transgender women in China currently experience widespread labour inequalities in the labour market, centred on wage arrears, the absence of contracts, and obstructed grievance procedures. The structural roots of this can be explained through Young's (2009) concept of 'exploitation' and Marxist labour theory. Young points out that exploitation is not merely the suppression of labour prices or the withholding of wages, but rather the systematic placement of specific groups at a disadvantage due to the social division of labour, resulting in the appropriation of the fruits of their labour by others (Young, 2009). In the case of transgender women in shelters, this manifests as formal enterprises excluding them from the formal labour market on the grounds of "strict vetting" or "image requirements", forcing them into less formal sectors of the labour market, such as small food delivery companies or service-sector roles without contracts. According to Marxist labour theory, this mechanism of exclusion and selective hiring essentially expands the scope for employers to extract surplus value from marginalised labour, whilst simultaneously intensifying the relative exploitation of workers (Marx, 1867/1976). For instance, S encountered delays in the payment of

performance-based wages following her resignation, whilst Y experienced repeated wage arrears across different food delivery companies (Interviewee S, 2025; Interviewee H, 2024). These phenomena are not isolated labour disputes, but rather the combined result of structural discrimination against minority groups in the labour market, the extraction of surplus value from marginalised labour, and the vulnerable position of minority groups.

The labour oppression faced by transgender women further exemplifies the dual characteristics of ‘marginalisation and powerlessness’ in Young’s theory. Due to the absence of employment contracts and formal employment relationships, transgender women are unable to seek redress through labour arbitration when faced with wage arrears, and can only rely on informal collective justice actions within shelters. Although such internal justice-seeking actions within the transgender women’s community demonstrate the subjective agency of minority groups, when mutual aid is constrained by a lack of resources or a breakdown of trust between individuals—such as the reduced collective support resulting from Y’s last-minute withdrawal during her first attempt to assert her rights—workers find themselves in a situation where they lack protection from both the institutional and community spheres (Interviewee H, 2024). This state of being unable to articulate grievances through government institutions or to obtain support through internal mutual aid is a classic manifestation of ‘powerlessness’ as theorised by Young (2009).

In the absence of a formal labour system capable of integrating and equally protecting transgender women, some workers are forced to turn to the grey economy to sustain their livelihoods; for instance, shelter manager H once obtained funds for the shelter’s operations by providing sexual services

(Interviewee H, 2024). This reflects the pattern whereby marginalised groups rely on ‘bodily capital’ to survive outside the formal economic system, and also reveals the ‘violence’ dimension in Young’s theory: the risk of sexual violence faced by transgender women in the grey economy, coupled with the absence of legal protection and social stigma, is precisely an extension of structural oppression. In summary, the predicament faced by transgender women in the labour market stems not merely from the discriminatory behaviour of individual employers, but from a system of structural oppression woven from the interplay of gender norms and class structures.

6.1.2. The Denial of the Right to Housing: Rental Discrimination Faced by Trans Women

Through field research conducted at shelters for trans women, this study found that the primary social injustice currently experienced by trans women in China manifests as the denial of their right to housing due to systemic social discrimination, specifically in the form of difficulties in securing rental accommodation. When I arrived at the shelter to conduct my fieldwork, the shelter was in the process of moving. H described to me how the shelter had been forced to change its address on multiple occasions due to landlords’ discrimination against transgender women.

“Because the transgender women at the shelter suffer from mental health conditions, we frequently experience incidents of suicide, self-harm or disappearances. Sometimes, family members of a transgender woman will call the police or come to the door. Landlords take great offence at the police visiting so often; they feel we cause too much trouble and are unwilling to rent to us again.

This means we have to move house frequently; the shelter has already relocated many times.” (Interviewee H, 2024)

During the fieldwork, an incident involving a resident’s attempted suicide occurred at the shelter, prompting a call to the police. Consequently, the landlord of the newly rented property refused to continue the tenancy, leaving the shelter residents—who had only just completed the move—facing yet another relocation.

“Even though we’ve signed a tenancy agreement, there’s nothing we can do if the landlord insists we move out. Taking legal action to defend our rights is a hassle and takes a long time.” (Interviewee H, 2024) *“The landlord is forcing us to move out; they’d rather pay a penalty than let us stay.”* (Interviewee S, 2024)

The residents of the shelter are already homeless because their families do not accept their transgender identities; when even the shelter cannot provide a stable home, where are they to go? In an interview, the manager, H, stated, *“My greatest wish is for the shelter to have a stable home so that everyone no longer has to move so frequently.”* (Interviewee H, 2024) Yet it is not only landlords who deprive transgender women of their right to housing, but also government officials who exert pressure on landlords through the exercise of public authority. According to S’s account, when she went to the local police station for routine population registration, the officer, upon learning of her identity as a transgender woman, asked for her landlord’s contact details. After S had left the station, the officer privately rang the landlord to warn them to be wary of the tenant.

“The landlord rang us straight after receiving the call from the police. I was absolutely furious; that officer was clearly discriminating against us, and his act

of calling our landlord privately was also against the rules.” (Interviewee S, 2024)

S subsequently went to the police station to demand an explanation, but her concerns were ignored, and the matter was ultimately left unresolved.

The lack of housing rights has become a significant form of institutional oppression faced by transgender women in Chinese cities. This stems not from individual landlords’ personal prejudices, but from a structural mechanism of exclusion shaped by the housing system, the logic of urban governance, and gender norms. Since the marketisation of the housing sector, China’s housing system has progressively adopted the ‘standard household’ as the ideal tenant model, making stable marriage, family structure and economic capacity the implicit criteria for spatial allocation (Wu, 2015; Huang & Yi, 2011). Most residents of transgender women’s shelters are homeless due to a lack of family recognition; their social position—characterised by non-marital status, the absence of a family unit, and economic vulnerability—stands in stark contrast to the ‘ideal tenant’ criteria. Consequently, this group exhibits what Young (2009) terms ‘unclassifiability’ within institutional classifications, rendering them susceptible to being perceived as high-risk, unstable, and unmanageable subjects. Consequently, shelters have frequently faced refusal of tenancy by landlords in the short term, and even when contracts are signed, there is little guarantee of continued residency; this predicament reflects the exclusion of transgender women from the conventional housing market.

This exclusion is not limited to the market sphere; field data indicates that local police officers, upon learning of a tenant’s transgender identity, proactively contact landlords to warn them about the tenant, thereby marking transgender

individuals as potential public security risks. Such ‘informal governance’ embodies what Fraser (2003) terms ‘participatory injustice’, wherein transgender individuals are excluded from the housing governance system as political subjects capable of being represented and heard. Concurrently, housing instability exacerbates the economic pressures faced by transgender women, thereby constituting ‘redistributive injustice’. More importantly, the long-standing stigmatisation of transgender identity within cultural structures—where landlords and administrative authorities perceive it as ‘abnormal’ or ‘dangerous’—constitutes ‘recognition injustice’ in the sense described by Fraser (2000). The intertwining of these three forms of injustice collectively results in the structural oppression of the transgender community within the housing market.

From the perspective of LGBTQ+ spatial studies, the housing predicament faced by transgender women is also a direct product of heteronormative urban spaces. The gender order in cities, combined with familism and policing, collectively treats transgender bodies as ‘abnormal visibility’; once the identity of a transgender person is revealed, it triggers eviction by landlords and police intervention (Bao, 2020; Hubbard, 2012). Whilst shelters provide a temporarily safe ‘counter-space’ for transgender women, under a highly regulated urban management system, such spaces are inherently fragile and frequently become targets of governance. The experience of transgender women being forced to move repeatedly and living without a fixed abode aligns with ‘structural homelessness’; that is to say, housing exclusion is not an isolated incident, but a persistent outcome at the institutional level (Meyer et al., 2019).

Taken together, the deprivation of housing rights experienced by transgender women reflects the interplay between the ‘marginalisation’ described by Young (2009) and Fraser’s (2003) three-dimensional framework of injustice. A lack of

cultural recognition means they are not regarded as legitimate tenants; a lack of economic redistribution makes it difficult for them to improve their living conditions; and a lack of political participation prevents them from accessing the housing governance system or challenging institutional discrimination. Housing thus serves as the most tangible spatial manifestation of the institutional oppression faced by transgender women.

6.1.3. Institutional Marginalisation in Education and Healthcare Resources

Through field research conducted at shelters for transgender women, this study found that the social injustices currently experienced by transgender women in China are manifested in their systematic exclusion from the education and healthcare systems. Specifically, this is evident in their inability to access equal educational resources due to discrimination stemming from school violence and mental health issues, as well as discrimination in accessing medical care on the basis of their transgender identity. The marginalisation of transgender women in access to educational resources is not always the result of direct discrimination against transgender identity within the education system, but is often indirect and covert. A sat the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (Gaokao) and was accepted by a Chinese university; however, the university refused to admit her on the grounds of her mental health condition, claiming they would reserve her place until she had fully recovered. Consequently, A was forced to apply to universities in Europe to secure her right to higher education.

“I have schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder, and the university used this as a reason to refuse my admission. I had no choice but to contact a transgender woman in the Netherlands to help me apply to a Dutch university.”
(Interviewee A, 2024)

A subsequently secured an offer from a university in the Netherlands and has travelled there to study, but few transgender women possess the resources and financial means to study abroad as A does. During the interview, A stated that being able to study abroad is already a great stroke of luck, whilst many more transgender women are denied the opportunity to pursue higher education.

“I don’t feel I belong to a disadvantaged group, because at least I can still study abroad. How many people in the whole of China can actually study abroad? I’ve already surpassed 95% of the Chinese population. Those transgender women whose families lack the financial means to fund their studies abroad—they are the truly disadvantaged group. In fact, whether or not one is part of a disadvantaged group is largely tied to financial circumstances; there are clear hierarchies within the transgender community, and those from affluent families lead much better lives.” (Interviewee A, 2024)

Furthermore, it is extremely common among transgender women to face discrimination due to their gender identity, resulting in school bullying that prevents them from pursuing their studies normally. B was bullied at secondary school because of her transgender identity, which led to depression and forced her to drop out of school. During the fieldwork, B was receiving treatment in a psychiatric hospital following a suicide attempt, and S described B’s situation to me during the interview.

“On the night of her suicide attempt, B went to a school reunion. We (S and other members of the shelter) all tried to persuade her not to go, because it was precisely the school bullying she experienced in secondary school that had led to

her depression and her having to take a leave of absence. We all told her that those classmates weren't good people, but perhaps she was too desperate for their approval. As a result, her depression relapsed after she returned from the reunion; those classmates mocked her for being neither male nor female.” (Interviewee S, 2024)

Whilst B was receiving treatment at the psychiatric hospital, she suffered both verbal abuse and discrimination from her attending physician due to her identity as a transgender woman, as well as sexual harassment from male patients in the same ward. According to accounts from other members of the shelter, B's attending physician subjected her to a series of verbal insults upon learning of her identity as a transgender woman. As the gender on B's identity card was still listed as female, the hospital placed her in a male ward, where a male patient in the same ward sexually harassed her, attempting to molest her and have sexual relations with her.

The exclusion faced by transgender women within the education and healthcare systems is, in essence, a form of institutional marginalisation. Young (2009) points out that marginalisation does not merely refer to being passively 'overlooked', but rather to institutions actively placing specific groups in a position of 'exclusion' through classification mechanisms, resource allocation rules and cultural norms, thereby rendering them ineligible to access core social resources. The experiences of A and B exemplify how the system excludes transgender people from educational and healthcare resources through 'technical regulations', 'health standards' and 'identity verification'.

Young (2009) notes that marginalisation stems from the inability of institutions to

accommodate certain groups, thereby excluding them from core institutional functions. In the field data of this study, the exclusion of transgender women within the education system is not always directly based on their 'transgender identity', but is more often achieved indirectly through institutional discourses such as 'mental illness', 'gender non-conformity' and 'school order'. A was refused admission to university; the ostensible reason was "mental illness", but the underlying cause was the "unclassifiability" of her transgender identity within the institutional framework. Whilst the system ostensibly relied on health standards, it effectively disciplined and excluded transgender women as subjects lacking the "qualifications of a normal student". Young (2009) notes that marginalisation often manifests as rationalisation, legitimised as a normal administrative logic. The school's refusal to admit A, who has a mental illness, on the grounds of "student safety", "academic pressure" and "mental health" essentially treats the transgender body as an unstable, "risky subject" that does not conform to the norms of the educational system, thereby rationalising exclusion.

This exclusion also manifests as what Fraser (2003) terms 'misrecognition': schools do not regard transgender students as subjects entitled to equal educational rights, but rather view their identity as a deviation and a problem, thereby denying their cultural identity and personal dignity. At the same time, exclusion within the education system is characterised by a distinct pattern of 'maldistribution'. Due to institutional discrimination, transgender students are more likely to discontinue their studies and lack academic qualifications, thereby losing competitiveness in the labour market. As A noted, she was able to study abroad in the Netherlands because of her family's financial support, whereas most transgender women are unable to pursue this alternative pathway due to class constraints. This highlights Fraser's (2000) argument that injustices of recognition

and redistribution often reinforce one another, and that cultural stigma serves to entrench economic inequality.

Furthermore, B's experience of dropping out due to school violence represents an intersection of cultural violence and institutional neglect; the school's failure to address bullying incidents and its lack of gender-diverse education effectively legitimised the bullying. Young (2009) points out that cultural imperialism portrays marginalised groups as 'abnormal', thereby normalising violence against them. The fact that B, even after graduation, still hoped to gain recognition at a class reunion only to face further humiliation reveals the profound cruelty of this lack of cultural recognition.

Furthermore, discrimination against transgender women within the healthcare system is not merely a matter of individual doctors' prejudice, but rather the result of active desubjectification by institutional structures. The verbal abuse B endured in hospital, being placed in a male ward and subjected to sexual harassment, illustrates how the system treats transgender patients as 'unclassifiable' subjects who 'do not conform to institutional logic' through rigid gender classification rules and inflexible administrative management. Within Young's framework, this constitutes a classic instance of 'marginalisation-violence' compound oppression. The hospital's gender regime misplacing B in a male ward constitutes institutional marginalisation; the sexual harassment by male patients in the same ward constitutes structural violence; and the doctor's insults represent the manifestation of cultural imperialism within the medical professional system.

The severe domestic violence and coercive 'conversion therapy' experienced by transgender women (such as interviewee H) must not be reduced to mere

interpersonal conflict. Viewed through Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity, these violent reactions from family and institutions represent the 'gender matrix' of heteronormative standards. In the post-socialist cultural context of China, gender is not a stable biological reality, but rather a ritualised repetition of behaviour driven by coercive heteronormative standards (Butler, 1990). When a transgender woman attempts to break this repetition, she exposes the artificiality of the gender binary. Consequently, violent family interventions seek to reimpose standard patriarchal performativity upon the transgender body. However, within shelters, this disciplinary coercion is suspended, and residents are able to develop new, non-binary modes of gender performance, free from the threat of familial punishment.

In Fraser's theory, this simultaneously represents a convergence of three-dimensional injustice. Transgender identity is viewed within the healthcare system as pathological, abnormal or a subject of ridicule, reflecting misrecognition; the lack of transgender-sensitive training among medical staff prevents transgender women from receiving dignified medical treatment (Zhu, 2022); Secondly, there is 'maldistribution': as transgender women commonly experience educational exclusion and exploitation in the labour market, they struggle to afford formal medical costs and are forced to rely on informal sources of hormones or delay treatment, thereby exacerbating health risks (UNDP China, 2020); thirdly, there is 'misrepresentation', as the transgender community is entirely absent from decision-making processes within the healthcare system (such as ward allocation rules, diagnostic and treatment procedures, and requirements for gender reassignment). Fraser (2003) points out that when a group is unable to participate in the formulation of institutional frameworks, its needs cannot be recognised by the system as 'political issues', thereby creating

‘frame-setting exclusion’. Consequently, B’s medical experience is not accidental, but rather a manifestation of institutional discrimination within the healthcare governance system.

More importantly, the marginalisation of transgender women within the education system and within the healthcare system are linked by a mutually reinforcing cycle: educational exclusion → disruption of studies → vulnerability in the labour market → reduced ability to afford healthcare; healthcare exclusion → deteriorating mental health → impaired learning or dropping out of school; identity-based stigma → deeper institutional distrust → weaker capacity for participation.

This constitutes what Fraser describes as a ‘structural cycle of injustice’, wherein three-dimensional oppression does not operate in isolation but collectively constitutes structural vulnerability. A, forced to seek educational opportunities abroad due to exclusion from the education system, and B, plunged into a mental health crisis due to cultural violence and medical discrimination, both reveal the marginalised predicament of transgender women who cannot be accepted within institutional structures. The system excludes transgender women from the classificatory logic of education and healthcare, placing them in a position of multiple marginalisation within the state apparatus: “no identity—no rights—no place”.

6.2. Shelter as a Counter-Space for Social Justice

6.2.1. Collective Protest and Crisis Response: Political Practice Beyond the Victim Role

Shelters not only provide accommodation and physical safety for transgender women, but also, through emotional mutual support and collective action, form a relatively safe communal space that embodies collective agency and everyday resistance. The role of shelters as safe spaces is primarily manifested in their practice of social justice through collective protest, democratic voting or deliberation, resource sharing, psychological support and suicide prevention. For instance, regarding collective protest, the shelter has on multiple occasions rallied together to resist pressure from the Chinese police. According to S's account, a transgender woman sought help at the shelter after her family opposed her transition and subjected her to domestic violence. Upon learning that she had been taken in by the shelter, her family, driven by anger and a desire for control, called the police and falsely accused the shelter of kidnapping their child. This led to a large police presence at the shelter, resulting in a confrontation between shelter members and the police, after which the group went to government offices to stage a collective protest. (Interviewee S, 2024)

“Over twenty police officers arrived. I was single-handedly holding off five officers and two riot shields. The police forced us to delete evidence of their violent conduct, whilst the landlord pressured us to move out, insisting we do so even if it meant paying a penalty for breaching the lease. We are preparing to file an administrative lawsuit and are considering lodging formal complaints against the landlord, the parents of the shelter member who called the police, and the

officers responsible for the violent conduct.” (Interviewee S, 2024)

6.2.2. Democratic Voting and Collective Consultation: Compensating for the Deficit in Participatory Parity

Regarding democratic voting, when contentious incidents arise at the shelter, the manager, H, seeks everyone’s input through a democratic vote to reach a decision in a fair and democratic manner. For example, when Y sought the shelter’s help regarding unpaid wages, the residents were reluctant to assist Y again because Y had backed out at the last minute the first time they were helped. Although Manager H was very keen to help Y and tried hard to persuade Y, the matter was ultimately dropped due to the result of the democratic vote, in which the majority opposed it. When B required an escort for a transfer to another psychiatric hospital, the decision was also reached through democratic consultation within the shelter, resulting in A and I being assigned to accompany B. H explained that whilst all members were keen to accompany B, given that B’s father would be present—and that he harboured strong aversion towards transgender women—it was decided through internal consultation that A and I would accompany B.

“You are the only cisgender woman here, and A is the transgender woman in the shelter who looks most like a cisgender woman. After discussing it, we all agreed that if the two of you accompanied B during the transfer, her father would be least likely to take offence.” (Interviewee H, 2024)

6.2.3. Resource Sharing and De-commodification: Building Alternative Networks of Mutual Aid

In terms of resource sharing, the shelter shares work, financial, living and medication resources. The shelter features a very large communal area; apart from sleeping, no one usually stays in their own room, but instead spends time in the communal living room. There are no distinctions between residents within the shelter; daily necessities and food are shared, including the oestrogen medication that transgender women require on a regular basis. There is a fridge in the shelter specifically for storing medication, which all members can access and use at any time. Furthermore, members with greater financial means provide employment opportunities for others. For example, C, who owns a garment factory and is financially well-off, frequently provides financial support to the shelter and offers jobs to other members. In an interview, the manager, H, expressed the hope that the shelter would serve not merely as a place of refuge, but as a resource centre for transgender women, helping them to rebuild their social support networks.

“I don’t want everyone to just stay in the shelter all day. Although the shelter provides free board and lodging, I hope everyone will go out to work and have a normal working and social life; that is the only way everyone can get better.”
(Interviewee H, 2024)

6.2.4. Psychological Support and Suicide Prevention: Crisis Intervention in Everyday

In terms of psychological support and suicide prevention, a system of mutual psychological support has spontaneously developed within the shelter. When any

member is feeling low or depressed, the others do their best to offer comfort. Thick psychology books are always left on the tables in the communal areas, and as A is the only member of the shelter with professional training in psychology, other transgender women turn to her for help whenever they need counselling. However, during the interview, A expressed the significant pressure she felt as the only member capable of providing psychological counselling within the shelter: “I am the only one here who can offer psychological counselling, which makes me feel I have a mission to help the other transgender women. But I also have my own mental health issues, and dealing with everyone’s psychological problems on a daily basis puts a great deal of pressure on me. Moreover, I am about to go to the Netherlands to study, and once I leave, there will be no one left in the shelter who can provide psychological counselling.” (Interviewee A, 2024) Furthermore, due to prolonged exposure to systemic discrimination, the transgender women at the shelter suffer from mental health conditions of varying severity. Consequently, self-harm and suicide attempts are common occurrences within the shelter. As a safe space, the shelter’s role in suicide intervention and safeguarding the lives of transgender women is of paramount importance. Founder and Director H stated, “*The most important role of the shelter is to prevent transgender women from taking their own lives; as soon as someone shows signs of wanting to harm themselves, we can intervene in time.*” (Interviewee H, 2024) During the fieldwork, an incident of self-harm and attempted suicide occurred within the shelter. Y’s depression relapsed, and she attempted to climb over the balcony railing to jump. S was the first to rush forward and hold Y, successfully preventing her from taking her own life. Then, on the evening of the third day of the fieldwork, whilst I was conducting group work and interviews with some of the transgender women at the shelter, W suddenly lost control due to an emotional dispute with her boyfriend. She self-harmed with a fruit knife, inflicting over a

dozen cuts on her forearm, and poured alcohol onto the wounds to intensify the pain. The group session and interviews had to be halted. A snatched the knife from W, calmed her down, and treated her wounds. A week after the fieldwork concluded, a transgender woman at the shelter went missing after leaving a suicide note. H rallied all the residents to go out and search for her; they eventually found her and prevented her from taking her own life. However, the shelter's suicide intervention efforts were not always successful. Just a few days before the fieldwork began, two residents had left the shelter alone in an attempt to take their own lives: 'One was found, and the other was confirmed dead.' (Interviewee S, 2024)

6.2.5. The Shelter as a Counter-Space: Marginal Resistance Against Institutional Exclusion

Although transgender women face structural oppression and marginalisation, the margins are not a place of isolation; shelters create a shared space where transgender women can support and stand in solidarity with one another, forming a physical space in which social justice can be put into practice. This proactive power enables transgender women to move beyond the role of mere victims. From the theoretical perspective of bell hooks, a shelter is not merely a physical place providing temporary accommodation for transgender women; rather, it is a constructed 'margin as a site of resistance', helping transgender women to rebuild their sense of self and self-esteem amidst institutional exclusion. Hooks (1990) points out that marginalised groups do not necessarily occupy a position of absolute deprivation, exclusion and enforced silence; on the contrary, the margins can also become a political space for practising social justice and resisting structural discrimination, where the oppressed can rely on their own agency to

develop subjectivity and forge collective bonds. Although the margins are a disadvantaged position created by structures of oppression, they are simultaneously a practical arena where marginalised groups can reorganise their lives, social relationships and actions for justice. In this study, shelters for transgender women embody hooks' theory of the margins: On the one hand, the shelter is a product of the multiple exclusions faced by transgender women from the family, the labour market, the healthcare system, the education system, the housing market and state governance structures; on the other hand, through practices such as collective protest, democratic consultation, resource sharing, emotional support and suicide prevention, the shelter transforms a passive marginalised situation into active community resistance.

The shelter first and foremost constitutes a 'counter-space'. A counter-space refers to an alternative space actively constructed by marginalised groups in response to exclusion and discrimination within mainstream institutions, culture and social spaces. It is not only a safe space providing physical security and emotional support, but also, through resource sharing, identity recognition, political resistance and collective action, it helps marginalised groups rebuild their subjectivity and political agency, offering a practical arena to counter mainstream spaces of oppression (Hooks, 1990). In this study, conflicts between the transgender community and mainstream spaces are ubiquitous. In the school setting, mainstream spaces assume students to be cisgender, heterosexual, and psychologically stable, which led to A being denied admission to university; in the family setting, members are expected to conform to patriarchal, marital, and kinship hierarchies, forcing many transgender individuals to seek refuge in shelters due to family opposition; Medical spaces assume a binary gender system, where the body must conform to medical classifications; this led to B facing

discrimination from doctors whilst seeking treatment, being assigned to a male ward, and suffering sexual harassment from other male patients; the rental market assumes that 'normal tenants' are stable, heterosexual, family-oriented, and low-risk individuals; this results in transgender people frequently being evicted by landlords, forcing them to move between multiple addresses in shelters and facing significant difficulties in securing accommodation. These mainstream spaces view transgender people as outsiders, a source of trouble and a risk. The counter-space formed by the shelter, through communal living, shared living rooms, shared resources and daily companionship, provides members with a space temporarily free from external discrimination. It serves as a temporary refuge for transgender women following institutional exclusion within the family, the market, the healthcare system and state governance, and is also a space of resistance where they can reconstruct their subjectivity and community support through emotional mutual aid, resource sharing and collective action. Marginal spaces are not entirely free from oppression, but they allow the oppressed to reclaim their agency beyond the dominant space and structural oppression (Hooks, 1990). This is precisely the significance of the shelter. It is not a completely safe and stable utopia; shelters have their own limitations and challenges, but at the very least, they provide transgender women with a minimal environment for survival, self-expression and mutual recognition.

6.2.6. Micro-Agency and Emotional Labour: Everyday Resistance Under High-Pressure Structures

As a counter-space, the shelter is not merely a physical space but also encompasses the emotional labour of daily life. Through companionship, comfort, suicide intervention, psychological support and crisis management, shelter

members bear one another's emotional pain, psychological stress and concerns for personal safety. Rather than passively receiving help, shelter members rebuild social relationships through mutual companionship, care and the shared bearing of risks. Particularly when the social environment lacks institutional mental health services tailored to the transgender community, the spontaneous psychological support networks formed within the shelter fill the gap left by functions that should be provided by social services and the welfare system. Although this emotional labour holds significant significance in terms of resistance, it also carries certain risks: when a small number of members with psychological training are forced to undertake ongoing psychological counselling and crisis intervention—such as the role of 'psychological counsellor' assumed by A within the shelter—community mutual aid may also lead to 'mutual aid fatigue' and the risk of secondary psychological trauma resulting from a lack of professional expertise.

The resistance of the shelter is also reflected in its exercise of agency, transforming the plight of marginalised groups into collective action. If one interprets the marginalised position and sense of powerlessness experienced by transgender women merely at face value, one might conclude that they occupy the position of victims and lack agency. However, as Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005) points out in her critique of Western liberal feminism, agency should not be understood solely as progressive subversion or open resistance against oppressive norms, but must also focus on how marginalised groups exercise agency within structures of domination through endurance, survival and ethical self-construction. In this study, the fact that transgender women choose to seek refuge in precarious, unofficial shelters and engage in highly exploitative informal economic activities (such as Y's work as a food delivery rider) does not imply a passive, submissive status. On the contrary, according to Mahmood's theoretical paradigm, their

agency is realised precisely through endurance and the maintenance of life within a systemic legal vacuum (Xu & Pan, 2021).

When faced with external pressures such as family members reporting them to the police, police visits, or eviction by landlords, shelter members do not bear the brunt of institutional violence alone. Instead, through collective protest, evidence preservation, planning for administrative litigation, and appeals to public authorities, they attempt to transform the hidden discrimination and violence against marginalised groups into visible public issues through collective action. This aligns precisely with hooks' (1990) concept of 'speaking from the margins'. Resistance by marginalised subjects sometimes takes the form of large-scale demonstrations and protests; such mass LGBTQ events are more common in Western countries, but are extremely difficult to organise within China's relatively conservative, austere and high-pressure political environment. Consequently, the shelter's resistance is more often manifested in acts of defiance, negotiation, mutual aid and collective voicing within everyday life. For instance, the fierce responses of shelter members to police pressure and eviction by landlords demonstrate how marginalised groups strive to secure the right to be heard, the right to appeal and the right to housing, even within the confined spaces of their oppressed existence. They are like wild grasses growing in the crevices of rocks: though the space and resources available for survival are extremely limited, they continue to grow upwards through tenacious vitality and the strength of collective solidarity. Although this 'everyday resistance' cannot bring about significant change at the level of institutional structures, it does afford marginalised groups temporary respite from structural oppression and allows them to develop collective self-esteem and agency through social justice practices centred on the shelters.

6.2.7. Boundaries of Internal Autonomy: Structural Limitations and Institutional Failure of Grassroots Spaces

The practice of ‘participatory justice’ in marginalised spaces is also reflected in the social justice practices of shelters, specifically through internal democratic voting and collective deliberation mechanisms. Fraser (2003) argues that the core of social justice lies in ‘parity of participation’, meaning that all members of society should have the capacity to participate as equal agents in social interactions and institutional decision-making. Trans women often lack a voice within state institutions, the labour market, the healthcare system and housing governance due to their marginalised position; within the shelter, voting, consultation and joint decision-making go some way towards compensating for the deficit in parity of participation experienced by trans women. This is manifested, for instance, in the decision-making process within the shelter where democratic voting determines whether to continue supporting members facing wage arrears, as well as in the collective deliberation and decision-making regarding arrangements for members to accompany others to hospital appointments. Such practices of participatory justice demonstrate how marginalised groups, in the absence of formal institutional safeguards, utilise internal self-governance to allocate limited resources, resolve internal conflicts, resist external risks, and achieve a degree of fairness and justice.

Resource sharing is another key manifestation of the shelter as a space of resistance. The sharing of food, daily necessities, medicines, job opportunities and financial assistance alleviates the resource scarcity faced by transgender women within the market system. hooks (1990) emphasises that marginalised groups are capable of creating alternative value relationships outside the mainstream order (capitalism and patriarchy). The core of the mainstream order is competition,

possession, hierarchy, commodification and control, whereas marginalised groups, detached from the mainstream order and lacking resource support, can develop a completely different value system for the sake of survival and dignity. The sharing of resources within shelters exemplifies how marginalised groups replace commodified transactions with mutual aid; members, having been excluded from the mainstream economic system, share social resources within the community through communal living and reciprocal support. Particularly in cases where transgender women lack support from their biological families, struggle to secure stable incomes due to labour discrimination, and are unable to access adequate care due to medical discrimination, shelters serve as a substitute for some of the social welfare that should be guaranteed by state institutions.

However, shelters, as counter-spaces, also have clear limitations. Although marginal spaces, as sites of resistance, alleviate structural oppression to some extent and create arenas for marginalised groups to practise social justice, they remain subject to the oppression of mainstream power structures and are constantly affected by resource shortages, external discrimination, internal conflicts and the trauma of their members (Hooks, 1990). Although shelters fulfil functions such as suicide intervention, psychological crisis counselling and medical care, they face numerous difficulties and immense pressure in their day-to-day operations. This indicates that the safety provided by shelters is relatively fragile and requires significant effort and resources to sustain. As a counter-space, the shelter cannot replace formal anti-discrimination systems at the state level, such as transgender-friendly housing policies, healthcare systems and mental health services; it can only serve as an appropriate substitute when such systems are absent. Addressing the limitations of shelters as both safe spaces and spaces of resistance, this study will provide detailed case studies and further

analysis in subsequent sections. Consequently, shelters not only demonstrate the agency of the transgender women's community but also reveal the structural failure of state and social institutions to protect transgender groups.

In summary, shelters for transgender women can be understood as 'spaces of marginal resistance' within hooks' theory: whilst their emergence stems from institutional exclusion and structural discrimination, they transform marginal spaces into arenas for developing agency and practising social justice through emotional labour, resource sharing, democratic deliberation and collective action. Within this space, transgender women are temporarily liberated from the predicament of exclusion by the family, the market, the healthcare system, the education system and state institutions; through mutual care, collective decision-making and collective action, they reconstruct the value and rights of social members. As a space of resistance, the shelter practises a form of social justice in everyday life that begins in small ways but is imbued with great power.

6.3. Limitations and Challenges in the Practice of Social Justice within Shelters

6.3.1. Empirical Manifestations of Internal Tensions: Micro-Power Dynamics and Interpersonal Friction

Although shelters provide transgender women with a space to practise social justice to a certain extent, offering support and serving as safe havens, they also have clear limitations and face numerous challenges, which are primarily reflected in two aspects: internal limitations and external constraints. In terms of internal tensions and limitations, the following issues are particularly prevalent: conflicts between individual choice and collective will; hidden power imbalances between

leaders/core managers and ordinary members; exclusion and power disparities between long-standing and new members; and an over-reliance on members' autonomy in the pursuit of social justice, which creates vulnerabilities. Individual choices must yield to collective will. For instance, as mentioned earlier, when Y sought the shelter's assistance regarding unpaid wages, although the manager H was keen to help Y, when the other transgender women at the shelter objected, even though H was the manager, her personal choice cannot override the collective will. When conflicts arise between the individual and the collective, the shelter lacks the capacity to mediate. Furthermore, the attitude of the shelter's core managers, represented by H and A, towards other ordinary members influences the group's attitude towards a particular member. When core managers harbour subjective biases against a member, this may give rise to new forms of hidden discrimination and injustice within the group. For example, during the fieldwork, whilst chatting with members such as H, A, W, C and S, H complained that the newly admitted member F had an eccentric personality and seemed like someone capable of dangerous behaviour. Other members agreed with H and stated that they would be wary of F in future and keep their distance from her.

"F often sends me flirty messages; I find her personality very strange, like the sort of person who might murder you in the middle of the night whilst you're asleep. If I'd known, I wouldn't have agreed to let her move in." (Interviewee H, 2024) This form of hidden discrimination within the group exists not only between core managers and ordinary members, but is also reflected in the sense of superiority that older members feel towards new members. In the interview, S stated that, as the longest-serving resident at the shelter, she believed she possessed a stronger sense of responsibility and a degree of managerial authority compared to the new members. *"I've been living at the shelter for three years now. I feel that the shelter is a place I must protect; I see myself as the shelter's head caretaker. I'm*

different from those members who have only just moved in.” (Interviewee S, 2024)

During the fieldwork, S also demonstrated a greater level of involvement in the shelter’s affairs than the new members, and sought to participate in decision-making regarding key matters. However, this behaviour has also sparked some dissatisfaction among the new members. In an interview, Y complained that S was too controlling: *“S wants to be in charge of everything; she thinks everyone should listen to her on many matters, which makes people feel a bit uncomfortable.”* (Interviewee X, 2024)

6.3.2. Empirical Manifestations of External Constraints: Institutional Surveillance and Community Fractures

As for external constraints, the absence of legal protection, a lack of policy support, societal stigmatisation of the transgender community, conflicts between other transgender groups and the shelter, as well as the prejudice and discrimination held by government officials with law enforcement powers towards the transgender community, have created systemic external pressures, posing significant obstacles to the shelter’s efforts to practise social justice. For instance, H, the founder and director of the shelter, is also a university student; she has been summoned for interviews and issued warnings by the university on multiple occasions. During the fieldwork, H was once again questioned by university officials regarding her establishment of a shelter for transgender women. In the interview, H expressed her understanding of the university’s concerns:

“There are always people who disapprove of me running the shelter and report me to the university. Every time, I have to go to the university to explain myself. Actually, my tutor is quite understanding, but she’s powerless to help. Whenever

someone reports me, the university leadership puts pressure on her, and she has to call me in for a talk.” (Interviewee H, 2024)

However, those reporting the shelter included not only people who discriminate against the transgender community, but also other transgender women.

“Because H is quite well-known within the community, and her shelter has become famous amongst transgender women—she’s something of a KOL—there are some other transgender women who can’t stand seeing her so widely admired, so they insult her and report her. There are plenty of bad apples within our own community; we’re not exactly united. But there’s nothing you can do about these people, because we’re a grassroots organisation with neither policy support nor legal protection; the shelter itself operates in a grey area between legality and illegality.” (Interviewee A, 2024)

Furthermore, the prejudice and discrimination towards the transgender community held by government officials with law enforcement powers is a major external pressure facing the shelter. As mentioned earlier, the police have previously used excessive force and engaged in physical altercations with shelter members. and the police have even phoned landlords to warn them to be wary of shelter members. In response to this, S explained, *“You know, the police are mostly cisgender men, and they’ve always been very prejudiced against us transgender women.” (Interviewee S, 2024)* However, it is precisely because of the lack of legal protection and policy support for transgender women that the shelter has not given up, despite facing immense external pressure: *“If I don’t do this, there will be no one else to do it.” (Interviewee H, 2024)*

6.3.3. Theoretical Deconstruction of External Pressures: Institutional Discrimination and Lateral Violence

Safe spaces are inherently highly vulnerable; as mentioned earlier, ‘safe spaces’ and ‘counter-spaces’ cannot completely isolate themselves from external oppression, and their stability and safety are relative. In the process of practising social justice, shelters are deeply constrained by systemic external policies and social environments, whilst simultaneously facing invisible internal power conflicts. This dual predicament leads to a structural imbalance for the shelter between safeguarding individual choice and driving collective action, resulting in limited effectiveness in the practice of social justice.

Firstly, institutional discrimination and oppression constitute the most fundamental external survival pressures facing the shelter. Shelter manager H, a university student, has frequently faced interviews and questioning by university management due to establishing the shelter (Interviewee H, 2024), reflecting the control exercised by institutional forces over gender practices that deviate from mainstream norms. At the same time, law enforcement officers, driven by prejudice, directly threaten the shelter’s physical living space through means such as pressuring landlords (Interviewee S, 2024), leaving the shelter in a prolonged state of limbo ‘between legality and illegality’. Malicious reports initiated by other transgender women within the community out of jealousy (Interviewee A, 2024) are a classic phenomenon arising when marginalised groups compete for limited symbolic capital within a confined ecosystem; the weak turning on the weak makes the shelter’s situation even more precarious.

6.3.4. The Reproduction of Dominant Logics: Labeling Violence and Seniority-Based Social Closure

The persistent infiltration of external oppression and the lack of institutional safeguards have also catalysed the reproduction of internal conflicts and power dynamics within the shelter. Due to the absence of standardised and binding institutional rules, a high degree of autonomy has led to relatively chaotic internal management, facilitating the emergence of power hierarchies and exclusionary mechanisms. On the one hand, the core managers' monopoly on symbolic capital and the right to speak has resulted in invisible labelling violence and discrimination within the shelter. For example, in a private conversation, Manager H and core members labelled new member F as 'eccentric' and 'potentially capable of dangerous behaviour' based on subjective assumptions (Interviewee H, 2024). Such subjective bias on the part of core managers has led to suspicion and isolation of certain members within the group, creating new forms of invisible discrimination and exclusion within the margins (Link & Phelan, 2001). On the other hand, within the shelter—a counter-space that originally advocated equality for all and horizontal mutual aid—long-standing members (such as S) have treated “length of residence” as their own capital of power. By establishing an exclusionary mechanism—namely, social closure—where “only long-standing members have management rights”, she pushed new members to the margins, replicating the oppressive logic of mainstream society’s “seniority-based hierarchy and class divisions”. Consequently, a space that should have practised social justice and reconstructed equality once again became a micro-power field characterised by distinctions of high and low status. This also triggered resistance in new member Y towards S’s excessive interference (Interviewee X, 2024). The micro-conflicts between new and old members over decision-making and

management powers indicate that mainstream society's hierarchical structures and power struggles are being replicated within the shelter.

6.3.5. Individual Autonomy versus Collective Will: Structural Dilemmas within Participatory Justice

This distortion of power, arising from the interplay of internal and external vulnerabilities, is further manifested—within the framework of Fraser's Participatory Justice theory—as a structural conflict between individual will and collective action (Fraser, 2003). The unfolding of collective action within the shelter relies heavily on moral contracts and emotional bonds between members. However, Y's last-minute withdrawal from a previous campaign to claim unpaid wages objectively shattered the mutual trust among members, leading the remaining members to collectively refuse to provide assistance during the second wage claim, driven by their resentment towards Y's previous lack of cooperation. Even though the manager, H, subjectively had a strong desire to assist Y, his personal will could not override the collective resistance of the group. This case demonstrates that, under internal self-governance lacking formal rules and procedural justice, the shelter is unable to strike an appropriate balance between 'upholding collective norms of mutual aid' and 'safeguarding individuals' practical claims to justice'. On the surface, the members' rejection of Y appears to stem from collective emotional hurt, but does there lie behind this an underlying mechanism of moral punishment? Might a mutual aid order maintained at the expense of individual members' fundamental rights give rise to new injustices? These questions remain to be explored in depth.

6.3.6. Conclusion: The Fragile Safety and Structural Boundaries of Marginal Counter-Spaces

In summary, as a space of resistance for marginalised groups, the shelter serves as a badge of self-empowerment and self-struggle for transgender women amidst the structural oppression caused by capitalist and patriarchal orders, and is undoubtedly of great significance (hooks, 1990). However, due to the multiple challenges posed by external institutional oppression and systemic stigma, the safety and stability of shelters remain fragile. At the same time, micro-power hierarchies, logic of discrimination and exclusion, and structural conflicts between individual rights and collective will have emerged within shelters themselves. These reveal that, under the dual influence of external constraints and internal tensions, shelters still face significant limitations and challenges.

6.3.7. Where Empirical Data Departs from Fraser

Although Nancy Fraser's (2003) framework of social justice advocates for the harmonious integration of 'redistribution' (economic justice) and 'recognition' (cultural/identity justice), the empirical reality of grassroots transgender shelters in China stands in stark contrast to this macro-institutional model. Fraser suggests that granting recognition within marginalised spaces can serve as a catalyst for collective mobilisation to achieve structural redistribution. However, field data reveals a more nuanced and specific micro-political reality.

Firstly, within the micro-space of the shelter, although absolute 'recognition' of transgender identity is achieved amongst members, this does not directly translate into 'redistribution' at the economic level. On the contrary, as evidenced by X's interview transcript, the shelter itself may inadvertently foster internal hierarchies,

as demonstrated by senior resident S's excessive exercise of authority over new residents. The complete absence of formal institutional safeguards (Guo et al., 2020) implies that mutual-aid spaces such as shelters may transform into closed environments characterised by horizontal surveillance and internal friction.

Secondly, Fraser's model posits an interactive relationship between the state and citizens, namely institutional relief. In the context of contemporary Chinese society, however, grassroots mutual aid operates in a precarious 'legal grey area'. H, the founder and manager of the shelter, faces the risk of external reporting, rendering the space inherently unstable. Consequently, the empirical data reveals contradictions that run counter to Fraser's expectations.

7. Conclusions

This study centres on the core question of 'how transgender women in the Chinese context can exercise agency to develop shelters into spaces for social justice'. The research indicates that, when confronted with multiple forms of structural oppression—manifesting as exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence—from state policies, mainstream society and their families of origin, transgender women do not remain in a state of complete victimhood. Instead, through the spontaneous establishment of shelters, they actively exercise agency to build spaces of resistance on the margins. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional model of justice, this study analyses how shelters exercise agency and practise social justice amidst structural and institutional oppression. In the Redistribution dimension: by providing stable accommodation, informal economic mutual aid and support with hormone medication, the shelters alleviate the material deprivation faced by this group following their systematic exclusion from the mainstream labour market; In

the Recognition dimension: the shelters break the discriminatory gaze of mainstream spaces, constructing a culturally safe space where transgender women are 'seen' and 'respected'; In the Participation dimension: the shelter transforms marginalised transgender women into internal managers, permitting and encouraging members to participate in daily decision-making and democratic resolutions; amidst the real-world predicament of marginalised public political participation among transgender communities, the shelter provides transgender women with opportunities to develop agency and rebuild self-esteem.

By integrating Bell Hooks' classic theory of 'the margin as a site of resistance', this study deepens the understanding of agency from a gender studies perspective. As Bell Hooks' theory posits, the 'margin' is not merely a passive site of exclusion, but a radical space that fosters resistance. Although the shelter is a product of structural oppression, the agency of the transgender women within it has enabled the shelter to become a counter-space capable of practising social justice to a certain extent. Trans women face multiple forms of exclusion from mainstream spaces. Whether it be universities refusing A's admission on grounds of mental health, traditional patriarchal family spaces subjecting trans women to domestic violence, or the housing market repeatedly evicting them from their legitimate rental needs due to perceived risks, all these reflect the difficult predicament trans women face within mainstream spaces. As an alternative space, the shelter helps transgender women find a breathing space amidst their marginalised circumstances by providing emotional companionship, resource support, psychological counselling, mutual aid among members, and recognition of their identity.

Due to China's relatively unique political environment, the agency of the shelter

as a space of marginal resistance does not manifest in grand demonstrations, but rather as a form of everyday resistance. For instance, when a transgender member fled domestic violence and their parents called the police to falsely accuse the shelter of ‘kidnapping’, the shelter’s members demonstrated remarkable collective resilience. Member S ‘single-handedly held off five police officers and two riot shields’; the group vehemently refused the police’s demand to delete evidence of violent policing; and, following eviction by a landlord in breach of contract, they swiftly organised the preservation of evidence and formulated strategies for administrative litigation and filing police reports. This attitude of refusing to yield an inch on their rights embodies the tenacious vitality of marginalised subjects ‘growing together in the crevices of rocks’. Although this micro-resistance cannot directly overturn the system, it has reclaimed dignity on the narrow fringes of power.

However, this study also clearly identifies the limitations of the shelter as an informal space. The shelter attempts to sustain its operations in the absence of institutional safeguards, relying solely on its members’ simple sense of justice, emotional bonds and informal agreements. This form of informal governance, which relies heavily on internal moral contracts and emotional ties, has led the shelter into a double bind of external constraints and internal conflicts. This manifests specifically when individual behaviour breaches the informal moral contract (such as Y’s last-minute withdrawal during the first wage claim). Due to the absence of formal procedural justice to balance the interests of all parties, group decisions that appear democratic end up sacrificing individual rights. Furthermore, within the shelter—which should have been a space for practising fairness—Social Closure begins to operate quietly due to the lack of institutional safeguards. Long-standing and core members monopolise spatial management and

the right to speak, enforcing a seniority-based hierarchy that replicates the oppressive logic of mainstream social stratification within the shelter.

The shelter's practice of justice offers a vivid portrait of the micro-resistance waged by China's transgender women's community in the cracks of society. They are both scarred marginalised subjects and fireflies huddling together for warmth in the darkness. In future research, I am curious to explore whether transgender women, once they leave the shelter's support, can rely on their own agency to rebuild their social support networks and achieve relative independence, rather than remaining dependent on the shelter's assistance and internal networks. While the shelter provides a space for marginalised resistance, might this lead to an over-reliance on the emotional and material support offered by the shelter, thereby hindering the development of individual, independent agency? This may well be a research direction worthy of continued and deeper attention.

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Appendix A

CONSENT FORM

Project title: A Sociology Research about Transgender Women Shelter in China

Principal Investigator: Jiayi Xu

I confirm that I have read and understood the information about the interview study and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I hereby confirm that I have had sufficient time to decide whether or not I wish to take part in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without giving any reason whatsoever.

I consent to participating in the study

Participant's name (in block capitals) and date

Signature

If you have any questions or comments, please raise them with the researcher or email: Jiayi Xu, jiayixu0528@outlook.com

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

I. Pre-Interview Protocol & Ethical Briefing

Informed Consent: Review the written consent form with the participant. Reiterate that participation is entirely voluntary and they may choose to stop the interview or skip any question at any point without penalty.

Anonymity Assurance: Re-emphasize that all data will be strictly anonymized; alphanumeric codes (e.g., H, S, A, Y, X) will replace real names, and specific institutional names or geographic locations will be omitted to protect personal safety.

Trauma-Informed Care Approach: Acknowledge that questions touch upon sensitive personal experiences. Inform the participant that the interview will immediately pause or terminate if they experience psychological discomfort or emotional distress.

II. Interview Questions Matrix

Module A: Demographics, Identity, and Background Experience

Could you share a bit about your personal journey regarding your gender identity?

How did your birth family respond when they learned about your transgender identity?

Probe: Did you experience rejection, economic exclusion, or instances of domestic abuse or forced institutionalization/conversion therapy?

How did you first learn about this transgender women's shelter, and what circumstances led to your decision to move here?

Module B: Exploring Structural Oppression (Young's Five Faces of Oppression Framework)

Sub-theme 1: Labor Exploitation and Precarious Employment

What have been your experiences trying to find formal employment?

Have you ever faced wage arrears, underpayment, or a lack of formal labor contracts due to your gender identity?

Probe for Rider Y: Why do small, informal platforms become the default option, and what are the barriers to taking them to labor arbitration?

Sub-theme 2: Spatial and Housing Exclusion

What difficulties have you encountered when trying to rent apartments independently in the mainstream housing market?

How does the shelter handle the constant threat of evictions and frequent relocations?

Sub-theme 3: Institutional Erasure (Healthcare, Education, and State Authorities)

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying within the formal education system or medical institutions?

Probe for Resident B's experiences: How do psychiatric facilities treat transgender patients when legal gender markers do not match physical characteristics?

Can you describe any interactions you have had with law enforcement or local neighborhood committees regarding your status at the shelter?

Module C: The Shelter as a Space for Social Justice (Fraser's Framework)

Sub-theme 1: Material Redistribution

In what ways does living at the shelter help alleviate your financial and material hardships?

How does the collective sharing of resources—such as living expenses, food, and crucial estrogen medications—work in your day-to-day routine?

Sub-theme 2: Cultural Recognition and Affirmation

What does it mean to you to live in an environment where people use your preferred name and respect your identity?

How does the shelter function as a "safe space" compared to mainstream society or your family home?

Sub-theme 3: Political/Socio-Organizational Participation

How are daily responsibilities, shelter policies, and unexpected crises managed here?

Can you describe how the democratic voting process functions when a community dispute arises?

Module D: Agency, Resilience, and Crisis Support

Many portray transgender women solely as passive victims of discrimination.

How do you view your own role and power within this shelter?

How do residents support one another when someone experiences a severe mental health crisis, depression, or thoughts of self-harm?

Probe for H & A: What kind of psychological toll does managing continuous crisis intervention place on you as community leaders?

Can you tell me about a time when the shelter tried to organize a collective protest or action to stand up for a member's rights? What were the outcomes and challenges?

Module E: Internal Limitations and Micro-Power Dynamics

While the shelter is a space of mutual aid, what kinds of disagreements or internal friction occur among residents in the communal areas?

Do you feel there is a difference in power, authority, or say between the core managers who fund/run the shelter and ordinary residents?

Probe for Resident X: How do the attitudes or personal biases of core managers affect how other residents treat a specific member?

Does social tension exist between long-standing residents (who have lived here for years) and newly admitted residents?

Probe for Resident S: Do older residents feel a heightened sense of control or authority over the shared space?

III. Post-Interview De-briefing & Cool-down

Emotional Check-in: Ask the participant how they are feeling after discussing these topics. Give them a few moments to decompress.

Open Floor: Ask: "Is there anything else about your experience in the shelter, your struggles, or your hopes for social justice that we haven't covered and that you would like to share?"

Resource Provision: Provide contact information for peer psychological networks or community resources if the participant indicates they need ongoing emotional support. Reconfirm their consent regarding the academic use of this transcript. Thank them warmly for their time and bravery in sharing their story.

Appendix C

Fieldwork In-Depth Interview Transcripts

Fieldwork Ethical Statement and Informed Consent

This research addresses highly sensitive issues concerning the transgender women's community, including employment, housing, healthcare and education. Furthermore, many of the interviewees are socially marginalised or suffer from significant psychological or mental health vulnerabilities (such as depression, schizophrenia, self-harm and suicidal tendencies). To strictly adhere to academic ethical standards in anthropology and sociology, this fieldwork and the interview records have been edited and preserved within the following framework:

1. **Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation:** All community members participating in the in-depth interviews for this study were explicitly informed prior to the interview of the researcher's academic objectives, identity, and the ultimate academic use of the data. All interviews were conducted on the premise that the interviewee was emotionally stable, of sound mind, and participating entirely of their own free will.
2. **Anonymity and Privacy Protection (De-identification):** To prevent social exclusion, labour contract disputes or risks to personal safety resulting from the disclosure of identities, all interviewee names in this appendix (e.g. H, S, A, Y, X, etc.) are academic codes. Furthermore, the names of specific workplaces, informal food delivery platforms, universities, hospitals and the actual geographical locations of shelters have been obscured or omitted.

3. Principle of Minimising Psychological Harm and Prioritising Personal Safety:

In view of the sudden crises that may arise during fieldwork, such as interventions regarding self-harm or suicide, the researcher prioritises the fulfilment of humanitarian assistance and the safeguarding of personal safety whilst on-site. The recording and debriefing of interview dialogues are conducted in a safe context after the crisis has subsided.

Appendix D

Summary Table of Basic Information for Interviewees in the In-Depth Interview

The table below presents the de-identified profiles of the five key interviewees mentioned in the main text and appendices.

This study provides basic information about the interviewees from in-depth interviews.

Respondent Code	Community Identity/Role Positioning	Time spent living in the shelter	The main topics covered in the interviews	Remarks
Interviewee H	Founder and director of the shelter; currently a university student	Long term(founder)	Gray economy financing, housing exclusion, democratic decision-making, organizational constraints	Core Community Manager

Interviewee S	Senior member of the shelter	Three years	Store employees' unpaid wages, stigma against grassroots public authorities, campus violence, suicide intervention	Core Actor
Interviewee A	Member of the shelter, H's girlfriend, professional psychological counselor, and person preparing to study abroad	Long term	The exclusion within the education system, psychological support pressures from community members, and internal conflicts	Core Community Manager; Has a background in psychology
Interviewee Y	Member of the shelter; delivery person for a small food delivery platform	1 year	Informal employment, absence of labor contracts, difficulties in protecting rights, and collective tensions	Marginal Labor Representative

Interviewee X	Regular member/New resident of the shelter	1year	Daily interpersonal relationships within the shelter, and the underlying invisible power structures inside it	The Marginal Observer
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Appendix E

Transcript of In-Depth Interviews (Key Excerpts)

Interviewer (Researcher): Jiayi Xu, Researcher for this study

Interviewees: H, S, A, Y, X (hereinafter referred to by their respective codes)

1. Interview Transcript: Interviewee H (Founder and Director of the Shelter)

[Regarding the failed attempt to defend member Y's rights]

Q: I heard from other members that when Y was previously owed wages by a food delivery company, the Shelter organised a collective protest to support her. Why was it ultimately unsuccessful?

H: Y used to work as a delivery rider for a food delivery company, and that company failed to pay her wages. At the time, all of us at the Shelter gathered together with the intention of staging a protest at the company's premises to help her recover her wages. However, just as we arrived at the company's entrance, Y, feeling intimidated, stopped us. She has since moved to a different delivery company but is still facing wage arrears; yet, due to that previous experience, nobody here wants to help her protest this time.

[Regarding the Shelter's Early Unofficial Fundraising Channels]

Q: The shelter now provides free board and lodging. How exactly is this substantial amount of daily operating funds raised?

H: The shelter has gained quite a bit of influence now, so we receive funding from some relatively wealthy transgender women. A few years ago, when we first

started raising funds, I made money by sleeping with men who had specific kinks. I had no choice; it was the quickest way to get money.

[On the Housing Crisis: Frequent Evictions and Relocations]

Q: As soon as I arrived at the field site, I saw everyone packing their bags and moving out. Why does the shelter need to change its address so frequently?

H: Because the transgender women at the shelter suffer from mental health conditions, we frequently experience incidents of suicide, self-harm or disappearances. Alternatively, family members of the women might call the police or come to the door. Landlords take great offence at the police visiting so often; they feel we cause too much trouble and are unwilling to rent to us anymore. This means we have to move house frequently; the shelter has already relocated many times.

Q: But didn't you just finish moving into the new place? Why has the landlord gone back on their word?

H: Although we signed a tenancy agreement, if the landlord insists we move out, there's nothing we can do. Taking legal action to defend our rights is a hassle and takes a long time.

[Regarding the democratic consultation strategy for coordinating Member B's hospital transfer]

Q: Regarding the arrangements for accompanying B to the hospital, why was it ultimately decided that you and A would go, whilst the other members did not?

H: You are the only cisgender woman here, and A is the transgender woman at the shelter who most closely resembles a cisgender woman. After discussing it, we unanimously agreed that if the two of you accompanied B to the hospital, her father would be least likely to take offence.

[On the Role of the Shelter and Expectations Regarding Residents' Work]

Q: How do you view the role the shelter plays in residents' daily lives?

H: I don't want everyone to just stay in the shelter all day. Although the shelter provides free board and lodging, I hope everyone goes out to work and has a normal working and social life; that's the only way everyone can get better.

Q: So, what is the most fundamental, core safety function of this space?

H: The shelter's most important role is to prevent transgender women from committing suicide. If anyone shows signs of wanting to harm themselves, we can intervene in time.

[Regarding Subjective Prejudice Towards New Resident F (Internal Hidden Discrimination)]

Q: Recently, during conversations, there seems to be some grumbling about F, who has just moved in. As the person in charge, what is your view of her?

H: (Complaining during a casual chat with core members) F often sends me flirty messages. I find her personality rather strange; she seems like the sort who'd murder you in your sleep. I wish I'd never agreed to let her move in.

[Regarding external institutional constraints faced as a university student running a shelter]

Q: As a current university student, did the university put pressure on you after learning that you had set up a transgender shelter?

H: There are always people who can't stand the fact that I've opened a shelter and report me to the university. Every time, I have to go to the university to explain myself. Actually, my tutor is quite understanding, but she's powerless to help. Every time someone reports me, the university management puts pressure on her, and she has to call me in for a chat... But if I didn't do this, there would be no one else to do it.

2. Interview Transcript: Interviewee S (Senior Shelter Member)

[Details of Unpaid Wages Encountered While Working in a Shop in March 2025]

Q: Regarding the shop you left in March of this year (2025), has the current wage dispute been resolved?

S: My performance-related pay has only been paid out in part and has not been issued on the stipulated date. I was previously employed at a shop and left in early March. The salary that should have been paid on the 14th was delayed, with the explanation that the nationwide stock-taking had not yet concluded and the payroll had not been processed.

[Regarding the housing crisis where the landlord insisted on eviction even at the cost of breaching the contract]

Q: How determined is the landlord to evict you, given that the tenancy agreement has not yet expired?

S: The landlord is forcing us to move out, preferring to pay a penalty rather than let us stay.

[On systemic discrimination and abuse of power by local police officers during population registration]

Q: You mentioned earlier that you encountered unfair treatment during routine registration at the police station. Could you elaborate on what the police officer did?

S: The landlord rang us after receiving a call from the police. I was absolutely furious; that officer was clearly discriminating against us, and his act of calling our landlord privately was also against the rules.

[Regarding Member B's Experience of Taking a Leave of Absence Due to School Bullying and Being Humiliated Again at a Class Reunion]

Q: What was the trigger that led to Member B's emotional breakdown, resulting in her being rushed to hospital following a suicide attempt?

S: On the evening of her suicide attempt, B attended a school reunion. We all tried to dissuade her from going, as she had previously taken a leave of absence due to depression caused by school bullying in secondary school. We told her those classmates weren't good people, but perhaps she was too desperate for their approval. As a result, her depression relapsed after returning from the reunion; those classmates mocked her for being neither male nor female.

[Regarding the violent clashes between police and residents triggered by a family member's call to the police, and preparations for administrative litigation]

Q: At the time, a resident's parent called the police claiming the shelter was 'kidnapping' people. How severe was the conflict on the scene when the police arrived? How do you intend to handle the situation moving forward?

S: Over twenty police officers turned up. I was single-handedly holding off five officers and two riot shields. The police forced us to delete evidence of their violent conduct, whilst the landlord pressured us to move out, insisting we leave even if it meant paying a penalty for breaching the lease. We are preparing to file an administrative lawsuit and are considering lodging formal complaints against the landlord, the parents of the shelter residents who called the police, and the officers involved in the violent enforcement, seeking to have these cases formally registered.

[Regarding the Failure of Suicide Intervention at the Shelter and the Grim Reality of Resident Deaths]

Q: I heard that prior to the start of this field investigation, two residents who had left the shelter on their own attempted to take their own lives. What was the final outcome of the intervention?

S: (Looking down in silence) One was found, and the other was confirmed dead.

[Regarding allegations of gender construction and bias among law enforcement officials]

Q: Why do you think police and other public officials frequently subject the shelter to such frequent searches and hostility?

S: You know, the police are mostly cisgender men, and they've always been very prejudiced against us transgender women.

[On three years of identity and stewardship within the shelter]

Q: Having stayed at the shelter for so long, how do you define this place and your role within it?

S: I've lived at the shelter for three years now. I see it as a place I must protect; I regard myself as the shelter's caretaker. I'm different from the members who've only just moved in.

3. Interview Transcript: Interviewee A (Shelter Resident and Community Counsellor)

[On the experience of being denied admission to a domestic university on grounds of mental illness and being forced into exile abroad]

Q: You passed the Gaokao and received an offer from a domestic university. Why were you ultimately unable to enrol and ended up going to the Netherlands instead?

A: I have schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder. The university refused my admission on these grounds, so I had no choice but to contact a transgender woman in the Netherlands to help me apply to a Dutch university.

[On the stratification of 'vulnerable' groups within the community and reflections thereon]

Q: The transgender community is often viewed as an absolutely vulnerable social group. How do you view this label?

S: I don't consider myself part of a disadvantaged group, because at least I was able to study abroad. How many people in the whole of China can actually study abroad? I've already surpassed 95% of the Chinese population. Those transgender women whose families lack the financial means to fund their studies abroad—they are the truly disadvantaged. In reality, whether one is considered disadvantaged is closely tied to financial status; there are clear hierarchies within the transgender community, and those from affluent families lead far better lives.

[On the immense pressure of being the sole counsellor in a community with severe mental health vulnerabilities]

Q: As the only person in the shelter with formal training in psychology, how do you cope with your own mental state whilst facing such a high concentration of negative emotions and even having to intervene in cases of self-harm on a daily basis?

A: I am the only person at the shelter capable of providing psychological counselling, which makes me feel I have a mission to help other transgender women. However, I also have my own mental health issues, and dealing with everyone's psychological problems on a daily basis puts me under immense pressure. Furthermore, I am about to go to the Netherlands to study, and once I leave, there will be no one at the shelter able to provide psychological support.

[On the stigmatisation and reporting of the shelter's manager, H, within the community, and the legal vulnerability of grassroots organisations]

Q: Why, apart from external discrimination, do some people within the transgender women's community frequently report H and the shelter to the authorities?

A: Because H is quite well-known within the community. She's famous for running this shelter among transgender women and is considered a key opinion leader (KOL). Consequently, some other transgender women resent the fact that she's so widely admired, so they insult her and report her. There are plenty of bad apples within our own community; we aren't exactly united. But there's nothing we can do about these people, because we are a grassroots organisation with neither policy support nor legal protection. The shelter itself operates in a grey area between legality and illegality.

4. Interview Transcript: Interviewee Y (Shelter Member, Food Delivery Rider)

[On the Situation of Being Unable to Sign Legal Contracts and Having to Rely on 'Undeclared Work' While Facing Exploitation]

Q: You're constantly being blatantly underpaid by small food delivery companies and can't take them to labour arbitration. Why didn't you choose to work for larger, more formal platforms back then?

Y: Big food delivery companies have more requirements and stricter vetting processes. Only small companies are willing to hire people like us (trans women), but these small firms all rely on undeclared work; they won't sign employment contracts with us, which is why they dare to withhold wages so brazenly.

5. Interview Transcript: Interviewee X (Ordinary Shelter Resident)

[Regarding dissatisfaction with senior resident S's excessive exercise of authority within the group]

Q: When everyone is in the communal lounge, do new residents and long-standing residents (such as S) experience friction in their interactions?

X: (Complaining privately) S wants to control everything; she thinks everyone should do as she says, which makes people feel a bit uncomfortable.