

# The (im)possibilities of queer girlhoods: Chinese girls negotiating queerness and filial piety

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## Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of nine Chinese girls and young women as they explore and negotiate queer subjectivities within the constraints of patriarchal and (hetero)sexual norms surrounding girlhood and young femininity. I focus on filial piety (xiaoshun) as a normative gendered discourse being reconfigured in changing gender, familial and other power dynamics in China. I argue that the discourse of filial piety continues to naturalise a heteronormative girlhood that will smoothly transition into young womanhood prepared to take on responsibilities of 'getting married and having kids'. This narrative, however, is in tensions with girls and young women's diversified expressions of sexualities. Through the participants' own accounts of queer explorations, I demonstrate how they actively engage and reflect on these tensions with familial and filial discourses while navigating the (im)possibilities of becoming queer girls across varied socioeconomic and family backgrounds. The findings of this study offered new insights into how familism and filial piety are woven into Chinese gender and sexual politics and being constantly (re)negotiated. My conceptualisation of queer girlhoods in China shows how queer girls and young women are marginalised in and around family. In the meantime, it demonstrates the emergent strategies of queer resistance and negotiations of filial piety through delaying marriage and managing familial intimacy.

## Keywords

Chinese girlhood, filial piety, heteronormativity, queer subjectivities

## Introduction

This paper explores the experiences of nine girls and young women from mainland China, aged between 16 and 21, as they navigate and explore queerness in the face of societal and cultural norms surrounding girlhoods and young femininities. These norms manifest girlhood as a

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relational and culturally embedded site where diverse girl subjectivities emerge and inhabit (Aapola et al., 2005; Driscoll, 2002; Gonick, 2003). The paper hence attempts to conceptualise queer girlhoods in China as these girls and young women negotiate the complex and sometimes contradictory discourses of gender and sexuality within Chinese context, through conformity and resistance to the norm of filial piety. Filial piety (*xiaoshun*), a core element of Confucian moral values and the Chinese relational conception of the self, denotes the importance of obedience (*shun*) to ensure familial harmony (Choi and Luo, 2016). Meanwhile, the notions of filial piety have also been reshaped by specific discursive, material and historic conditions as well as the emergent gender and sexual subjectivities in the postsocialist era (Bao, 2020; Luo et al., 2022).

This paper draws on interview data and social media diaries from a larger doctoral project looking at how Chinese girls and young women experience gender and sexual inequalities and engage in digital feminisms. It emerged as a recurring theme how specific participants ( $n=9$ ) had been struggling with maintaining their relationship with parents while starting to explore and understand their own sexualities from online feminist discussions. In this article, I focus on these nine participants who have shared their stories of negotiating tensions arise from their queer sexualities and socio-cultural expectations on them as girls or young women. I conceptualise queer girlhoods in relation to the narratives of the participants' embedded and situated experiences. It is important to note that during the research, some participants expressed hesitation when it comes to identification with specific and fixed labels or terminology related to sexual orientation. This hesitation brought into question the uncritical adoption of identitarian categories of sexuality, and I tried to keep the original descriptive phrases of participants themselves in the demographic information as presented in the methodology section of this paper. Meanwhile, echoing Bao (2020: 17) in a post-identitarian uptake of 'queer', the paper recognises queer as an 'ongoing process' of becoming rather than a fixed identity or innate sense of self. The nine participants mentioned in this article aged from 16 to 21 years old. Although I use both girls and young women to refer to these participants, all of them referred to themselves as girls most of the time. It stretched the rigid definition of girlhood as a universal experience or expectation on a coming-of-age phase before female adulthood (Driscoll, 2002; Helgren and Vasconcellos, 2010), which in legal and societal terms in China would be before 18 years old, and manifested girlhood as a culture-specific construction even in terms of age. Moreover, theorisations of queer times have suggested how queer people's experiences of life course do not coordinate with the linear, progressive, 'straight' time that often marks life stages according to heteronormative or homonormative forms of familial ideals (Binnie and Klesse, 2013; Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2005; Luo et al., 2023). The notion of 'queer girlhood' in this paper hence is not infantilising the participants or neglecting their agency; instead, it speaks to this body of queer temporal studies to bring Chinese queer girls and young women's struggles with negotiating marriage and motherhood as normative markers for 'proper' female maturity into academic and public discussion.

## Locating girlhood and young femininity in a postsocialist China

In this section I demonstrate the historic, material and discursive contexts for researching girlhood and young femininity in contemporary mainland China. More specifically to this paper, I attend to how neoliberal discourses of independence and autonomy reconfigure the dominant ideals about family-centred femininity by updating rather than fully dismantling Confucian gender norms (Liu, 2014). Confucianism for a long time has shaped the patriarchal ideals and filial norms of Chinese femininity surrounding obedience and familial obligations rendering women's ideal roles as dutiful daughters, wives and mothers (Leung, 2003; Zhan, 1996). Although Maoist and revolutionary discourses of women's liberation have promoted women's participation in social production and

created new feminine ideals like ‘iron girls’, it was also argued to devise a gender neutralism which stripped off the possibility for understanding and challenging gender and sexual power differentials (Jin, 2006; Wang, 2005). The marketisation of Chinese economy and opening up to global market marked new periods of sociocultural transformations, which represented an interesting pathway of adapting to global neoliberalism with very limited political democracy and culturally embedded notions of individual rights (Yan, 2010, 2020). Yan (2010, 2020) presented an influential perspective of looking at Chinese individualisation as an ongoing process that opened up new spaces for individual expressions and emergent subjectivities and meanwhile closely tied to traditional familial values and cultural norms such as filial piety.

Following this body of work showing the complexities of contexts for researching gender and sexual subjectivities in China, this article carefully contextualises these disruptions as well as continuities of gender and sexual power relations. Socioeconomic transformations in the past three decades have arguably caused the traditional forms of patriarchal family to start dissolving in China (Shen, 2011; Yan, 2003). For instance, it was suggested that urban daughters were particularly benefited from the one child policy in terms of better access to education and financial investment from parents which brought them greater autonomy in life choices including marriage (Fong, 2002). Following rapid marketisation of economy, neoliberal conditions such as rising housing prices and precarious job market in the past two decades pushed urban women to become more dependent on marriage and their natal families in face of potential economic uncertainties (Song and Ji, 2020). This was also reflected in several debates around ‘women returning home’ where familial values and gendered roles in the domestic sphere that has been critiqued in the Maoist periods were (re)endorsed in official rhetoric, pushing urban women back to family in a disguise of personal choice (Bulbeck, 2009; Song, 2016). Therefore, the so-called advancements in young women’s autonomy in neoliberal terms are far from being evenly distributed but are bounded by existing imbalance in socioeconomic power differentials such as social class, urban-rural divide among others, reconfiguring rather than fundamentally transforming patriarchal structures and familial norms including filial piety (Xie, 2021).

Filial piety, as a core dimension of Confucian familial culture, normalises obedience through aligning with parents’ expectations and prioritising familial obligations and is thought to be the key to maintaining familial harmony (Zarafonitis, 2017). One core aspect of practising filial piety is to ensure the continuity of heteronormative family through marriage and reproduction, which is critically relevant to my analysis of how girls and young women are positioned in and around family contexts. (Heterosexual) marriage is not only found to remain almost a universal norm in China, but adult women who resist or delay marriage are particularly stigmatised through a discourse of leftover women (Davis, 2014b; Fincher, 2016; To, 2013). Moreover, cultural norms drawing from influences of Confucian patriarchal values link the functioning of patriarchal family and heteronormative marriage with women’s obligation of reproducing a (male) child (Davis and Friedman, 2014; Tang, 1995). In a similar vein, Martin (2023) conceptualised a neotraditional form of young femininity taking shape against the backdrop of postsocialist China, where young women are normalised in state discourse to be naturally family-and-marriage-centred and must take on the familial obligations. Overall, the norm of filial piety remains highly gendered, upholding an ideal of family-oriented femininity and intersecting with heteronormativity and patriarchy as will be discussed in following discussion on sexuality and queer politics in China.

## **Researching queer and sexual politics in a postsocialist China**

All participants discussed in this paper were born after mid 1990s, which is often associated with economic marketisation as well as social transformations including the emergence of new types of

gender and sexual subjectivities particularly in urban China (Farrer, 2002; Jeffreys, 2006; Pan, 2006; Rofel, 2007). The notion of sexual revolution was particularly influential as an illustration not only for the growing visibility of topics related to sex and sexuality in both popular and academic discourses, but also that sex was being partially decoupled from its procreative function while pleasure and desire started being explored (Pan, 1994, 2006). More recent studies, however, have noted that familial values of Confucianism still feed into dominant discourses about sexuality and the purpose of sex is still closely linked to the reproduction and the preservation of family bloodline (Liang et al., 2017).

Previous studies of LGBTQ+ (or *Tongzhi* as one commonly used local term) communities and individuals in China and other Asian countries have also looked into how Confucian values and norms of familism play out in queer politics (Brainer, 2018; Chou, 2001; Ho, 2011; Song, 2022; Tan, 2011; Wang, 2021). More specifically, researchers have paid attention to how filial piety as a familial norm regulates and disciplines non-heterosexual desires and performances and constitutes an important dimension of queer subjectivities in China (Chou, 2001; Engebretsen, 2014; Ho, 2011). In this regard, Chou (2001) troubled the western-centred perspectives of coming-out which gave primacy to confrontational politics and individualism (e.g. through direct disclosure of sexuality to one's family). Chou (2001: 27) proposed an indigenous approach of *Tongzhi* (which can be literally translated into English as comrades) politics in China that understands 'coming-home' as a more subtle strategy to negotiate with rather than confronting family. This was further complicated and developed by bringing attention to another model of 'coming-with' which emphasises queer subjects' active maintenance of familial harmony and 'interrogating heteronormative family structures' (Huang and Brouwer, 2018: 107). More recent studies of urban-based gay communities and queer activism engaging parents has demonstrated that a neo-Confucian normativity (Luo et al., 2022) or neo-familial model (Wei and Yan, 2021) of Chinese *tongzhi* politics is taking shape that focuses on familial intimacy and harmony rather than individual identity and autonomy.

Meanwhile, Liu and Ding (2005: 33) presented a well-founded query on the rhetorical tactics of silencing queer sexualities around family, which was termed by them as 'the poetics of reticence'. Liu and Ding (2005) pointed out that such silence constitutes a complicit model of reinforcing homophobic forces in familial discourses of filial obedience, rendering queer sexualities invisible in and beyond (heteronormative) family. Kam's (2007, 2013) ethnographic study of *lala* communities (lesbian, bisexual and transgender women as defined in the research) in Shanghai similarly found out that the significance of familial harmony was constantly brought up to justify queer subjects' decisions to remain closeted to their family, which became major causes of stress. Moreover, Kam (2013: 6) pointed out how heteronormative marriage placed queer women at a more disadvantaged position as they were firstly rejected as 'sexually autonomous subject' as women and then failures to enter maturity and adulthood and to meet familial obligations for their rejection of marriage.

As the substantial amount of research on Chinese queer politics engaged adult participants particularly adult men, there have been few investigations into the experiences of girls and younger women and how they navigate queer sexualities, leaving a gap both in sexuality studies and girlhood studies in China. This article engages with this specific and diverse group of queer girls to address their struggles with exploring queer sexualities, particularly manifested in their resistance to the filial norms around girlhood and marriage. Former academic literature set up for my analysis of queer girl subjectivities to shift away from a rigid and generalised conception of Chinese girlhood as somehow monolithic and positioned against the backdrop of state discourses and a unified political ideology. Through conceptualising Chinese queer girlhood as a discursive site where gender, sexuality and other power relations come into play, I argue this study will further inform

academic discussions on the intersection of Chinese girlhoods, feminist and queer politics to address the barriers and possibilities emerged from these stories and practices of queer resistance.

## Methodology

This section turns to the methodological and analytical framework for engaging girls and young women in my research and looking into their experiences and explorations of queer sexualities. As mentioned previously, this paper draws on interview data and social media diaries from a larger doctoral project looking at how Chinese girls and young women experience gender and sexual inequalities and engage in digital feminisms on the specific platform of Weibo. Weibo, a Chinese microblogging site similar to Twitter, facilitated the data collection process for enabling me to reach for participants from diverse backgrounds and from all over the country. In the meantime, it was also found to be a crucial space for girls and young women in China to take part in public discussions and civic and political participation including digital feminist activism (e.g. see Peng, 2020; Xue and Rose, 2022) and explore and learn about gender and sexuality (Zarafonitis, 2017). Informed by online ethnographic methodologies and its strength in studying online communities and contexts, this PhD project was a fully online-based qualitative inquiry (Hine, 2000, 2015; Postill and Pink, 2012) and was approved by UCL Research Ethics Committee. It also followed the ethical guidelines of Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020) to address ethical issues around collection, storage and handling of research data.

### *Data collection and sampling*

Data collection for the broader research was completed in two stages spreading over a period of 6 months. For the first stage I did an online tracking of gender-related topics that were trending on Weibo and related discussions for a whole month, during which I also tried to recruit participants for the next stage. For the second stage of my PhD project, I aimed to involve girls and young women aged between 16 and 22 and varied in their ethnicities, geolocations and family backgrounds (please see detailed information in Table 1), for the purpose of diverse perspectives from the participants. The age range was initially chosen to aim at girls and young women who were between the age of starting high school and finishing university, which also roughly correspond to a transitional period from girlhood to young adult womanhood in both legal and sociocultural terms in the context of mainland China. However, the temporality of this transition and its relation to the filial norm of marriage have been problematised by these participants themselves as I have touched upon in the introduction and will return to later.

In this second stage of this research, I interviewed these 21 participants twice (42 interviews in total) via online video or audio call. In between these two rounds of interviews, participants were also asked to keep one diary entry each week to record and reflect on anything that they encountered or wanted to share about gender and feminism over a period of 10 weeks. Both rounds of interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner and the original interview guide did not include questions about sexuality. However, sexuality and the experiences of tensions while trying to discuss sexuality with parents emerged as a recurring theme brought up by 9 out of 21 participants. This article hence chose to focus on these nine participants who shared experiences of exploring queer desires and relationships in and around family and look into the interviews and/or social media diaries of these participants. Their engagement with feminisms also constituted an interesting and distinctive aspect of this study, as I expand on how queer awakenings and resistance to marriage are empowered by online feminist discourses in the next section. Their basic demographic information has been listed in the table below.

**Table 1.** Demographic information of the participants quoted.

Name	Age	Educational status	Current and former place(s) of residence	Sex orientation defined in own terms	Other information about family
Wing	16	High school student	Korla, Xinjiang	Lesbian	Lives with mother
Tree	19	Undergraduate student	Studying in Beijing. Originally from Hubei province	Lesbian	Sole child in family, parents divorced, lives with mother before college
Gao	17	High school student	Beihai, Guangxi	Non-heterosexual	Has a younger sister
Kit	16	High school student	Xi'an, Shaanxi	Bisexual, preferring girls	No mentioning of siblings, lives with both parents
Gigi	20	Undergraduate student	Guangzhou, Guangdong. Grew up and originally from a small town in Guangdong	Lesbian or bi-sexual	Has a younger brother
Tong	21	Undergraduate student	Studying in Chengdu, Sichuan. Originally from Hunan province, grew up in Guangdong province	Bisexual	Has a young brother
Corn	17	High school student	Anhui province	Pansexual	Lives with mother and stepfather, has a stepbrother and a stepsister both older than her
Yin	17	High school student	Beijing. Originally from Shandong province	Exploring relationship with girls	Has an older brother, lives with mother away from rest of family
Darry	19	Undergraduate student	Nanning, Guangxi	Lesbian	Sole child in family, lives with both parents before college

### *Analytical approach and positionality*

This project followed an emerging research paradigm of feminist participatory methodology (Caretta and Riaño, 2016) challenging the dominant knowledge and knowledge production in research and bringing in voices and perspectives that tend to be silenced and overlooked children (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018). These methodological and epistemological considerations take issue with merely focusing on young people as inherently vulnerable groups needing protection, which could reinforce rather than challenge the hierarchy within research practices as processes of knowledge production, and suggest instead to focus on empowering young people through research (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; Horgan, 2017). This therefore aligns well with theoretical and methodological formations in girlhoods studies that sought to highlight girls and young women's agency not only in social interactions, culture creation but also increasingly in research practices (Aapola et al., 2005; McRobbie, 1991; Zhu, 2022). This is of course not to deny the significance of institutionalised ethics of conducting research with children such as gaining parental consent which I have abide by (Robinson and Davies, 2014). To go beyond just recognising the research processes and relationship as power-laden, feminist approach to girlhoods studies also put an emphasis on how to address this imbalance and develop a reciprocal research relationship. For this research, I

explained to the participants at the beginning about their right to quit, to choose what and how to share. I also tried to constantly encourage them to understand and participate in decision making during the research process. For instance, for the social media diary I provided a suggestion of prompts (e.g. hot topics about feminism on Weibo) that the participants could choose to write about without offering them a structured template. This act engaged participants to take initiative in deciding what and how they would like to explore and was described by many participants as a ‘meaningful’ and ‘empowering’ experience when I asked in the second interview how they felt about writing diaries. It also invited multimodal presentations (including drawings, screenshots, texts and short fictions) of a wide range of topics related to gender and feminism that the participants encountered in daily life and rich accounts of how they engaged and responded to the discussions and discourses surrounding those issues.

### Queer awakenings from a heteronormative girlhood

Following the conception of heterosexual and reproductive marriage as a gendered norm prescribing women’s role as wives and mothers (Kam, 2013, 2014), I argue that this norm extends into regulating younger girls and girlhoods. This heteronormative girlhood juxtaposes with a paradoxical restriction at both familial and society level on young women’s sexual autonomy as evidenced by some participants’ early queer awakenings. This societal taboo (Farrer, 2014; Huang, 2018) increased the threshold for girls and young women to actively explore and discuss sexuality in the first place. Wing, a 16-year-old girl living in a county in Xinjiang, was talking about her sexual awakenings and explorations in our first interview. She shared how she first came across depictions of sexual behaviours in online-published erotic novels and became familiarised with this genre despite knowing that her parents see this sexual knowingness as ‘bad’ and needed to be disciplined and restricted:

- Wing: I first knew this in the novels, I think. Then there were some feminist microbloggers on Weibo and they were sharing some knowledge about sex.
- Xie: Have your parents ever told you anything about this?
- Wing: Hmm. Never. When I was reading those novels and they saw me reading, they would ask ‘are you reading erotic novels’, or they would say ‘reading erotic novels is what bad kids do’.

(Wing, 16, 1st interview)

The above quote showed that Wing was aware of the normative girlhood that prohibited sexual knowledge. For Wing, it contradicted with the casual family conversations where her mother would naturally talk about expectations on Wing to ‘get married and have kids’ (*jiehun shengzi*) in the future. Self-identified as a lesbian, Wing told me how her queer awakening prompted her to resist marriage and motherhood at a young age:

I was kind of aware of my (sexual) orientation probably since primary school, so I really hated being told that I’d have to get married and stuff.

(Wing, 16, 1st interview)

Wing had a few attempts at coming out to her mother saying that ‘you were always nagging that I should get married and have kids but I think this is not going to come true’. This was received with her mother’s silence and diversion of topics. Wing expressed confusion and frustration for such dismissive attitudes towards her sexual orientation as ‘a random idea which only lasts for a bit’. What was hidden within the awkward silence of talking about sexuality was a self-evident norm on

girls to become future wives and mothers rooted in a familial discourse that reproductive concern is a naturalised obligation for women (Evans, 2008). Her mother's dismissal of Wing's coming-out and expressions of non-heterosexuality as only a developmental phase illustrated a strong link between marriage and motherhood with proper female maturity and womanhood (Evans, 2007; Kam, 2013, 2014).

It is notable that in the quote presented above, Wing acknowledged that her source of information on sexuality and sex education began with online feminist microbloggers, and such discovery encouraged her to explore sexuality and queerness more actively. Towards the end of our first interview, Wing told me that she had not only read erotic novels but also wrote erotica-like fanfictions herself. According to Wing's explanations, her writings are born out of an alternative form of queer femslash writings (Dhaenens et al., 2008; Yang and Bao, 2012) and belong to a specific and niche sub-genre imagining a restructured system of gender and sexuality. From her own perspective, this type of writing allowed some 'flexibility' in her writing of girl-to-girl relationships 'free from the limits in real world'. I argue Wing's writing practices creating a queer erotic imaginary (Zhao, 2017, 2018) where she could explore queer desires disregarding heteronormative discourse of filial obligations that warranted her mother's expectation on her to enter heterosexual marriage and motherhood. Connecting to and extending from what Luo et al (2023: 1) conceptualised as 'yes-but-not-yet' form of queer youth temporality, I argue that Wing's writing of queer girlhoods exemplifies an alternative queer temporality that subsists on a sense of finding spaces outside the scripts of heteronormative girlhood.

Although there was seldom an open discussion about sexuality in family conversations, the participants themselves showed anticipations for resistance from parents. Yin, a girl of 17 years old studying in an elite Beijing high school, lived with her mother away from her hometown and only saw her father and other family during traditional festivals. When Yin spoke about her experiences of exploring 'relationships with girls', quoting her own words, she showed a strong awareness of the possible reactions from her parents if her sexuality was known to them, despite feeling emotionally distant from her parents and family. She tried to keep positively hoping that 'it's still possible that if they know they'll gradually accept it', but, directly coming out to her parents is rather unimaginable. Kit, who is a 16-year-old high school student in urban Xi'an, similarly told me that her queer awakening was accompanied by worry when she first came across that she was more sexually and romantically attracted to girls than boys. The anticipated reaction from her parents that they might be disappointed at her immediately stopped her 'digging into this', 'as I know they've always wanted me to get married and have kids'. It again exemplified that the filial regulation of girls' sexuality was already enforced through this heteronormative notion of marriage and family implied in conversations with their parents without the need for explicitly speaking about sexualities. It manifested how the juxtaposition of a silence about queer sexualities and a heteronormative assumption of marriage effectively elicited shame to shut down possible discussions on and explorations of queer sexualities. Echoing Liu and Ding (2005: 38–39 in their critique of reading reticence or silence as a negotiated 'tolerance' of non-heterosexual desires in Chinese contexts and essentially free from explicit homophobia, the experiences of my participants suggested the contrary that silence could shut down possible conversations within the family. Moreover, such poetics of reticence (Liu and Ding, 2005) silently but evidently work through the norm of filial piety, in which cases queer girls had to self-regulate and keep guessing whether their queer desires would infuriate or disappoint their parents.

I think. . . Hahaha why am I feeling this. . . I should say it without feeling ashamed. Sorry I need some time to conquer this (\*paused for a few seconds). I think lots of my further explorations came down to masturbation and getting to know my own body.

(Kit, 16, 2nd interview)



The excerpt above recorded a small episode in my second interview with Kit where she was struggling with the feelings of shame and uneasiness when she attempted to share her experiences of proactively learning about sexuality as a queer girl. From the previous conversation, Kit was aware of my feminist stance as a researcher and young Chinese woman, and I have made sure from the outset that all participants understand they are encouraged to define and decide what to share with me in interviews and diaries. I chose to remain silent and only smiled at Kit, in order to give her time to think about whether to share with me or not. Kit went on to talk about her increasing comfort and confidence with her own sexuality as partly ascribed to a feminist approach to sexuality with a focus on pleasure. By reading online feminist microbloggers, she was introduced to the idea of exploring pleasure and her own body. It is noteworthy that in the interview with Wing (which I quoted previously), Wing also mentioned that her source of information for sexuality and sex education began with online feminist microbloggers. These online feminist discourses of sexual positivity diverged from the norm restricting sexual knowing in girlhoods. This inspired Wing to explore queer sexualities more actively and enabled Kit to critically question why girls, including herself, would feel ashamed for becoming sexual and queer subjects and speaking openly about it. These experiences and critical reflections on the regulation of queer and sexual desires are presented here as meaningful experiences of queer awakenings from within a heteronormative girlhood. It was also suggested that feminist knowledge and pedagogy of sexuality has enabled and empowered these queer girls to question and challenge the regulatory forces of reticent poetics (Liu and Ding, 2005), and to move beyond and explore queerness outside familial silence and dismissal of their sexualities.

## **Negotiating filial norms of heterosexual and reproductive marriage**

It has been explored in the former section how queer girls and young women struggle to navigate queer awakenings and explorations within a heteronormative girlhood defined by familial expectation on them to smoothly transition into wives and mothers. Now I will further unpack in this section how the filial obligations for young women to ‘get married and have kids’ becomes much more pressing when they reach certain age. Below showed an excerpt from the transcript of my second interview with Yin where she offered a detailed and nuanced narrative of one of her female cousins who used to show a strong resistance marriage like herself but was later pressured to reconsider marriage as ‘a responsibility to the family’.

You know I’ve talking to that cousin of mine (note: referring to an older female cousin of hers who was mentioned in her social media diary) . . . I thought she would never get married but then she suddenly told me ‘oh this probably couldn’t work’. It’s just so unrealistic (to reject marriage) . . . she always thinks that she has a responsibility to the family. I even feel like my cousin is ashamed and think that she owes something to the family. Comparably I’m much more ungrateful and unfilial. Of course it’s also because I have an older brother and he now has a son. Happy enough for the whole family.

(Yin, 17, 2nd interview)

Filial piety as a normative gendered discourse in the quote above worked through affective disciplinary forces as it aggravated the feelings of shame projected onto Yin’s cousin who as the girl child in the family was already a failure in her father’s reiteration of the patriarchal norm of son preference. It became clearer when Yin continued to write how her older brother has a son shall be ‘happy enough for the whole family’ that spared herself from similar situation. It further evidenced that the patriarchal and patrilineal norm of having a male child to continue the family bloodline had

not become obsolete at all but sustained its relevance in Chinese familial cultures (Liang et al., 2017; Wei and Yan, 2021). Therefore, as the sole daughter in the family, to resist the filial responsibility finally became ‘unrealistic’ for Yin’s cousin after their years of discussions on not getting married. This complicated the existing discourse around urban daughters under one child policy as obtaining more educational and financial investments from parents (Fong, 2002) and demonstrated that it also came with larger pressure of practising filial piety.

Age also played a vital role here as Yin’s cousin is relatively older than her, linking back to the notion of girlhood as a transitional period where the primary and naturalised outcome for girls’ maturation would be to enter heteronormative and reproductive marriage as they reach a certain age. There is a notable temporal dimension to this norm of marriage, which is also embedded in the discourse of ‘leftover women’ connecting to a medicalised discourse of ideal age of reproduction by when women must get married (Feldshuh, 2018; Fincher, 2016). Moreover, although heterosexual reproductive marriage remained to be the universal norm and only legally approved or institutionalised form of marriage in China (Davis, 2014a), Gigi noted how women from different geolocation and local cultures may experience and negotiate this norm differently. Gigi was attending a university in Guangzhou while participating in my research, but she grew up in a small town in Teochew region where her family was originally from. Partly ascribed to the central importance of familial culture and values for Teochew communities, Gigi told me how friends in her hometown ‘usually get married and have kids at a much younger age’ compared to people in Guangzhou which is the capital city of Guangdong province:

Even at 27 or 28, still many women in cities are not willing to compromise their professional career for marriage and family. Those women who are independent (unmarried or not bounded by marriage) and keep exploring in their own professions are what I aspire to become.

(Gigi, 20, social media diary no. 2)

Women from urban areas in Gigi’s account were positioned as ‘independent’ and having more autonomy and negotiation power instead of having to be pressured into marriage by parents and familial culture at a young age. Having a successful professional career was also idealised as a strategy to resist the filial norm of marriage in Gigi’s expression of her aspiration for becoming just like these ‘independent’ women. In relation to professional career, many participants value education as a steppingstone for better jobs which offer them alternative life choices to break away from the normative familial and societal expectation on them to enter heterosexual and reproductive marriage. For instance, although Wing was not drawn to the normative expectations on girls not to show interest in sex, she did contend that it is reasonable for young people to avoid ‘young love’ (*zaolian*) and engaging in sexual behaviours to focus on study and school performance. Kit also told me in the first interview that how she felt that she must keep studying very hard to get into ‘a better place’. Darry who was attending a university in her home city Nanning similarly said that she wanted to prove ‘that I’m able to support myself’ before considering whether to come out to her family or not.

### **Reworking filial piety through maintaining intimacy**

From the previous sections, it was shown how some participants used their rejection of marriage as a hint and subtle strategy for coming-out, instead of doing it in a more outspoken and confrontational manner. This also demonstrated that refusing to enter heterosexual and reproductive marriage itself would be seen as a deviation from filial piety, or moreover, the heteronormative family. This was echoed in Tree’s experience who was at that time a 19-year-old undergraduate student in

a university in Beijing. Tree attempted at coming out to her mother when she was still in high school suggesting that she ‘might do something that you (note: referring to Tree’s mother) find unacceptable’ to imply her aversion to marriage.

I think she immediately sensed that I was hinting at something else rather than simply refusing to get married, she got really angry and yelled at me: ‘If you don’t want to get married, fine. But you must not be gay’.

(Tree, 19, 1st interview)

Tree’s mother automatically picked up the hint as Tree’s opening up about her being gay which hence had to be immediately dismissed. The conversation ended up with Tree’s apology for infuriating her mother and stopped her further plans for ‘tentative coming-out’ ever since. As the sole child in the family living with her divorced mother, Tree showed great concerns over her mother’s feelings in her coming-out attempt and gave in as soon as her mother ‘got really angry’. Coming out to parents, even in its most subtle way, was read as a double blow to the norm of filial piety as firstly a refusal of filial obligation to ‘get married and have kids’ and secondly a failure to live up to their parents’ expectations. It is noteworthy here how queer voices need to be shut down and rendered silent in order to avoid conflicts with parents, which echoes former research on the ambivalence of silence around sexualities and its homophobic effects (Kam, 2013; Liu and Ding, 2005). Filial piety disciplines girls’ sexuality in both discursive and affective ways, as it is reconfigured to become a requirement of actively maintaining a good relationship with parents rather than simply showing passive obedience.

I conceptualise this as a form of queer affective labour (Huang and Brouwer, 2018) as it requires queer girls and young women to actively engage in constant negotiation of their relationship with parents through reworking the notion of obedience. It manifests as a key aspect of neo-Confucian homonormativity for queer subjects in China to maintain intimacy with their family of origin (Luo et al., 2022). This, however, has not fundamentally transformed the gender and age hierarchy of filial piety as some of the former research on patriarchy and family relations in China argue (Santos and Harrell, 2017). Moreover, the experiences of my participants show the gendered nature of filial piety and its implications on the normalisation of affective labour for girls and young women as daughters (Evans, 2007). Yin reflected on this issue, stating that treating her mother well (*dui ta hao*) was a ‘mandatory requirement’ for her as a girl child, while it was more like her mother begging for care and attention from her older brother. Moreover, this naturalisation of caring and maintenance of intimacy interlaced with existing generational hierarchy within familial structure. Gao, a 17-year-old girl from Guangxi, wrote in her social media diary about filial piety as a kind of ‘hierarchal order among family members’ and reflected how she read this kind of hierarchal kinship and family relations as ‘a form of power’ based on *beifen* (researcher’s note: it can be translated into English as the seniority in the family in terms of age). She gave an example that her parents and grandparents taking up higher position according to *beifen* would expect to receive care and respect from her as a (grand)daughter and it felt like an essential part of her role in the family to ‘please’ and not to ‘annoy’ her parents and grandparents. On this basis, queer subjectivities of (un)filial girl are taking shape as they attempt to shift the core of filial piety away from continuing the heteronormative family through marriage and reproduction onto managing familial intimacy.

### **Concluding marks: Queering a filial girlhood?**

The inquiry into the experiences of my participants presented a critical analysis of the discourse of filial piety as structuring and enforcing the patriarchal and heteronormative regulations of girlhood.

I argue that filial piety prescribed a normative girlhood as prohibited from sexual autonomy but expected to be transitioning into marriage and motherhood (Kam, 2013, 2014). In the meantime, this article mapped out the emergence of queer girl subjectivities as they attempt to negotiate the tensions between queer girlhoods and the filial obligations of marriage and reproduction. The article highlighted how these girls and young women resist or strategically delay marriage while actively reflecting on and attempting to reconfigure the norm of filial piety itself. It was also presented throughout the paper how digital platforms provided channels for obtaining knowledge about sexuality and expressing queer desires and how online feminist discourses enabled these queer girls and young women to critically reflect on the norms around filial piety. As explored earlier in this paper, my participants accounted for education and career as enabling them to stand up against the filial obligation of 'getting married and having kids'. In the meantime, a new queer normativity emerged from their practices as less rigid expression of neo-familism (Wei, 2022; Yan, 2018), reconfiguring the passive and obedient form of filial piety into active maintenance of a 'good relationship' and intimacy with their family (Song, 2022). However, it is often neglected that queer girls and young women have to take on the responsibility of educating parents as a form of queer labour to manage family relationship (Huang and Brouwer, 2018) and gain recognition by using what they have learned from social media and particularly digital feminisms.

Taking up feminist and intersectional perspectives of girlhoods, I reiterate the significant role of the girls and young women who participated in this research for sharing their situated and embedded experiences and knowledge of navigating queer girlhoods. This investigation has offered new insights into nuanced and intersectional reading of how filial piety and filial obligation of marriage entangled with patriarchy, heteronormativity and other socioeconomic power relations but at the same time challenged and destabilised by queer resistance. Filial piety as one analytical focus of this paper is embedded within Confucian familial culture dominated by Han-Chinese discourses. Methodologically, it is a qualitative inquiry with a small sample of participants fully conducted online. The research project that began with my interests in online cultures and digital activism hence could only offer partial and localised perspectives (Driscoll and Gregg, 2010; Hine, 2015) into Chinese girlhoods. It was not meant to replicate what other qualitative research conducted in family, schools and other 'physical' spaces could find out about this topic. This research is at its limits here for being unable to attend to how other power differentials, such as ethnicity and urban-rural divide, come into play. Queer girlhoods in China warrant further investigation and a focus on locating the experiences of Chinese queer girls and young women within the wider society. I call on future research to continue this discussion and to further interrogate the roles of schools, communities, parents, education practitioners and how to engage these stakeholders to further empower queer girls and young women.

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