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Rethinking the Gay Chinese Migrant through the Prism of Migration Aspirations: Observations from France and Belgium

以移民愿望为视角重新思考中国男同性恋移民：基于在法国和比利时的观察

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Abstract:

On the basis of data gathered by two independent ethnographic studies of gay Chinese migrants in France and Belgium, this paper aims to identify the role of intersecting and parallel aspirations which shape their migration trajectories toward Western countries. These aspirations include motivations to respond to or appropriate traditional family configurations, imaginaries that characterize the countries of destination, the desire to fulfill same-sex sexual and relationship goals, as well as class, educational, national, and ethnic affiliations. Using concepts of intersectionality and super-diversity, this paper further argues that the simultaneous and overlapping nature of these motivations deserves to be discussed as a subset of current Chinese diasporas.

Keywords: Sexual migration, Chinese gay diaspora, migration aspirations, intersectionality, superdiversity

摘要:

基于对在法国和比利时的中国男同性恋移民进行的两项独立的民族志研究所收集的数据，本文旨在确定这一群体多样且交叉和平行的移民愿望，以及这些愿望如何决定他们向西方国家移民的轨迹。这些愿望包括对传统家庭结构的回应和妥善应对的动机，对目的地国家的社会想象，对实现同性恋身份和同性关系的渴望，以及阶级、教育、国家和民族归属等因素的影响。本文使用交叉性和超级多样性的概念，进一步论证了这些动机的同时和重叠的性质及其作为当前中国侨民的一个子集来讨论的价值。

关键词: 性移民，华人同性恋移民，移民愿望，交叉性，超级多样性

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Introduction

The migration patterns and socio-demographic composition of overseas Chinese in Europe have significantly changed with China's emergence as a global economic power in the 21st century (Thunø and Li 2020). The most recent wave of Chinese immigrants to Europe comprises young students and skilled individuals with access to resources, outnumbering economic migrants. This trend can be observed in countries like France (Attané 2022; Wang 2021) and Belgium (Cao, Zhu and Meng 2017). With the growing diversity within Chinese communities in Europe, aspects of gender and sexuality are likewise becoming important topics of research. While scholars have explored the Chinese female diaspora in Europe using a gendered and intersectional approach (e.g., Y. Chen 2023; Sáiz López 2012; Wang 2017), *sexuality* has been largely overlooked in scholarly portrayals of Chinese in Europe, with the exception of studies on female sex workers in Paris (Lévy and Lieber 2011). Chinese LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other) or queer³ individuals have yet to be discussed as thoroughly. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to shed light on this “invisible” subgroup of Chinese in continental Europe⁴ by uncovering the migration aspirations of gay Chinese migrants residing in France and Belgium.

Previous studies have documented the historical differences in Chinese migrations to France (Poisson 2005; Wang 2020) and Belgium (Pang 2002; van Dongen 2018). However, both countries have experienced an influx of Chinese *xin yimin* (new migrants) seeking economic opportunities since China's Opening-up in 1978 (Chuang, Le Bail and Merle 2020). Additionally, there has been a notable increase in the number of Chinese students and skilled migrants in both countries since the beginning of the new millennium. Seizing on this evolving migratory trend, this paper aims to provide insights to eventual research dedicated to Chinese LGBT+ newcomers in continental Europe, as seen through the lens of sexuality. While acknowledging the heterogeneity within the LGBT+ population and recognizing the existence of distinct gender norms, our focus in this study is on self-identified male Chinese gay migrants. As such, the present paper provides a unique and fresh empirical case study by comparing the multifaceted migration aspirations and diverse migration pathways of gay male Chinese who currently reside or have previously resided in France and Belgium at different stages of their life course.

Over the past few decades, there has been a “sexual and emotional turn” in migration and mobility studies toward examining the role of sexuality, emotionality, and affects of individuals on the move, moving these factors from the periphery to the center of analysis (Mai and King 2009). Scholars have emphasized the importance of considering gender and sexuality in understanding migration (Fresnoza-Flot 2021; Manalansan IV 2006), as demonstrated by the pioneering works on the “sexual migration” of Mexican gay and bisexual men to the United States, which highlighted how individuals' sexuality could partially or entirely motivate their migration (Cantú 2009; Carrillo 2017). However, it is important to note that sexual migration is not solely driven by one's yearning for sexual freedom but is also influenced by economic, social, familial, and political factors, as well as cultural norms and values in relation to sexuality (Carrillo 2017). Another body of literature employs the term “queer migration” as an umbrella term for the voluntary or involuntary movement of individuals or communities who identify as queer, encompassing diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions

³ In the present paper, “queer” is used as an analytical category, distinguishing it from a mere label of identity. As such, it is used interchangeably with LGBT+.

⁴ While research has been conducted by authors cited regarding gay Chinese from Hong Kong to the United Kingdom, we maintain that the post-colonial dynamics between these two regions are different from the migration from mainland China to “continental” Europe (especially in legal, historical, and linguistic frameworks).

(Gorman-Murray 2007; Luibhéid 2008). Queer migration, whether within or across national borders, can be motivated by various factors, such as seeking safety, escaping persecution or discrimination, pursuing acceptance and affirmation, accessing LGBT+-friendly resources and support systems, or exploring personal and social growth opportunities. It also encompasses forced migration of the LGBT+ population, including seeking asylum or refugee status in another country due to persecution or threats based on sexual orientation or gender identity in hostile social environments (see Mole 2021).

However, recent discussions on the transnational mobility of LGBT+ individuals tend to examine the queer aspects within normative migration patterns or among migrants with regular status, such as labor migration (Lewis and Mills 2016), international students or skilled migration (Kam 2020; Poon et al. 2017), and marriage migration (Boele-Woelki and Fuchs 2017). Scholars often use the category of “sexual/queer/gay migrant” to emphasize the role of sexuality in shaping their migratory journeys, or the category of “economic/labor migrant” to highlight socio-economic factors as the primary driver. Yanqiu Rachel Zhou (2021) employed the term “queer economic immigrants” to capture both the normative migration pattern of queer Chinese individuals to Canada and the significant role of sexuality in shaping their transnational migration experiences. In any case, it must be recognized that rigid and static categorizations may oversimplify the diversity of migratory movements and fail to capture, or even occult and invalidate, the nuances and complexities of individual experiences (Castles 2000; Crenshaw 1991). We thus utilize and combine various migrant categories across different spatio-temporal contexts to highlight the diversity of types, aspirations, patterns, and legal status of gay Chinese migrants in Europe.

This paper aims to explore how sexual and socio-economic aspirations intertwine in the decision-making processes of transnational migration among a group of Chinese gay men and to examine how these same aspirations, influenced by socio-cultural, ethno-racial, and familial factors, both evolve according to and consequently shape their migration trajectories and settlement experiences. This is done by sharing narratives of 16 Chinese gay men who have migrated to France and 10 to Belgium. By adopting a comparative approach based on ideas of intersectionality⁵ and super-diversity,⁶ it aims to start a discussion on the multifaceted lives of gay Chinese men in continental Europe. There are strong arguments for the use of this two-pronged approach to migration studies. We refer to Rosie Roberts’ (2019) description of migration as a multi-sited and multi-temporal practice rather than an end-to-end process. That is, movement is triggered by the circumstances of one’s individual background such as class, ethnicity, family, etc. (hence, the need for intersectional analysis); and pathways taken are determined by their practice of agency, as a function of both mitigating circumstances (visa, job availability, capitals, etc.) and personal aspirations (hence, super-diverse individual trajectories).

Apart from the categorizations of being Chinese *and* gay, other salient factors which include macro social environments, immigration policies, affects, and social imaginaries that exist among Chinese migrants in these two European countries shall be considered. To provide a comprehensive understanding of our study, we will begin by explaining our research methods and providing background information on the informants, including their socio-demographic characteristics. This will be followed by a theoretical overview and discussion, situating our

⁵ While originally described by Kimberlé Crenshaw as the synthesis of experiences (of oppression) based on *race* and *sex* (1989), this can also include the particularities brought about by one’s position in existing social power structures, which include education, migration status, poverty, etc. (1991).

⁶ Defined by Steven Vertovec (2007: 1024) as a migration process “distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified”.

informants within the current scholarships on Chinese LGBT+ migrants and migration aspirations. In the subsequent sections, we will delve into specific aspects of our findings before drawing conclusions and arguing for the significance of our findings in the broader context of studies on queer migration and Chinese migration to Europe.

Migration Aspirations and Chinese Queer Diaspora

Over the past few decades, the theorization of migration has expanded beyond economic rationality, shifting toward a deeper exploration of the intricate processes, experiences, and subjectivity of individuals belonging to various national, ethnic, gender, social class, and sexuality groups (de Haas 2021). Departing from the conventional “push-pull” model, recent research on migration decision-making processes has shifted from focusing primarily on the “determinants” and “causes” of migration toward examining the “drivers” from an external standpoint and the “aspiration” or “desire” for migration, considering the interplay between structure and agency (Carling and Collins 2018). In this paper, we employ “migration aspirations” as a generic term, drawing on the intersectional conceptualizations proposed by Jørgen Carling and Kerilyn Schewel (2018). This perspective enables us to understand migration aspirations as encompassing various dimensions: as “a comparison of *places*”, “culturally defined *projects*”, and “a matter of personhood or identity” (Carling and Schewel 2018: 953–954). By embracing both the “instrumental” and “intrinsic” aspects (de Haas 2021), we seek to comprehend the migration aspirations of our gay Chinese informants *beyond* a mere instrumental pursuit, such as seeking refuge from a sexually backward country to a sexually progressive and liberal country, or striving for better economic opportunities, education, and healthcare. As shall be explained later, other factors may include intrinsic yearning for a different lifestyle, cultural exploration, same-sex romance, or sexual freedom. This paper seeks to contribute to the advancement of our understanding of the multifaceted and intersectional nature of migration aspirations, highlighting the intricate interplay between contextual drivers and individual desires (see also Wimark 2016).⁷

The scholarly work on sexual migration and queer migration has played a pivotal role in bringing sexuality into the discussion on migration motivations. Within this context, researchers such as Lionel Cantú (2009) and Héctor Carrillo (2017) have emphasized the significance of escaping sexual oppression (from family or society) and the desire for sexual freedom as primary drivers of the migration decisions of Mexican gay and bisexual men. However, it is important to note that these scholars also recognize that for some individuals, especially those from lower social backgrounds, migration decision-making is shaped by a combination of both sexual liberation and socio-economic opportunities. Among others, Héctor Carrillo (2017) notes that while some Mexican gay or bisexual men can be characterized, at least partially, as either labor or lifestyle migrants, many others find themselves in an irregular migration status in the United States, even having entered legally. It is worth noting that the transnational movement of LGBT+ individuals encompasses a diverse array of personhoods, categories, patterns, and aspirations. Nevertheless, for those classified by migration regimes as “regular migrants”, such as international students or skilled migrants, their migration aspirations tend to be reduced to pre-established and often overlooked categories, limiting the exploration of their individual motivations and intrinsic aspirations beyond the instrumental function of migration.

⁷ As a caveat, this paper does not necessarily use the concept of *difference* or *othering* of gay *versus* heterosexual individuals or Anglophone *versus* non-Anglophone countries as a springboard for discussion. Perceived differences between such binaries may or may not always exist, but the importance of this paper rests more on its *exploratory* role in advancing knowledge about this particular subset and geography in the Chinese diaspora.

In recent years, scholars on overseas Chinese, predominantly in Anglo-Saxon countries, have turned their attention to studying the migration trajectories and lived experiences of Chinese queer men and women. Notably, Travis Shiu Ki Kong's (2011) pioneering work reveals the migration patterns of three types of gay Chinese migrant men from British Hong Kong to the United Kingdom during the 1980s and 1990s. The first profile identified by Kong comprises overseas "brides" using marriage abroad as an escape from a homophobic environment, economic hardships, and political uncertainty. The second profile examined in his study involves gay individuals who migrated alongside their families. Finally, his research tackles the experiences of students who migrated in a hidden pursuit of sexual freedom, intending to stay after their studies through the means of marriage or employment. Likewise, existing research shows similarities between the profiles of the latter category in Kong's study and those in Canada and Australia (Kam 2020; Poon et al. 2017; Yu and Blain 2019; Zhou 2021), i.e., international students, skilled migrants, or students-turned-migrants.

Nonetheless, there exist differing interpretations regarding the role of sexuality in the migration aspirations of Chinese queer immigrants. Scholars such as Lucetta Yip Lo Kam (2020), Maurice Kwong-Lai Poon and colleagues (2017), Haiqing Yu and Hayden Blain (2019) emphasize that seeking sexual freedom, exploring gay sexuality, and escaping heteronormative environments are significant motivations for the migration of queer Chinese. However, Yanqiu Rachel Zhou (2021) presents an alternative perspective, arguing that while sexual identity does influence queer Chinese immigrants, it is not the sole determinant of their decision to migrate. Zhou highlights that the categorization of these individuals as economic immigrants in their immigration applications suggests that economic considerations play a prominent role in their migration pathways. Additionally, Haiqing Yu and Hayden Blain (2019) note that some gay students from lower social backgrounds who come to Australia on scholarships may also seek upward social mobility as a motivation for migration. It is worth noting that these studies primarily focus on the (mostly post-arrival) experiences of gay or lesbian Chinese migrants and pay insufficient attention to a deeper analysis of the migration aspirations of different "categories" of migrants, engaging with both the instrumental and intrinsic dimensions of migration aspirations.

Methodology

The empirical data presented in this paper are derived from two distinct research projects where the migration aspirations of gay individuals from China are observed to be prominent and recurring themes. The first project (2020–2021) examines the trajectories of gay (ex)students from China to France, while the second project (2018–2021) focuses on Chinese migrants at different stages of same-sex couplehood in Belgium. Both sets of informants share not only similarities in terms of their social profiles, educational backgrounds, age groups, and sexual identities, but also divergences regarding their migration pathways, categories, and legal status. These differences, along with the non-identical social context of each host country, provide a foundation for comparing, examining, and contrasting the diverse migration aspirations and pathways of gay Chinese migrants in Europe.

Research Methods

For the French component, data collection techniques comprised multi-platform online participant observations (in queer cyberspace, including forums, websites, social media, and location-based dating apps; and during 14 online events organized within Chinese diasporic LGBT+ community) and semi-structured interviews with 16 key informants. The interviews, with an average length of one hour and 22 minutes, were conducted, all in Chinese mandarin,

using an interview guide that was structured from a life-course perspective. Prior consent was obtained, and the interviews were recorded for reference. All informants in the study provided their consent for participation, either by signing a consent form attached to an information sheet of the research project or by giving their oral consent. However, one informant declined to be recorded during the interview, so only notes were taken to capture the information shared during that particular interview. The Belgian study was carried out as part of a larger and ongoing research that began with traditional participant observation conducted in Brussels' queer district, near the *Rue du Marché au Charbon*, as well as sites that had sentimental significance for the informants (domestic and leisure spaces, tourist spots, etc.). Additionally, snowball sampling was employed to identify and recruit gay individuals and semi-structured ethnographic interviews were conducted with 10 Chinese informants. The interviews varied in length from one to two hours, coupled with participant observation in their leisure activities such as dinners, clubbing, etc., over the course of several years. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, some interviews were conducted through social media and messaging apps between 2020 and 2021. However, the decision by both authors to include online spaces in their inquiry was not solely influenced by the pandemic but also by the digital hyperconnectivity of Chinese LGBT+ in both countries.

Research Sample and Data

The present paper compares the data of these two extensive ethnographies with 26 interviews with informants in France and Belgium.⁸ The 16 informants in France ranged in age between 22 and 38. They were all born in mainland China and had pursued, at least partially, their undergraduate studies there. The majority were from affluent (middle-class or middle-income) urban families and had obtained, or were in the process of obtaining, a higher education degree in France. Despite several similarities, this group of informants remains heterogeneous in various aspects, such as birthplace, educational background (both in terms of discipline and level of education), coming-out status, employment, length of stay in France (from one to 16 years), and intimate life (five partnered). Of the interviewees, eight were still students at the time of interviews and four participants remained in France either as skilled migrants or recent graduates seeking employment opportunities.⁹ Furthermore, four others had returned to China after spending several years studying (and working) in France. The 10 Chinese informants in Belgium were aged 24–38, with eight out of 10 already employed in various fields such as logistics, education, or finance, or pursuing higher education. Similar to the French sample, they also all come from middle to upper middle-class families in urban centers, all of whom have acquired at least a master's degree. At the time of the interviews, two of them were single, while five were in various registered relationships (either marriage or legal-cohabitation); the rest described themselves as being in non-formal relationships. Five were actively employed and two were looking for employment, the rest identified as being in a professional pause. In terms of migration status, six of them chose to retain their Chinese passports. Unlike the French set, however, three informants were born in special administrative regions.

Despite some similarities, there are differences in how the two projects were designed and

⁸ The names of the informants have been anonymized to ensure the protection of their identities. Additionally, sensitive information such as study programs, addresses, birthplaces, and places of work or study have been modified or anonymized. The demographic descriptions provided in the study reflect the circumstances and characteristics of the individuals at the time of the interviews.

⁹ Foreign graduates of French higher education have the option to request a Temporary Resident Permit (*Autorisation Provisoire de Séjour* or APS). This permit is valid for one year and is intended to assist them in securing employment opportunities in France.

how data were collected. Some clarifications are, therefore, necessary to explain how the data is presented. As the France-based component was dependent on recorded and transcribed interviews (regarding questions on migration aspirations), direct citations from informants are possible. In contrast, the Belgium-based set was more reliant on on-site participant observations in highly affective and intimate spaces, which rendered recording inopportune. Instead, field notes and ethnographic vignettes are the primary form the data takes. This is especially suitable for informants who agreed to be *cited* but not *located* or *identified*. This difference in form should not detract from the validity of the arguments presented here, as the themes to be discussed hereunder represent commonalities between the two data sets.

The Researcher as Part of the Field: A Note on Reflexivity

The identity, positionality, migration trajectory, subjectivity, and emotionality of the researcher play integral roles in shaping the whole research process, from the initial research design to the field relations, and even the interpretation of collected data (Davies 1999). The authors of this paper fall under this description. Aaron Raphael Ponce is a gay fourth-generation descendant of overseas Chinese, born in an Anglophone country, and has experienced *othering* from within and outside of the Chinese community. He has also experienced anti-Asian discourse (sexual or otherwise) in his international travels. His research project focused on the effect of the relationship-formation process among a larger gay Asian migrant cohort in Belgium. Cai Chen was a gay student from rural China who had experienced multiple (both internal and transnational) migrations even before coming to France. His research project was inspired by his own trajectories and the latter impelled him to pay close attention to the bridges between intra- and trans-national migrations, the diverse social origins of international students, and the multiple life-course aspirations embedded in migration. In recognition of the influence of their identities, positionality, and emotionality, both authors were diligent in their efforts to objectify field relations, negotiate social distances and identities, and analyze the impact of affects on the field. Various techniques were employed, including the use of different languages (formal and informal), adopting the shifting roles of both insider and outsider, and critically examining and incorporating the researchers' emotionality into data collection and interpretation processes.

Normative Migration and Non-normative Sexuality

Both France- and Belgium-based informants may be described as “regular migrants” or as (State-recognized) “normative” migrants: whose visa categories include family reunification, studies, employment, or marriage. All informants in the French case relocated to France for the purpose of international higher education and crossed the border with a student visa. After attaining their French degree(s), some of them sought or seek to secure employment to be able to remain in France as skilled migrants. However, study-to-employment transition was not easy and some might also try other “normative” means, such as continuing education, becoming an auto-entrepreneur, or marrying a French citizen. Meanwhile, the informants in Belgium had mixed motives for seeking education or employment, joining their partners, or moving to a city with a “gay scene” – described by Bobby Benedicto (2014: 8–9) as “spaces and imaginative geographies”, where there are “cultural processes of accumulation and selection (and thus, exclusion) in ordering gay life”. However, in terms of official migration status, four of the ten came to Belgium under the category of “family reunification” (an umbrella term that includes marriage, partnership, or cohabitation); two were on student visas when they met their partners, and the rest were on work visas (the latter two types are categorized as Card A residence permit by the Belgian government).

This intersects with their self-identification as gay. Existing literature on gay migration suggests that non-normative sexuality in an oppressive and conservative societal context could be a predominant driver for queer individuals to migrate for sexual liberation (e.g., Cantú 2009; Carrillo 2017; Gorman-Murray 2007; Lewis 2012). Seeing as how the current legal system in China is not conducive to equal rights (the absence of legislation to acknowledge and protect same-sex couples [Liu and Zhu 2020], State censorship against LGBT+ media [Shaw and Zhang 2018], or the immense social pressures on LGBT+ individuals such as the expectation to marry and bear children [Miège 2009]), we cannot simply categorize such individuals as simply “regular” on the mere basis of what papers they hold and the stamps on their passports. Even among those migrants who hold visas for a same-sex marriage, such a view ignores the heavy emotional baggage and socio-familial strain experienced by those with non-heteronormative sexualities and identities, as well as the complexities of being recognized in one society but not the other (Dhoest 2019; Vuckovic Juros 2019).

For the above reasons, the first theme presented in this paper is that of sexuality, and its accompanying concepts of desire, intimacy, and sexual freedom as intrinsic aspirations in the migrant processes. This is in line with existing results presented by researchers such as Sarah Ahlstedt, who mentions that it is precisely the non-normative nature of queer migrants’ emotional and sexual desires that leads them to “feeling queerly different” (2016: 32). This feeling of double differentiation (alluding not only to non-heteronormative sexuality, but also to ethnic, linguistic or class distinctions that may either facilitate or impede interactions with the host society) means that emotion cannot be separated from migration. Furthermore, in the study of semiotics, it has been argued that emotions (such as love or attraction) and their expression are not mere “feelings” but rather “a symbolic code which shows how to communicate effectively in situations where this would otherwise appear improbable” (Luhmann 1986: 8–9).

This is especially reflected in the concept of sexual scripts, wherein the interaction between prevailing discourse and popular imagery with one’s corporal sexual and corporal expression is two-way. That is, while social and cultural norms influence how a person sees his body as a sexual entity and thus dictate how he expresses his emotion and desire, the manner of how individuals as a part of the group carry this out can certainly influence public perception at best, or lead to the creation of stereotypes and hegemonies at worst (such as the pervasive trope of the Asian male as submissive bottom or “potato queen”¹⁰; see e.g., Callander, Holt and Newman 2012; Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Kimmel 2007; Nguyen 2014; Sternadori 2015). We likewise argue that this queering process must also be looked at through the lens of sexual migration, defined by Héctor Carrillo (2017: 9) as:

motivations connected to sexual desires and pleasures, the pursuit of romantic relations with foreign partners, the exploration of new self-definitions of sexual identity, the need to distance oneself from experiences of discrimination or oppression caused by sexual difference, or the search for sexual equality and rights.

Pre-migratory Conditions: Homosexuality, Internal Mobility, and Family

The previous life trajectories of these informants (in terms of employment or educational attainment) had generally involved geographic mobility (rural-urban or inter-urban) within China, which enabled them to better experience a cosmopolitan and gay-friendly urban environment and to obtain autonomy from the natal family. These geographical changes

¹⁰ “Potato queen” is a slang used to describe gay men, usually from East or Southeast Asia, who prefers or exclusively dates Caucasian men. Often, but not always, it is a younger Asian man who dates older white men.

contribute to the self-identification process and expression of gay identity among peers and friends. Their sexual aspirations for studying or moving abroad consisted of the longing for more sexual freedom and an open environment, and not just a quest for gay identity (they portrayed themselves as self-aware of this fact) or the escape from the heteronormative and homophobic family. Interestingly, they used family support as a strategy of empowerment to experience what they had imagined Western gay life to be, as well to achieve personal development for financial autonomy (as also discussed in the study of Muyuan Luo [2022]). The social imaginary of Western gay life is largely influenced by the global circulation of queer cultural products in China. The series “Queer as Folk”, mentioned many times by different informants in both France and Belgium, could be one example. Many recounted that they envied and imagined the ways of Western gay people in being and doing gay as portrayed in Western series or films.

Despite their self-awareness, informants claimed that their homosexuality was undisclosed to parents prior to going abroad, due to the special role of family kinship in contemporary China. The family described as the foundation of Chinese social structure based on Confucianism and the ideal family model stresses the value of order in the family and the virtue of filial piety (see Slote and De Vos 1998). It defines the roles and relationships of each family member, especially *sons*, which include submission to parents, marriage, and reproduction. Thus, for the informants, awareness of their non-normative sexual desire became (though not exclusively) a factor in their choice to sojourn in France. This does not, however, always imply *opposition* to the Confucian context, but *adaptation* to and *appropriation* of it. For instance, authors such as Yong Li and Simeng Wang (2021) describe how Chinese migrants, when navigating between different social norms and systems of reference, frame their trajectories to respond to the goal of achieving not only professional and financial success but also familial duties as sons. Having to balance individual sexual freedom with personal development (especially financial comfort) and familial duties, the ability to achieve financial autonomy and personal success (therefore, non-sexual factors) are seen as important components of a “happy gay life”. For both informant sets, irregular migration in Western countries for the mere sake of individual sexual freedom did not seem an appealing option. Surprisingly, most informants in both sets stated that what represses gay men in China is neither the state apparatus nor homophobia but Confucian familism, romanticized marriage, and gendered heteronormative social norms.

We take as an example Xuanhe (skilled migrant aged 33 in France), an informant who had disclosed his gay identity at school and to his parents, engaging actively in gay associative activities at his campus in China. However, his homosexuality has never been accepted or understood by his parents, who still want him to get a girlfriend and marry as soon as possible. He commented that “this issue [marriage anxiety] is a real burden for [him] and it remains a problem to be solved in the near future”. Even when he was working in far-away Paris, he still occasionally received pressure to marry from his parents. This same pressure is similar to what has been observed among heterosexual Chinese migrants (see studies by Simeng Wang [2017; 2020]). Simple transnational relocation or coming-out at a distance is not seen as the best way to escape repressive heteronormative social norms in China.

Interestingly, for some informants, the “shock value” of having a European boyfriend becomes a way of reconciling these two seemingly conflicting aspects of the life course. For instance, a Brussels-based Chinese informant shared how he presented his Belgian fiancé to his parents, explaining that the Belgian had a stable job in a government agency and an ancestral family home in the Belgian countryside and was willing to sponsor his visa application, as well as to take care of him financially while he was learning French and looking for a job in Belgium. Despite closing off the possibility of reproduction, the key words

“employment”, “home”, and “support” appeased the worries of his otherwise traditional parents – and, according to the couple, even garnered the Belgian recognition as a “real” son-in-law. Similar narratives were shared by other Brussels-based informants. In either case, we can see that the eventual importance of refining and re-thinking the Western conceptualization of gay migration when speaking about the Chinese context; the contextual effects of family values would be essential for such discussions (Chou 2000; Luo 2022; Luo, Tseng and Ma 2022).

Studying Abroad as a Pathway to Sexual Freedom

In the French case, the aspirations of the informants to study in France have been found to be multifaceted and interwoven. Chinese gay students describe their studying abroad predominantly as a pathway to achieve upward social mobility, with foreign qualifications or work experience abroad being portrayed as an advantage in the Chinese labor market – a trend that is visible among their heterosexual counterparts (Li 2015; 2020). Some claimed to have specifically chosen France as a study destination due to its “relatively lower tuition fee”, “rich cultural patrimonies” or the desire to “learn a new language to be more competitive” (which are again observable as a general trend) and to “explore a new culture”. Nonetheless, obtaining a foreign diploma to accumulate transnational capital was not the sole objective of gay Chinese students’ international education migration.

One informant, Shuai (bachelor student aged 27 in France), shared that he “had two objectives for studying in France: one is to have a romantic relationship, the other is to get [his] diploma”. Another informant, Hao (recent graduate with a master’s degree, aged 26, in France), said that “[he] was always interested in foreign languages and cultures and wanted to study abroad to experience the lives that he had seen in foreign films or series [...] not only about the gay scenes but also the broader liberal society and culture”. Hao thought it obvious that “[he] will have more freedom as a gay there [in the West], if [he] could study abroad one day.” The yearning for sexual freedom could be translated by their aspiration to “be truly themselves” and “stop hiding their homosexuality”, which occupies an essential place in their aspirations for studying in a “more open and gay-friendly country”. Influenced by the global circulation of queer cultural products and the social imaginaries of the West as “gay paradise” or “open and liberal society”, they look forward to experiencing “liberal social ambiance” and “Western gay lifestyle” through transnational relocation for education.

Sexuality, Desire, and Intimacy as Migration Aspirations

Following this, it can be found that sexuality, desire, and intimacy remain strong motivations for migration, not only as factors in choosing a place of settlement, but also grounds for separation in relationships. For instance, of the five informants in a registered relationship in Belgium, four would openly talk about their sexual preferences, and how this affects their chosen relationship configuration. One of the earliest conversations the Belgium-based researcher had with a registered couple was about sexual preferences. The Chinese informant asked the Belgium-based researcher what the latter’s “type” was, to which he replied that he preferred stocky or muscular men, with chest hair and a beard. The Chinese informant then exclaimed: “Oh, so you like bears [men who have a large built, and often hairy and bearded], so typical!” Taken aback by the reaction, the researcher then returned the question. The informant opened up that their choice to move and settle in a university town outside Brussels enabled him to enjoy “the tall Belgian twink [boyish-looking, young gay man] with blond hair and blue eyes” who were “fresh meat”. He added that living in a university town meant that “every year fresh meat would arrive”, while his partner could also “meet new people”

with the yearly influx of new students and staff. In their case, even if they were always passing by Brussels for work or as a gateway to their international travels, fulfilment of their sexual lives could be obtained by the strategic placement of their home, which saw fluxes of young, white Belgian students (for the Chinese informant) and young internationals for the Belgian partner. The opposite was true for another couple; the Belgian husband felt that his Chinese partner had spent “too much time” being jobless in Belgium, and wanted to go back to China, where he would have fewer opportunities “to sit around and use the dating apps” to look for dates. According to him, the sudden availability of possible sexual partners in Belgium put a strain on their relationship, leading to talks of divorce. Eventually going back to China (where work was easier to find for the Chinese partner and sexual partners were more restricted) was seen as a way to save the marriage.

In another case, one informant held several jobs: a corporate day-job and independent activity in the multimedia sector, where he would be paid to produce erotic audio-visual material. One day, browsing through the informant’s portfolio, the researcher noticed that in about a hundred or so pages, only two of the campaigns featured non-white men. When asked about the imbalance of representation, he simply answered that “beauty is beauty,” and that “we all need to accept our sexual preferences”. He mentioned that working in the media sector in Europe granted him access to many sexual encounters that he could not have in China and he went on to describe how he found European men charming and cute. In this case, the intertwining of motivations is clear: leaving China and staying in Belgium represented access to the sexual field he preferred, but this access is amplified and facilitated by his professional success (his corporate job gave him his work permit and resident visa).

Surprisingly, in some cases, the sexual desire for the foreign body did not necessarily equate “foreign” to whiteness: one of the Chinese informants confided that when he first settled near a train station, he felt that the “Arabs, with their trimmed beards and large eyes and beautiful eyebrows” were more handsome than local Belgians, but that he was thinking of leaving Belgium because “it did not matter” if he could marry or not; his type were still “culturally conservative” and he would not want to get married and start a family anyway. Likewise unexpected was that one of the partnered informants, despite being in a relationship, claims to have been bored with the idea of sex, and that he was with the Belgian not for the latter’s looks, but because of the deep emotional connection they shared. We can conjecture that the evolution of preferences among these gay Chinese informants is in congruity with the same changes brought about by globalization and mobility already observed among heterosexuals.

From the above examples, two things can be noted. First, informants’ narratives seem to confirm what others such as Héctor Carrillo (2017) describe as the idealization of Anglo-European countries (popularly described as the “West”) as havens of sexual freedom. Second, in most of the cases, the practice of this same sexual freedom is tightly linked with, but not always limited to, the desire for the white European body. Moreover, in both the French and Belgian cases, this desire influenced the choice of settlement. Likewise, in both cases, personal success as measured by educational attainment and financial autonomy was seen as a marker of prestige. Finally, informants who have travelled prior to their migration to either France or Belgium self-identified as more cosmopolitan than their European peers.

“Europe” as Imaginary, as Seen through Experiences in Belgium and France

It is also of interest to note how imaginaries affect the choice of destination and how informants locate themselves in different fields. In both cases, there was a strong imaginary (arguably essentialized and stereotyped) of Europe as a singular category, “liberal and open”, where

LGBT+ people have equal rights. Hao confessed that “[he] was so envious of the fact that same-sex marriage was legalized in France” and he looked forward to the liberal and open societal atmosphere in Europe. When Hao arrived in France, he felt that “everything seemed unrealistic and [he] felt like living in the movies.” Ironically, Belgium-based informants’ narratives veered more toward ignorance of the country’s existence; for instance, one of the couples admitted that when they first met in China, the Chinese partner “had no idea where Belgium was,” only that it was a part of Europe. Hence, their description of ideal partners is not one of nationality or perceived cultural identity but tangible physical features of whiteness that Belgians were thought possess (“tall, blue eyes, blond hair”). Thus, the awareness of non-white Belgians/Belgians of migrant background emerged only after arrival.

In contrast, in the French case there was a strong imaginary as to what constituted “Frenchness” that went beyond physicality and delved more into the possibility of a “more liberal and tolerant social environment” and opportunities to “experience a romantic same-sex relationship”. This was found related to the previous knowledge of French language and culture: four informants out of twelve studied French as major in Chinese universities and six others studied French before or at the beginning of their journey to France. The transnational relocation in the French case is mainly due to the international education, but is also motivated by gay Chinese migrants’ aspirations for a liberal gay lifestyle and more sexual freedom in France. These are in parallel to previous studies (see Benedicto 2014; Manalansan IV 2003) which describe how gay men view travel, and eventually settlement, in an Anglo-European country as a class marker. Despite the conflicting imaginaries between the two countries, the imaginary of Europe being a “gay paradise” remains.

Ethnicity as a Hindrance to Aspiration

The above section begs the question: how can perceptions of *one’s own* ethnicity and racialization serve as or affect aspirations to move? We have already seen that sexual attraction to physical features of non-Chinese men can motivate participation in the sexual fields of the country of destination. However, the informants’ *own* physicality is often put into question. For instance, one Belgium-based informant shared his frustration about his “looks” – that he was not as muscular or athletic as the men on Grindr (location-based gay dating app); and that his Chinese features meant that did not have the raised cheekbones or strong jawlines of either white or Arab men. Another informant had received harassment on Grindr, labelling “Asians”¹¹ as “having small dicks”. Others reported sexual rejection based on their obvious Chinese or Asian looks.

Like in the Belgian case, racialized language toward gay Asian or Chinese men has been frequently found on gay dating apps by all France-based interviewees who have used them. Denton Callander and colleagues (2012) note that racialized language is a prominent aspect of contemporary sexual culture, especially in the online environment. When it came to an intimate relationship, labels alluding to identity such as “Chineseness”¹² or broader “Asianness” were perceived as both advantageous and disadvantageous for many gay men. On the one hand, they could easily meet other gays who are “only into Asians”, while on the other they suffer from the rejection of those who explicitly mark “No Asians” on their dating app profiles, only based

¹¹ Note that on dating apps like Grindr, it is possible to choose one’s “ethnicity”; as of the writing of this text, “Asian” is the only option on the drag-down menu in the app. As nationality is not featured on the menu, some informants resort to writing that they are Chinese in the 500-character profile description box.

¹² We shall not delve into discussions on definitions of “Chineseness” as an identity (ex. as a form of ethnicity or Han culture; belonging to the Chinese state; *huaqiao* vs *huayi* etc.). We refer instead to the references listed in the bibliography, as they have tackled this in detail.

on their perceived origin or ethnicity. One informant, Peng, found that “it’s very difficult to set a boundary between preference and racism because you can’t know the real meaning of these words”. However, others regarded explicitly putting such words on dating app profiles as a form of racial discrimination. For example, Chao (highly skilled migrant aged 28 in France) had received racist insults on Romeo (also dating app), and even reported being automatically blocked when someone found out his nationality. He shared that “in fact, within the gay community, your appearance, physique, body type, ‘race’, and even age, are all aspects that can be discriminated against.”

Such encounters force informants to face the implications of their physicality described in racialized terms, and whether their destination countries are accepting, after all. They get caught in the “ambiguity” of cross-racial attractions, fetishization,¹³ or sexualized racialization, often leading to what David Eng describes as “racial castration”, whereby a migrant “internalizes these dominant images as a process of self-regulation” (2001: 19), thus making one’s ethnicity a hindrance to the full expression of one’s sexual desire. At least one informant attributes to this his decision to eventually go back to China, saying that dating other Chinese at least puts him in an even playing field. However, aspirations may still over-ride such negative experiences.

Migration as an Aspiration in Itself

As mentioned, negative encounters in different fields (sexual partners, co-ethnics, etc.) may have the effect of casting doubt on one’s aspirations or choice to leave or stay; informants seem to resolve this by putting their *own positionality* in the migration process versus others as an aspiration in itself. This is illustrated by the very colorful discourse that Belgium-based informants utilize in describing their acquaintances. For example, one of the informants in a registered but open relationship lamented how his friends (whether gay male or female) would always talk about marriage “as a question of getting a visa or sharing finances” with the Belgian partner, and scoffed at how they could not manage to get residence permits on their own. In response, another informant complained how other Chinese, especially gays in a relationship, would act “arrogant and haughty”, while at the same time being just another typical “potato queen”. Incidentally, those who described other co-nationals as being “potato queens” had varied travel experience, having resided in South America, Africa, or Southeast Asia whether for work or leisure, and would describe the locals they encountered as being more handsome and masculine than Belgians. For some, surrounding one’s self with (white) European partners was a marker of cosmopolitanism and the ability to assimilate into European culture; on the other hand, some equated having European (white) friends or sexual partners to pandering to the “potato queen” stereotype.

Yet others find that staying in Europe away from family and being unaffected by events in China (“what happens in China does not concern me anymore”, as one put it) can be a marker of success. Some other qualities attributed to non-LGBT+ members of the Chinese diaspora, especially those from working-class and rural backgrounds, include “ignorance” (of LGBT+ issues), “nosiness”, and “rudeness”. Moreover, it was observed that informants did not express a great need to join Chinese social media groups (such as those found on WeChat – a popular Chinese multi-purpose mobile app for messaging, social media, and mobile payment, etc.) or to expand their network of Chinese friends.

In these cases, when the *initial* motivations of upward social mobility (via education and

¹³ An “Asian fetish” is a strong sexual or romantic preference for persons of Asian origin (Caluya 2008; Jackson 2000).

employment), sex and relationships (via marriage, sexual encounters, or other configurations), or renegotiating family ties are confronted with challenges (racist encounters whether sexual or otherwise, administrative difficulties, sexual and romantic failure, etc.), the ability to migrate successfully becomes in itself a motivation and marker of one's status. Accumulating cultural capital such as knowledge of local languages; or being able to successfully attract desired partners; or even the luxury of not being bothered by family far-away are examples of how the ability to determine one's movement and settlement can itself be an aspiration.

Nuances: What these Narratives Tell Us

At the onset, both fields demonstrate qualities consistent with existing research on both gay and Chinese diasporic migration. First, the two samples are composed of highly educated, transnationally mobile males, with skills and backgrounds consistent with the so-called most recent wave of Chinese migration to European countries. Second, while economic and professional advancement is a priority for these gay Chinese migrants, the freedom to pursue both sexual and emotional relationships as gay men remains an equally powerful factor in choosing the host society where settlement is possible. Third, the fulfilment of desire, whether sexual or otherwise (financial, emotional, etc.) becomes a point of reflection regarding where to settle and whether to do so in the long-term. Finally, social relations (with co-ethnics or co-nationals, locals in the country of settlement etc., but especially with family and kin) become a means of assessing the feasibility and desirability of a chosen trajectory. In both cases, the informants have a strong awareness of their sexuality, which affects other aspects of their identities, particularly their nationality/ethnicity, and their class background. They likewise share common experiences such as difficulties in adapting to their new environments, finding meaningful sexual, emotional, or personal connections, and trying to extract themselves from sexual and racial stereotypes. Looking at existing research, we can see that these problems are not exclusive to gay Chinese men in particular; nor are they limited to France and Belgium. If the migrant condition has similarities across different subsets of the diaspora, what then is the importance of studying this particular group? What kind of data is recurrent, and what is valuable for future research?

For one, the specific intersection of being *gay* and *foreign* in the host countries is a particular dynamic that puts being "Chinese" into question. Contrary to traditional diasporic research which frames Chineseness in categories such as ethnicity, language group, or subjectivity to State mechanisms, it is the experience of being gay situated within the migrant experience that pushes the informants to rethink, re-affirm, or re-formulate what it means to be Chinese, and to either forge or break links with their society of origin. In the specific case of family duties, some either go the traditional route and use their mobility as a means of escape; others assert their queerness while retaining traits that correspond to Confucian or even neo-Confucian (Luo, Tseng and Ma 2022) requirements; while others choose complete rupture. For some, this rupture extends to co-ethnics or co-nationals in the host society; for others, these form part of a support community.

Likewise, Othering makes informants aware of the negative effects of racialized discourse (Gans 2017), whether sexual or otherwise; yet others, while themselves being minorities, use racialized discourse in critiquing other ethnic groups (e.g., blacks, Arabs), whether in terms of education, law and order, or sexual freedom. Speaking of other ethnic groups, the racial other is often discussed with the discourse of idealizing sexual partners: whether it is talk of "potato queens" who enjoy white men, or those who claim to like Arabs for the latter's masculinity, the physicality of "race" becomes a factor in their pursuits of sexual mobility. In any case, while conventional research describes the relation of the Chinese diaspora with non-Chinese

communities as a dynamic of economic and political dominance (see Chua 2003; Kong 2011), we can see that *sexuality* and *desire* also have a role in these dynamics. This also puts into question conceptions of discrimination and victimhood. That is, it shows that even those who are part of a double-minority can themselves perpetuate discourses that hierarchize, and that these hierarchies exist, sometimes simultaneously, in different fields: sexual, economic, racial, etc.

Moreover, the two samples hint at a shift in the sexual agency and social positioning of the gay Chinese migrant. Sexually active or partnered informants are able to openly critique their host societies, partners, and contacts. Their tastes are influenced by their transnational experiences and access to information. Meanwhile, while they show awareness of the stereotype of the Asian man as sexually submissive, there is a general effort to go beyond being economically or racially subaltern by manifesting one's ability to choose and the freedom to move. This freedom to move does not just imply freedom to *move out* of China, but also to move *elsewhere*, or even to *move back* – not all informants view the country of origin in absolutist terms.

There are, however, notable differences. For one, the French sample showed more instances of informants choosing to return to China to fulfil the socio-emotional obligation of taking care of their parents. They also use already established and highly active networks, whether online such as in the case of the WeChat groups or association- and location-based activities, to reach out to co-ethnics and co-nationals for support. In the Belgian case, informants expressed little need, and at times even aversion, to such networks, preferring instead to keep in close touch with non-Chinese kin and peers, especially those connected with their Belgian partners. This again leads to variations on the conception of “family” or kinship ties and its importance, whether as the traditional nuclear family, or the family of one's partner, or no family at all. In some cases, abandonment of kinship ties is congruent with abandonment of national belonging to the Chinese State.

There are several possible causes for the differences noted. On one hand, the sample selection was inherently different: the Belgian study specifically searched for currently or previously partnered informants, while the French study was more open in this regard. This could explain why the Belgium-based informants produced more discourse regarding extended family and leaving China for their partner, while France-based informants were more concerned about self-development and a subjective “happy gay life”. Apart from this, there is an inherent geographical difference in the two studies. In terms of land area, France is 17 times the size of Belgium; end-to-end travel is more accessible in Belgium, and the two main Chinatowns are only hours apart. Population-wise, as of 2020, Paris has twice as many inhabitants as Brussels (around 2.2 million vs 1.1 million). This discrepancy is reflected in the number of Chinese nationals registered in the two capital cities: around 3,000 in Brussels (IBSA n.d.) versus 69,383 in the greater Parisian region (in 2017; excluding descendants of Chinese immigrants) (Attané 2022). This could be the reason why France-based informants could feel the need to search for both co-ethnic and LGBT+ networks, while the Brussels-based contacts moved in small, tightly knit groups, although this needs to be confirmed by a more in-depth study.

Conclusion

One last point to consider – a point that synthesizes all of what has already been said – would be the variety with which the informants perceived their current life status and sexual and emotional satisfaction, as well mechanisms of response to difficulties encountered. Far from being inconclusive, this heterogeneity, scatteredness, and multi-directionality of their current

and planned trajectories attests once more to Steven Vertovec's (2007) description of migration as an exercise in super-diversity; the fact that several aspects of the life course – family, sex, work, relationships, etc. – simultaneously exert influence attests to the process as intersectional. Although pre-migration conditions are similar (China as the legal/national framework of origin, being gay as the personal emotional context), the different circumstantial and personal variables of their migrations yield different results. In any case, there is a visible pattern: questions of ethnicity (and its accompanying appendages of nationality, cultural values and racialization), class/educational background, and sexuality intersect, but in cases where the informants are hyper-aware of their status as gay men in a Chinese environment, it is the latter factor whose strings are most pulled in the process of movement.

While this paper is brief and certainly does not encompass the complexity of queer (Chinese) migration, it is the authors' hope that it can be a springboard through which more specialized research can be launched. For instance, the Belgian study yielded narratives of emotional and psychological difficulty that, although they cannot be included in this paper, need to be addressed. Studies on psychological counselling do exist that take into account the complexities that partnered Chinese or Asian migrants face (e.g., Bahns, Lee and Crandall 2019; Hiew et al. 2016; Hsu 2017) but these unfortunately focus on heteronormative, regular-status migrants. The French study, however, observed the impact of migration on the sexuality of gay Chinese migrants and the implications of their "sexual changes" (Carrillo 2017: 181–186), along with the influence of conservative Chinese sexual norms and values, for their sexual health (C. Chen 2023). While the sexual health of Chinese migrants is much discussed in the anglophone context, much needs to be understood about the sexual health of Chinese migrants in Europe. It is by increasing knowledge of the queer Asian subgroup's particularities that such issues can eventually be addressed.

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