

**Oversea and Overseen:
Oral History of Gay Chinese Migrants to New York City***

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OVERSEA AND OVERSEAN: ORAL HISTORY OF GAY CHINESE MIGRANTS TO NEW YORK CITY

This study attempts to answer two questions: What role does desire play in LGBT migration, and what impact does migration have on their sexualities? To do so, I adopt horizontal and vertical perspectives, in the sense that I simultaneously focus on the influences on individuals of both living society and cultural embodiment. Doing so provides new insights into long-standing interests of the LGBT migration field concerning the relationship between migration (whether internal to a country or between countries) and sexual identity.

Studying the transnational mobility of populations, the LGBT migration field has long been concerned with how society, as a space, “pushes” (departure society) or “pulls” (host society) sexual minorities and with how both provide sexual cultures that either suppress or fulfill individuals’ desires (Fournier et al. 2018). However, some scholars in recent years have pointed out a blind spot: “Although a migration pathway clearly denotes a trajectory across time, time is seldom an actual factor in analyses of migration experiences” (Baas 2019:207). This perspective emphasizes that understanding sexuality as a spatial practice is reasonable, but spatial factors are not the sole variables influencing individuals’ sexual practices and, hence, migration. Rather, the temporal trajectory of peoples’ lives, specifically as it relates to understanding and practicing their desires, affects how individuals grasp and respond to spatial factors. In other words, the ability of sexual minorities to realize their desires pre- and post-migration is a result not only of their relocation in space but also of their movement along personal timelines of sexual

self-growth (Luo et al. 2024). As Robertson (2015:45) argues, “Transformations in both time and space are central to theoretical understandings of modernity and globalization.”

This study considers this relationship between space—migration between countries—and time—trajectories of individual’s lives—by studying the community of gay Chinese migrants living in New York City (NYC). I intend to discover the external and internal reasons for their migration, and the changes in their sexualities through this journey. To do so, I conducted oral history interviews with eight men with same-sex desires who migrated from mainland China (China) to NYC. As I will explain, these interviews resulted in observations divergent from the mainstream voices in the American migration field.

This empirical research will first fill a research gap in U.S. queer studies and queer migration studies regarding China as a departure society. After conducting an exhausting literature review in this area, Claudia Fournier et al. (2018:348) provided some advice to scholars. The first piece of advice is “to document post-migration experiences... especially among lesbian and/or non-Latino populations.” According to the latest version of the Legal Immigration and Adjustment of Status Report from the Office of Homeland Security Statistics, during Fiscal Year 2022, China was ranked the third largest origin country of newly issued legal permanent residents in the U.S. Moreover, the United Nations International Migrant Stock Database estimates that 2.433 million Chinese people immigrated to the U.S. from 1990 to 2020; the number of those

who moved but did not obtain citizenship is undoubtedly much higher.¹ Despite such a tremendous group of migrating people, we have witnessed little research focused on the LGBT community among these migrants.

In particular, into international migrations research, I introduce the concept of “neo-familism” with distinctive Chinese cultural features as developed by Muyuan Luo based on Yunxiang Yan’s research on individualization in contemporary China. Since the late 20th century, Yan proposes, social institutions in China have gradually lost governance over individual practices. However, a Western-style individualism does not emerge because “the interests of the family [still] take precedence over the interests of individual family members.” Meanwhile, the younger generation of Chinese individuals indeed feel “unable to practice what [their parents] believe” (Yan 2018:185). This entanglement of personal and family demands is referred to as “neo-familism,” and it is particularly evident in the field of sexual deviance. As Luo points out, “family as a heteronormative institution” does not promote the “escape” of sexual minority individuals. Migration, on the contrary, is a site for the compromise between individual desires and parental expectations to be realized (Luo 2022:580).

Yan’s fieldwork focused on migration within China. Building on this foundation, I aim to delve into the life experiences of international migrants from China to NYC, exploring how homosexuality collides, negotiates, and compromises with the process of

¹ Data can be accessed via: <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/special-reports/legal-immigration/year-end>, and file:///Users/frank/Downloads/wmr-2022_0.pdf.

individualization under familism. In this process, I have identified two significant phenomena that lead me to a new understanding of these emigrants as both migrative subjects and sexual subjects.

First, sexual desire is not propelling the immigration process. LGBT migration scholars, exemplified by Héctor Carrillo, tend to generalize gay migration as sexual migration, as “they leave their countries of origin believing they will be able to live their sexualities more freely” (Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014:920). However, the people I studied did not leave China because they felt “sexually repressed” there. And their moving to NYC was not because they fantasized about “sexual freedom.” Rather, NYC, as the host society, is more likely a point on the trajectory of individual development, chosen for its academic and professional resources. Although some migrants hope to extend their stay through legal means, the driving force behind this goal is still unrelated to sexuality but is rather connected to their appreciating the vitality of New York culture. Therefore, gay Chinese migrants cannot be understood as sexual migrants, which contradicts the long-standing default perspective in the American academic community.

Second, family is a core factor shaping individual attitudes towards sexual desires. “Self-development” is a subjective desire but also an expectation of parents for their children to do well occupationally. Because education is thought to be critical to occupational success, migration, whether within China or from China to the U.S., is fundamentally an educational investment. In this process, parents’ attitudes towards their children’s sexual orientation influence whether individuals can practice their sexual desire in host societies. Living in NYC, some choose to sacrifice themselves to meet

parental expectations by giving up their sexualities; some choose to negotiate with their parents by achieving economic independence, conditionally engaging in sexual practices; the others have gained acceptance from their parents and are fully integrated into Gay New York. In this sense, the desire to migrate is directed towards doing well in the eyes of people's families.

In sum, migration is fueled by desire, yet for sexual minorities, the driving force of these is not so much sexual as it is developmental and responding to parental concerns. To put this dramaturgically, the main character of participants involved in this research is a "son," rather than a "migrator." Their family relationships remain unchanged despite their relocation, keeping them entwined in the power dynamics of individualism and familism, molding their expression of sexualities.

METHODOLOGY

A Multidimensional and Interdisciplinary Approach

This research employs oral history interviews as the main method, paying attention to life trajectories of individualization and migration, while also conducting some innovative practices. Two main reasons led me to this methodological decision.

First, the sociological "life course perspective" has gradually been applied to studies of migration (Wingens et al. 2011:1). Meanwhile, this perspective "cannot be understood as generated in a singular moment of 'decision-making,' but rather must be grasped across past–present–future" (Collins 2018:977). However, this temporal focus has not been extensively conducted in academic projects surrounding queer communities. Innovatively, by "attending to the whole arc of the migration experience, thereby seeing

how immigrants' pre-migration origins shape later experiences post-migration," Carrillo (2017:5), with his renowned empirical study on the Mexican gay community in San Diego, has demonstrated the effective utilization of a life-course perspective, inspiring me to adopt the same approach.

Second, the individualism, sensitivity, and occasional unconsciousness of sexualities means researchers "sometimes have to create new methods," (Ramírez and Boyd 2012:1), including how to collect information. Specifically, survey questionnaires and interviews are challenged by the diversity of individual sexual culture and language, especially in a cross-cultural and multilingual context. For example, since Chinese does not have everyday translations for "identity" or "sexuality," how can I responsibly interview and write about Chinese speakers' identity and sexuality in English? Regrettably, facing similar challenges, Carrillo (2017:12) points out the "intense, and sometimes quite emotional, intersubjective encounters between participants and interviewers" in his project, but does not share detailed interview experiences. However, queer oral historians are enthusiastic about discussing methodology, which has led me to search for methods from oral history in this sub-field.

Oral history interviews are known for their flexibility of agenda and attention to the equality in the power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee. Guided by this philosophy, conversations often begin with questions "unrelated" to academic knowledge, such as "tell me about your life." Understanding the research purpose of oral historians, interviewees also have the power to ask questions, answer, and lead the conversation's direction, achieving the goal of "co-authorship" in research analysis.

Based on this, queer oral historians go further, proposing the approach to understand sexuality as a “body-based knowing” (Ramírez and Boyd 2012:1). This not only emphasizes that oral historians need to facilitate the narrative manifestation of interviewees’ embodied sexual knowledge but also indicates that a sexualized dynamic, as a bodily response, inherently exists between subjectivities in an interview. This flirtation-like intimacy, fostering trust relationships, will impact “the conversation in ways that were sometimes very productive” (Boyd 2012:103).

In this context, then, my roles in this project are as interviewer, interviewee, and sexual subject. Therefore, I voluntarily disclosed my sexual identity as gay to the participants in this project, encouraging them to narrate their experiences in personalized language—English or Chinese, daily or scholarly, elegant or coarse—to “make meaning out of their lives, memories, and stories” (Murphy, Pierce, and Ruiz 2016:10). At the same time, I voluntarily answered their inquiries about my personal life, establishing a reciprocity different from the “researcher-subject” relationship.

However, I have also attempted to avoid some potential issues that oral history interviews might bring. Traditional oral history interviews are known for their use of real names, and interview recordings are publicly archived, creating pressure on sexual narrators. As pointed out by Nan Boyd (2012:110), the “public record justification” of oral history archives leads narrators to self-regulate expression, shaping their articulation as “what [is] perceived to be permissible speech.” Therefore, I encouraged the use of anonymity, which all narrators willingly accepted, and I emphasized that only I would access interview recordings.

Participants

This research analyzes interview transcripts from eight Chinese men with same-sex desire who are voluntary migrants to NYC. The participants in my sample: (1) are at least 18 years old and (2) were born and raised in Mainland China. Five participants directly moved from China to NYC, including two with living experiences away from family in other Chinese cities, while the other three have living experiences in other cities beyond China after leaving home. One participant had received his U.S. citizenship when our interview happened, but the others were still staying with visas. A summary of their demographic characteristics can be found in Table A-1 in the appendix.

An additional point to note is that although the self-identification of participants is considered something to be handled with care by queer scholars, it poses challenges in cross-cultural and multilingual projects. As mentioned above, Chinese lacks an everyday translation for “identity,” but participants in this project (similar to many men with same-sex desire in present-day China) are accustomed to directly using the English term “gay” to define their sexual orientation. For narrative clarity, I will use this terminology to refer to my interviewees’ identity. At the same time, because this project primarily employs the oral history interview method, I will refer to the interview subjects using the terminology commonly adopted by oral historians, “narrator.”

Procedure

To recruit, I posted interview invitations on Chinese and English social media platforms, including Instagram, Sina Weibo, and WeChat. These invitations were written

bilingually, conveying introductions of myself, the project, research purposes, with the protection of their privacy accented. Additionally, the Gay Health Advocacy Project at Columbia University also shared the invitation via email within its student network. Before the interviews, on phone or by texting, we had brief conversations regarding more personal questions.

Interviews

Although I aimed to avoid entering conversations with a predetermined agenda, I outlined rough conceptual directions to ensure the consistency of collected content. Table 1 outlines a summary of this interview design. To ensure the privacy and comfort of the conversations, the interviews took place at either my home or the interviewee’s residence. Participants reviewed and signed a legal release, granting me the authority to record, transcribe, translate, and academically utilize our interviews.

Table 1. Conceptualized Interview Directions

Sexual Development	Trajectory of Migration	Societal Influence on Sexuality	Familial Influence on Sexuality
1. Realization of same-sex desire 2. Attitudinal and practical change of homosexuality	1. Hometown city 2. Cities live in and why migrate	1. Self-understanding of sexual culture in different cities 2. How did/does the societal culture influence sexualities 3. How do sexualities affect their migration	1. Self-understanding of their familial cultures 2. How do parents influence their sexualities 3. How does the parents-son power dynamic change over time 4. How does family affect their migration

Transcription and Translation

I recorded a total of 22 hours and 44 minutes, using equipment and software powered by Rode. I then transcribed these recordings with software named “Xun Fei,” which supports multilingual work, including Chinese and English. This involved two steps. First was proofreading based on Chinese. In this process, I removed repetitive parts and filler words from the narrators’ spoken language that did not contribute to the meaning. The second step is translation. It’s noteworthy that narrators used English for certain expressions, and when quoting them, I will use double quotation marks.

THE DESIRABILITY OF MIGRATION

Bad or oppressive laws, heavy taxation, an unattractive climate, uncongenial social surroundings, and even compulsion (slave trade, transportation), all have produced and are still producing currents of migration, but none of these currents can compare in volume with that which arises from the desire inherent in most men to “better” themselves in material respects.

Ravenstein, 1889:286, “The Laws of Migration”

I want to start with how desire, as an internal driving force, shapes international mobility among individuals. Migration scholars, with diverse research interests, generally agree on one point: the pursuit of a better future propels migration (Pine 2014; Collins 2017). Similarly, in the field of LGBT studies, the decision or desire to migrate often takes center stage in queer migration studies (Bass 2018). For voluntary migrants, desire undoubtedly acts as an internal motivator for embarking on the journey. However, desire,

though inherently associated with a sexual filter, is multi-faceted. The crucial question is: What desires drive whom, and from where to where?

Gay Chinese migrants to NYC exhibit diverse proactive migration routes. Some come directly from their home towns, while others have lived in China and other cities outside China. The desire initially propelling them on their journey is what I call “self-development,” which gradually transitions towards “self-enjoyment.” In this evolution of desire, their attitude towards NYC also undergoes subtle changes. Specifically, during the pursuit of educational resources, this city is not considered the future home but rather the location of Columbia University and New York University. However, as they begin to value the convenience and vibrancy of life, the vision of “returning to” or “staying in” NYC becomes a crucial factor influencing their decision-making.

The complexity of desire forms the premise of my argument, which includes but does not emphasize the role of sexual desire in gay Chinese migration. It is not the decisive factor reported by any of my narrators. This minimizing sexual desire deviates from the traditional findings of U.S. scholars studying gay migration. I will briefly introduce this paradigm in the research literature and provide a detailed exposition of how self-development and self-enjoyment influence the migration of gay Chinese individuals.

The (De-)Sexualization of Gay Migration

In the methodology section, I mentioned that discussions around the population movement of sexual minorities have long been confined within the framework of queer

geography. Meanwhile, they are also anchored within the realm of sexology: Sexual desire is considered the determinant of gay migration. I am not criticizing this as a stereotype in scholars' minds; on the contrary, it is a common experience. But this is because the fieldwork often focuses on Latino populations. For instance, Carrillo led the largest academic interview sample of gay Mexican migrants to the U.S., from which the majority of his interviewees (63 out of 77) categorized "the notion of sexual freedom" as one of their motivations for relocating to San Diego, California. This contributes to Carrillo's argument that "they leave their countries of origin believing they will be able to live their sexualities more freely" (Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014:920; Carrillo 2017:68).

This echoes his meticulous literature review of previous studies. Carrillo is highly appreciated for challenging stereotypical understandings in U.S. academia, such as the assumption that pre-migration sexualities in the so-called Global South are homogeneous. However, his idea that sexual desire is the major driver for national emigration in the gay community is, in his words, "broadly consistent with that of other lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) immigrants who moved to the USA" (Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014:920).

In contrast, within the gay Chinese community, a clear dissociation between sexual desire and the migratory decision is explicit. Eight narrators initially left their hometowns for educational purposes and subsequently, either directly or gradually, arrived in NYC. Six of them considered better education and/or career opportunities as the sole reasons driving their relocation. The remaining two proposed that imagines

about future sexualities played a limited role in propelling their migration, compared to the more appealing quality of life that NYC could offer.

Therefore, I categorize these two desires as “self-development” and “self-enjoyment.” In NYC, the host society, these two desires are satisfied by educational/occupational institutions and the city’s economic and cultural aspects, respectively. The different paths through migration to fulfill these desires imply distinct orientations toward future life. The former is more likely to lead individuals to the next, not necessarily NYC-based, institution, while the latter is more likely to settle them down here for a longer term. I will develop these two different migration motivations through specific cases.

Self-Development Migration

Self-development, especially for education, is the most reported major driver of their relocation to NYC. Six narrators immediately offered this answer when our conversations came to talk about “why migration.” They comprise individuals who came directly from China, as well as one person who had previously lived in the United States and relocated to NYC. The educational institutions represented include both undergraduate and graduate schools. Based on this, they further expressed their “lack of knowledge” and “indifference” towards the city of host before their relocation.

Teng, born in 2000, had been living in Beijing and completed his undergraduate studies there. He possesses a healthy physique and enjoys posting photos of himself on social media accounts. In fact, almost all of our cumulative four-hour conversation

revolved around the timeline of his phone's photo gallery – a suggestion he actively made. From there, discussions would arise about which pictures had gained popularity online. He believes that he needs “a window” to access more employment opportunities, and sexual attractiveness is considered an advantage in networking. Despite the significant role his sexual agency plays in his life, he straightforwardly expresses that his move to NYC has nothing to do with it:

Teng: At that time, I applied to some schools.... When going abroad, you need to see which program is more suitable for you, whose courses are more flexible. Although Columbia was the least prestigious among all the schools I got into, I felt it was more suitable for my development. So, I came here.

Interviewer: So, New York didn't particularly attract you initially; your priority was the school.

Teng: That's how I thought at the time. I had no idea of New York.

Like Teng, all the narrators in this project have experienced education in the U.S., initiating their migration at different ages due to educational pursuits. I have no intention of delving into the discussion of the wave of Chinese students studying abroad, commonly referred to as “gilding.” However, this population movement, characterized by socioeconomic and generational features, evidently concretizes the paths through which they realize their self-development desires. When future competitors are all going to study in the U.S., the choice of not migrating will be taken off the table, as exemplified by Joey's story:

Interviewer: Why did you have to come to the U.S. for your master's degree?

Joey: It's a more traditional path, and all my classmates did it.

Interviewer: Did you try exploring the job market at that time? For example, did any supervisor during your internship suggest that you need to go to the U.S.?

Joey: I didn't ask because I didn't even consider that question. I thought getting a master's degree (in the U.S.) was definitely necessary... In my college, there were about 200 people in my cohort, and only one person didn't pursue a master's because they were from Beijing, and their family arranged a job for him. For us (those whose parents couldn't help them find a good job), we didn't have that consideration; we must pursue a master's degree. Professors also convey that message, saying, "Okay, everyone must pursue a master's."

While the trajectories differ, Zhang San (born in 1998 in Guangzhou), after living in Pittsburgh for three years and completing a bachelor's degree, similarly "passively" relocated once again due to graduate education at Columbia University:

Interviewer: Why Columbia?

Zhang San: I didn't get into other ones at that time, those other Ph.D. programs... I did my undergraduate in Pennsylvania, but I had never been to New York.

Interviewer: Did you have any expectations of the city at that time?

Zhang San: No expectations. I just thought, okay, [I'm moving to] another place.

I chose the above three stories as examples of migration driven by self-development desire because they vividly illustrate that on this path, the educational resource advantage in NYC and the narrators' institution-centered migration orientation led them to this city. The new question is, will their educational experiences in NYC prompt them to plan to stay here after graduation? Will their migration orientation change? What might replace the attraction of institutions?

Self-Enjoyment Migration

“My decision to come here had nothing to do with the city, but after staying for a year, I just feel like I want to stay in New York. I feel that New York is suitable for me,” Teng told me. On New Year's Day 2022, he posted on his social media, saying, “I love New York. I belong here.”

Based on the content provided in the interview, Teng is one of the narrators who has explored American life to the most extent. He frequently attends concerts of European and American singers, fulfilling his childhood dreams; he meets “interesting people” and participates in “fun activities,” realizing his expectations of exploring cultural diversity. All this joy seems to be convincing him to stay. In fact, by the time of our conversation, he had been applying for Ph.D. programs to further his academic achievements, and he most hoped to stay at Columbia University. However, at the same time, he also applied to universities in other cities—although a new desire is driving him to extend his stay in NYC, it is too young to completely replace the potential of self-development.

This new desire, which I call the desire for “self-enjoyment,” can be clearly demonstrated by Alex and Nork. While self-development binds the migrant’s route to institutions—good schools, good companies—self-enjoyment centers on the immigrant’s subjective experience. It pushes individuals to start thinking: In what kind of space do I really want to live?

After graduating from MIT, Alex (born in 1996) stranded again on a pivoting moment. By then, he had been living away from hometown for seven years. Raised in Taiyuan (China), he went to Vancouver for college, Boston for graduate school, and NYC for a brief summer internship. With pretty much competitiveness in job hunting, he had the confidence in applying only for positions in where he wanted to live. The “multidimensional[ly]” “playful” and “interesting” life offered by NYC allured him to return.

Alex: I just wanted to come to New York. I had been to New York before. And I always felt like I should live in New York for at least a year when I was 20 something.

As he wished, Alex smoothly secured a decent job at a consulting company in NYC. His current life is both a return on educational investment and a fulfillment of his expectations for subjective happiness. When it comes to pleasure, sexual satisfaction is an inevitable dimension of life. In fact, even though Alex was so out-of-closet that he had an openly gay boyfriend back in high school, he still experienced many new sexual explorations in NYC. He began attending “gay parties and cruising parties,” seemingly aligning with the prophecy of gay migration as sexual migration. However, when

specifically reflecting on the role sexual desire played in his move to NYC, he categorically denied its significance:

Interviewer: I want to summarize a bit, and you can judge if I'm right. Before moving to New York, part of your expectation was the job here, and another part was that this is a sexually playful city.

Alex: Hmm, yes and no, it's definitely a sexually playful place, but it might only be 10% of my motivation. I think, more importantly, New York itself as a city is very playful. And its interesting aspects are very multidimensional. Actually, looking back now, I don't even think the sexual part played much of a role. It's actually quite small in my entire motivation... even today, it's not the most attractive thing about New York to me. I think what's more attractive is the city itself, like I have many friends here, and New York is very vibrant, lots of fun going on, lots of things going on, lots of interesting people. These are more important to me.

A similar narrative was offered by Nork (born in 1997), who sincerely gave a somewhat surreal answer to the question "why NYC": for Chinese food. After graduating from high school, he went to Kansas for college, and his life was framed within the campus-town. For him, the challenge was immense as the "whole area had only one Chinese restaurant"; when he reluctantly decided to accept the "Americanized Chinese food" after lowering his standards, he found this compromise was a luxury because he did not have a car or a driver's license. In this situation, he traveled to NYC by chance and, upon seeing the convenient and lively cityscape, immediately decided to transfer.

Actually, Nork's story provides strong evidence for my argument of the "de-sexualization" of migratory desire because when he decided to move to NYC, he was not only in the closet but also refused to accept his homosexual orientation. Although, in

front of me, he was now with a refined makeup, striding through the pre-war old living room in his high-heeled boots, he did not even know the word “gay” in his freshman year. It was after his relocation to this “quite fun” city where “gay men are gaudy and flashy” that when he started to explore his sexuality, unplanned.

The post-migration sexual satisfaction that Nork experienced contributes to his decision to stay in NYC after graduation, eventually bringing sexuality into the factors shaping his trajectory. However, this does not change the fact that it was absent when he moved to both the U.S. and NYC, allowing me to maintain my argument that the desire for self-enjoyment was the capital force for his migration.

Up to this point, I have presented two different migration motivations, both unrelated to sexual desire. But the new question is, among gay Chinese migrators, why does the distinction between self-development desire and self-enjoyment desire emerge? At the same time, why do some narrators, represented by Teng, exhibit a struggle when considering the next destination in satisfying these two different desires?

I believe that these two different desires actually represent the cultural embodiment of familism and individualism in one subject. Next, I will elaborate on how this internal conflict is shaped and how it influences the migration paths of my narrators.

THE (NEO-)FAMILISM OF MIGRATION

When your parents are alive, do not wander far. If you must travel, you should adhere to the path of benevolence as if your parents are still there to oversee you.

Confucius and his disciples, 770–256 BCE, trans, *The Analects*

Desire is often considered as a product of subjectivity, but in this project, I discovered that it also is intersubjective, a result of familial relations. The subjectivity of desire can be clearly demonstrated through sexual desire as a migratory drive. Let me once again use the exemplary empirical research by Carrillo. Practically, what his informants desire is a “space to enact their sexualities far from the gaze of families,” in other words, they do not want their desires to be interfered with by others, even their families (Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014:920). This motivation for migration exhibits a strong individualistic color. More importantly, this individuality-driven migration has its cultural roots. In his book (2017:99-115) “Pathways of Desire,” Carrillo, in Chapter Four, “A Gay Culture of Migration,” elaborates on the collective culture of the group migrating from Mexico to the U.S. “Gay friends” and “potential boyfriends” provide a network for gay Mexicans to relocate without relying on familial/relative resources. From motivation to path, somehow, everything is anti-familial.

In contrast, my narrators demonstrate a prevalent familism orientation, thereby limiting the agency of individualism to varying extents. Their current or past desires for self-development may seem like an expression of “self-ism,” but through insights into their life histories, I found that its essence is the realization of expectations related to parenting. This does not imply that my narrators do not genuinely desire a better self, but their achievements or failures will simultaneously satisfy or disappoint them and their parents. From this perspective, an individual becomes an agent of familial desires.

Therefore, when the individualized desire for self-enjoyment becomes stronger, leading migrants in a direction different from the “path expected by parents,” they, like Teng, find themselves hesitating.

It seems that, in contrast to the “individualism” of Western societies, the characteristic of Chinese values lies in “collectivism.” However, in reality, the values in contemporary China are rooted in “familism.” Fei Xiaotong, one of the earliest and most famous sociologists in China, detailed this point in his work “From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society” (1992). Traditionally and rurally, the family is a group formed by blood relatives. Individuals within this group often live together, forming villages, making familial rules to some extent social rules. This phenomenon still exists in today’s China. However, simultaneously, with the acceleration of modernization and increased population mobility, the paradigm of “individual-family/village/society” has been disrupted in some regions. There, instead, the paradigms of “individual-family” and “individual-society” synchronously shape an individual’s values. A cultural phenomenon known as “neo-familism” has emerged, as termed by Chinese scholars.

Here I explain: 1) what familism and neo-familism are and how they influence gay Chinese migration; 2) how the confrontation between individualized desires and familial desires enacts homosexuality.

Family and Migratory Desires

I am grateful to Gary Hamilton and Wang Zheng for their excellent translation of Fei Xiaotong's book, and would like to quote words from their "Foreword" in the English version to explain the meaning of its metaphoric title:

The bulk of this book is a translation of *Xiangtu Zhongguo*... *Xiang* means "countryside," and *tu* means "earth"; but the combination, *xiangtu*, is a set phrase meaning "one's native soil or home village." By using *xiangtu* to modify *Zhongguo* (China), Fei is conveying a subtle meaning to his readers: that Chinese society has grown out of its ties to the land. Should any of his readers miss the subtlety, Fei clarifies the meaning of the title in the book's first sentence, "Chinese society is fundamentally rural." (P. vii)

For example, many villages in China are named after one family name, representing the village as a society, essentially a vast familial system formed by blood relations. Fei Xiaotong proposed the idea of "China as a familiar society," and in this context, we can understand "familiar" as "familial." Although this viewpoint emerged after World War II and China has undergone rapid socialization since, the complexity nurtured on that vast land still makes this phenomenon of "society as family" observable.

Nork was born in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, where the culture of family lineages occupies a significant position. In his memories, his hometown consisted of "several hundred relatives," where he long believed that "a man must get married and must have a son." He avoided exploring his sexuality for an extended period, even when traveling and living in other cities in China, as he always thought, "there are relatives in every city." He believed in his father's authority, thus embarking on a series of migrations. Nork moved to Qingdao to attend high school following his father's business plan, crossing the north

and south of China, and it was arranged by his father for him to “go to the U.S. to study marketing and help the family business.”

In contrast, more progressive situations occur in economically developed cities, especially in regions where incoming populations rapidly move, and social relationships atomize. Blood relations that traditionally constituted social networks lose their status as the sole facilitator of individual socialization. Instead, individualism has emerged in Chinese society with the reform and opening-up of China (1978), as pointed out by Yunxiang Yan (2018). In such situations, younger generations learn about and internalize various cultures through diverse channels. Western-style (hyper-) individualism has not appeared because the “child-parent” relationship as the most core and fundamental social relation has not only remained unchanged but has gained greater power over individuals. Regardless of how much people understand diverse cultures, traditional “filial piety” still holds strong influence in Chinese society. This awareness of obedience to parents has given rise to sparks of clashes in values across generations, leading to what Yan calls “neo-familism.” Consequently, the children find themselves in a dilemma: either compromising their own desires or causing harm to their parents.

Taking this new kind of family relation into account, Luo provides constructive findings on internal gay migration in China. Essentially, as a “heteronormative institution” (as of this writing, same-sex marriage is still not legally recognized in China), the family contradicts homosexuality, thereby, to some extent, promoting the mobility of gay men to other cities. Interestingly, this mobility is not an “escape.” By contrast, “like their heterosexual counterparts,” the family is their most desired destination (Luo

2022:587). This means that gay Chinese individuals have a strong willingness to have same-sex marriages, and “going home” is the ultimate goal of migration—they hope to persuade their parents to accept their sexual orientation through self-development and return to the original family unit.

In this project, I find similar narratives. As a migratory drive, the desire for self-development is a product of the combined wills of individuals and parents, driving some gay Chinese migrants to leave home for education, gradually moving towards the U.S. and NYC. However, through this journey, migrants inevitably generate a desire for self-enjoyment as they grow personally, in which sexuality matters. But their blood relation with parents has not changed, and the new desire, potentially unknown or unsupported by parents, becomes an illegitimate presence in the family system. Therefore, they generally persist in achieving self-development, both to meet parental expectations and to gain greater power to persuade their parents to accept their desire for self-enjoyment.

From this perspective, for individuals coming from a neo-familialist cultural background, migratory desire is directed towards both a better self and a higher power position in their families. Based on such power climbing, I categorize their trajectories into three patterns: 1) filial obedience; 2) mutual negotiation; 3) parental compromise.

Pattern #1: Filial Obedience

Jackson, born in 2000 in Tianjin, moved to Hangzhou in 2018, then to NYC in 2022, and is set to go to Beijing in January 2024, always with the sole purpose of

studying or working. He does not care about the city, is not concerned about the subjective happiness of living there, and cares even less about his sexuality.

Since middle school, Jackson has been aware of his attraction to men. However, because he feared his parents would discover his sexual orientation, it was not until he was 22 years old and left China that he dared to explore his sexuality to a limited extent. Through LGBTQI+ support meetings he attended on campus, he discovered: “Turns out gay people can get married here, it’s pretty good.” For the first time in his life, he made gay friends and openly discussed his life experiences. “If I stay in New York, I really want to have a boyfriend,” he says, but shortly after, he sighed, expressing that he would rather return to China to fulfill his parents’ expectations, “sacrificing” his sexual desire, perhaps even getting married to a woman:

Jackson: I believe [my parents] are quite progressive, but not progressive enough to accept that their son, returning from the United States, has suddenly become gay.

Interviewer: Do you strongly desire to stay in the United States, or is it both acceptable for you to stay here or return to China?

Jackson: I’m somewhat inclined to go back home; (sigh); I miss my family.

Interviewer: Does this mean that you think your sexuality can be sacrificed?

Jackson: Yes, indeed, yeah. Sometimes, when I think about returning, I worry that once I find a job, my parents will start pressuring me to get married and go on blind dates.

This year, a college classmate suddenly disclosed to me that he's not straight and mentioned something about non-binary gender. I asked him why he was telling me this, and he said he thought I would accept it. I then asked him, "What will you do?" He's still in China and said, "For now, I'll just go with the flow." He seems uncertain about the future but currently has a boyfriend in the United States. Even in the future to get married, [he/I (inexplicitly)] will take it step by step. There's no clear answer. No, no steps. He definitely won't get married. But how would one handle it when parents are pressuring you?

Pattern #2: Mutual Negotiation

Joey (born in 1999) had two girlfriends during his college time in Beijing, even though he was hundreds of kilometers away from his hometown in Shandong Province. In his upbringing, parental commands not only intervened in his relationships but also in his friendships. Since middle school, his friends could only be "children of parents' friends," especially those who performed well academically. This pressure led him to tell himself for a long time: "Maybe I'm only 90% gay?" He once strongly hoped he could fulfill his parents' marriage expectations until he realized he could not and did not have to. After breaking up with his second girlfriend, he began years of trying to negotiate with his parents.

In 2019, he came to NYC for graduate studies. At that time, he had no concept of this city, but life here made him choose to stay longer for work, increasingly realizing that his feelings were equally important as his parents' expectations. When he had already fulfilled the tasks assigned by his parents with a "good education" and a "good

job,” dating someone of the same sex is not something he cannot do. But for now, this can only be done in NYC.

Talking about his hometown, Joey reveals a strong tone of reproach without concealing, suggesting an anticipated future of staying away from parents until his sexual orientation is accepted by them:

Interviewer: Why don't you like Shandong?

Joey: It's impossible to be gay there. No one is. And my parents would think it's a disease.

Interviewer: Have you heard them mention it?

Joey: Because I discussed it with them. I made up a story. I forgot how I brought it up, but the result I remember very clearly. I said a friend is gay, and then my dad said it's a disease, you can't hang out with him. I defended him (his made-up friend), I said, it's not like that, it's not a disease, it's normal. But they didn't accept it.

Interviewer: Have you heard any criticism of homosexuality from neighbors in your hometown?

Joey: Not really.

Interviewer: So, in a sense, your fear of revealing your sexual orientation comes only from your parents.

Joey: Yes.

The migrants negotiating with their parents are all in a partially disclosed stage, meaning that their close friends are aware of their sexual orientation, but their families are not. This state of partial disclosure seems to hinder migrants' sexual freedom in their current lives. As several narrators expressed, the potential risk of parents hearing rumors still limits their sexual practices. However, sometimes, even a gay individual has disclosed his sexual orientation to his family, it is not guaranteed that he will be fully accepted. Zhang San came out to his family in high school, but his parents still "cling to fantasies of having a straight son:"

Zhang San: They still subtly pressure me to get married. For instance, they sometimes ask if I've met a good-looking, wealthy girl, or talk about how cute it is when other people have grandchildren. It just makes me feel that they are concerned about this.

I feel that it is difficult to get their support within the family until I am completely financially independent, until I can earn money. But, actually, their greater concern about me is that they worry I won't live well, or they think being gay is like doing drugs, which is why they have a negative attitude towards it. In my view, I must first live my life well now so that I can let them understand me.

Pattern #3: Parental Compromise

However, different attitudes toward homosexuality by different parents make "economic independence" not the sole watershed for migrants to openly pursue their sexual desires. Unlike Zhang San, Lin (born in 2000) provides a different example. Lin came out to his parents in high school, and, although this was by accident, his parents did not pretend that nothing had happened, as did Zhang San's parents. As Lin was

graduating from high school, he was admitted to both Brown University and Columbia College. His parents, as sponsors, still used their power to ask him to go to Columbia, but he was totally satisfied with their decision. As he says, he knew “there was going to be much more fun in NYC:”

Lin: (In high school) I bought a dildo at an adult store, and my mom found it. Then, my mom asked if it was for a girlfriend. I said no, and directly told her it’s for me because my mind was a bit blank at that time. I just told the truth and said that I am gay. She didn’t have any reaction, and I remember that I asked my mom very rationally if she would support me. Then, my mom said, I think this is a fact, and I can only accept it, with no support or non-support. I don’t know if she had any struggle in her heart, but she did not show any struggle in front of me.

My dad was not home at that time. I told my mom not to tell my dad, but obviously, she probably called my dad within a minute.

Interviewer: After coming out to your mom, did you suddenly feel like you could come out to other people?

Lin: Yes, because many of my friends already knew at that time, and after this happened, I just (came out publicly).

To summarize, I have shown the changing path of gay Chinese migrants in terms of their power relationship with parents after leaving home, manifested by the shift in their attitude toward sexual desires. Some insist on sacrificing themselves to fulfill their parents’ expectations, some try to find a balance between the two, and the others persuade their parents to accept their appeals. These changes result from the confrontation between individualism and familism. Different family contexts and individual situations determine the influencing factors in the power struggle; it is not

necessarily only “financial independence” that can lead to a successful sexual individualization to parents. In this process, the cultural context provided by the cities where migrants live does not play a decisive role in determining individual sexualities but rather serves as a “toolkit.” These cultures become meaningful to them only when they can use them.

EPILOGUE

There's a place for us
Somewhere a place for us
Peace and quiet and open air
Wait for us somewhere
Somehow, someday, somewhere

Leonard Bernstein / Stephen Sondheim, “Somewhere”

I have talked about the structural conditions that influence migratory desires and sexualities of gay Chinese population in NYC. In this discussion, family plays the crucial role, somehow overshadowing the individual interpretations on homosexuality. However, I also want to point out that, being gay, of course, is important to my narrators. During interviews with them, I also learned valuable knowledge from them regarding the diversity of individual stories about pain, pleasure, confusion, struggle, adventure, and, most importantly, love, in their lifespans. In this thesis, migration is sociologically constructed as a pathway of being a better self that is desired by family and of being ultimately a true self in family. But it is much more than that. My narrators are looking for a place to belong.

Teng's profound love for a U.S. citizenship stands out among the other narrators; he believes it will be the moment when he can finally "be chill." "Don't ask me why, I don't know either." Later, he suggested a conclusion for his story: His happiness in NYC, can only be truly attained when he becomes a green-card holder, somehow.

During my interview with Zhang San, he suddenly paused and pulled out marijuana from under his table. Putting some in the holder, he lit it, carefully leaning by the window, inhaling, exhaling. The room was still filled with the scent of incense, and slowly, smoke began to swirl, as if we were in a temple in Nepal. He dreams of becoming a monk there, someday.

Jackson later opened his window too. The heavy smell of cooking oil in his living room was a common challenge for everyone cooking Chinese food in a New York apartment. He had just finished half of his dinner, and upon seeing me, he quickly put down his chopsticks. "If I don't talk it out, I'll really suffocate," he explained about why he accepted my invitation to be interviewed. He just wants to reveal a part of himself, somewhere.

Conducting oral history interviews is always a process of learning through unlearning. In the narratives provided by this project, the lives of contemporary Chinese gay population is no longer a mystery but an intriguingly complex field in need of further exploration. The relocation that ensues is not just an individual movement between two spaces; it is a historical process spanning the river of time, shaping the bodies "from the soil."

I would like to use the ending of the last piece of essay in Fei Xiaotong's book, titled *From Desire to Necessity*), to close my thesis:

In modern society, knowledge is power. This is so because people in society make plans according to their needs. In rural society, people depend on experience and do not need to plan. This is so because, in the process of time, nature has selected for them a traditional life design on which they have come to rely. Each simply acts according to his or her own desires. (P.140)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I sincerely thank my advisors, Professor William McAllister and Professor Andie Tucher, for all they have done to guide me forward. I also express gratitude to my parents; even though they may not understand what I am doing, they have never ceased to encourage my academic pursuits and provide financial support. (Well, I apologize for portraying less-than-ideal family dynamics in this article). Thanks to my oral-historian friend community in NYC known as the "Horny Squad." Finally, my appreciation to my partner Assaf Liron for countless nights of accompanying my writing and pretending to be genuinely interested in academic papers.

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Appendix

Table A-1. Narrator Information

Pseudonym	Birth Year	Where Lived in China	Where Lived Outside China	Why Go To NYC
Stephan	2001	2001~ 2020, Shenzhen	2020~2023, NYC	College, NYU
Jackson	2000	2000~2018, Tianjin	2022~2023, NYC	Grad school, Columbia U
		2018~2022, Hangzhou		
Teng	2000	2000~2022, Beijing	2022~2023, NYC	Grad school, Columbia U
Lin	2000	2000~2019, Beijing	2019~2023, NYC	College, Columbia U
Joey	1999	1999~2017, Ji'nan	2021~2023, NYC	Grad school, Columbia U
		2017~2021, Beijing		Work, Finance
Zhang San	1998	1998~2018, Guangzhou	2018~2022, Pittsburgh	College, U Pittsburgh
			2022~2023, NYC	Grad school, Columbia U
Nork	1997	1997~2013, Fuzhou	2016~2017, Kansas	College, transfer student
		2013~2016, Qingdao,	2017~2023, NYC	
Alex	1996	1996~2015, Taiyuan	2015~2020, Vancouver	Work, Consulting
			2020~2022, Boston	
			2022~2023, NYC	