

Negotiating Gender and Kinship: LGBT+ Family Practices in Twenty-first Century China



Since the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1997 and its removal from the list of mental disorders in 2001, China has witnessed profound transformations in the lived experiences of LGBT+ and queer individuals, particularly in the domains of intimacy, sexuality, and parenthood (Song 2021; Wei and Yan 2021). While some individuals have distanced themselves from the normative framework of heterosexual marriage by openly affirming their sexual identity within familial, social, and friendship networks, others continue to enter into heterosexual marriages through diverse strategies (Wei 2023; Tao 2024; Hou 2025a). Beyond the multiplicity of sexual and intimate arrangements, the emergence of new forms of parenthood—coupled with the growing accessibility of reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization and surrogacy—challenges conventional kinship models and gender norms within Chinese society.

This special feature focuses on the family experiences of LGBT+ individuals in China to analyze how they navigate marriage, sexual, and parental arrangements. It further examines how issues of race, gender, and bioethics intersect with assisted reproductive practices and fertility preservation technologies. In doing so, it seeks to enrich our understanding of the rapid social transformations taking place in contemporary China and to contribute to a necessary reconfiguration of anthropological approaches to kinship, still predominantly shaped by Euro-American paradigms.

1. Under Heteronormative and Marital Pressures: Identity, Family Expectations, and Social Norms

In imperial China, same-sex affective and sexual relationships were rarely subject to political or social sanctions as long as they did not threaten the institution of heterosexual marriage. Male homosexual behavior—whether discreet or open, pre- or post-marital—was generally tolerated as long as familial obligations, particularly the production of a male heir, were fulfilled. While male sexual freedom during this period is well documented, women’s same-sex experiences remain less visible due to strong norms of chastity and fidelity. Nonetheless, lesbian relationships within polygynous households—among wives, concubines, and female servants—were sometimes tolerated. This long-standing coexistence between institutionalized heterosexual marriage and informal same-sex relations was disrupted during the Maoist era (1949–1976), and even more so in the reform era beginning in the 1980s. Since the late 1990s, influenced by global queer movements, increasing numbers of LGBT+ individuals now claim homosexual identities and relationships (Bao 2018), challenging the historical model of “double lives,” where same-sex intimacy coexisted with compulsory heterosexual marriage.

However, coming out remains rare, and heterosexual marriage continues to be a near-universal expectation. According to the 2020 census, over 90% of men and 95% of women aged 35–39 had been married at least once (Guo et al. 2023). Many LGBT+ individuals continue to conform to marital norms through different strategies: “marriage fraud” (*pianhun* 骗婚) with heterosexual partners (Zhu 2018) or “mixed-orientation marriages” (*tongzhihun* 同直婚), a more nuanced formulation (Song et al. 2024); or “marriages of convenience” (*xinghun* 形婚) with homosexual partners of the opposite sex (Cai 2023; Hou 2025b). These strategies allow individuals to meet familial and societal expectations while maintaining relative autonomy in their private lives.

The enduring dominance of heterosexual marriage compels LGBT+ individuals to navigate a delicate balance between sexual identity and familial obligation. In this context, (neo-)familism (Yan 2021) and individualism intersect in ways that challenge Western-centric discourses emphasizing visibility and coming out as universal markers of queer modernity. A decolonial, intersectional lens is thus essential to understand the complex realities of private life for LGBT+ individuals in contemporary China.

2. Diverse Pathways to Parenthood: Technics, Gender, and Inequalities

Since Marilyn Strathern’s pioneering work on reproductive technologies (1992), the anthropology of kinship has undergone a significant revival, increasingly drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from Science and Technology Studies (STS), gender studies, and queer and LGBT+ studies (Franklin 1997; Carsten 2004; Mamo 2007; Smietana and Twine 2022). While much of this research has focused on Euro-

American contexts, recent ethnographic research on assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) has expanded to non-Western settings, particularly Israel and Muslim-majority countries (Inhorn 2003; Birenbaum-Carmeli 2016). In China, although reproductive technologies have developed rapidly in recent years, they remain understudied in academic research on LGBT+ populations (Wei 2021; Tao 2024). Alongside the normative model of heterosexual couples raising children within marriage, new forms of conjugal and parental arrangements – enabled by technologies such as in vitro fertilization and surrogacy – complicate Chinese kinship structures and gender norms, or at the very least, prompt their re-examination.

Reproductive medicine and ARTs are not merely technical or biological interventions; they are deeply embedded in cultural, social, and political frameworks (Franklin and Gardey 2023). The theoretical and practical challenges raised by ARTs in China are shaped by several specific factors: (1) reproductive technologies are primarily regulated by the state, with limited influence from religious institutions; (2) historically, polygynous families in China recognized multiple maternal figures prior to 1949; (3) cultural conceptions of motherhood place less emphasis on gestation and childbirth; and (4) China's patrilineal and unilateral kinship system informs distinct understandings of family and parenthood. These elements create a context in which ARTs raise questions and generate tensions that differ markedly from those in other regions.

By approaching family negotiations and reproductive choices as a “total social fact” (Mauss 1950) – shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-political forces – this special feature aims to examine the unique dynamics of LGBT+ kinship practices in China. It also contributes to broader debates on the ethical and legal dimensions of ARTs, their impact on kinship and gender norms, and the specific challenges that arise in the Chinese context.

Suggested Topics (including but not limited to):

- Intersectional approaches to queer and LGBT+ identities in China
- Intergenerational negotiations of marriage
- Emerging forms of conjugality and sexuality
- Single parenthood and same-sex parenthood
- New kinship terminologies and neologisms
- The ARTs market and cross-border reproductive practices
- Eugenics and gamete selection
- Care, education, and social integration of LGBT+ children

Submission Guidelines

We invite interested authors to submit an abstract of 300-500 words, along with the paper's title and the contributor's biography (all in English), by **15 September 2025**. Full papers will be due by **15 February 2026**.

If you are interested in contributing to this special feature of *China Perspectives*, abstracts and queries should be sent to **HOU Renyou** at renyou.hou@cnrs.fr.

All submitted papers will undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process. Research articles (written in English) should be 9,000 words long, and follow the format of articles guidelines available here: <https://www.cefc.com.hk/china-perspectives/submissions/style-guide/>.

Guest Editor' Bio

Renyou Hou is a Permanent Research Fellow in anthropology at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). He is the author of *Negotiations and Compromises: Marriage Practices in Contemporary Rural China* (Inalco Press, 2024). His research interests include (1) gender and kinship in contemporary China; (2) health and globalization; and (3) assisted reproductive technologies and surrogacy.

<https://lisst.univ-tlse2.fr/accueil/hn-equipes-de-recherche/centre-danthropologie-sociale-cas/renyou-hou>

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