The End of the Rainbow?

Chinese Queer International Students Negotiating the “Ethnic Closet” in New Zealand

Taylor Le Cui & Lin Song

This research is supported by the New Zealand Rule Foundation’s

Rainbow Wellbeing Legacy Fund.

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Authors

Taylor Le Cui 崔乐

Taylor Le Cui is a New Zealand-based sociologist whose work focuses on issues of sexuality, education and employment. He holds a PhD in Education (2022) from the University of Auckland's Faculty of Education and Social Work, and another PhD in Applied Linguistics (2013) from the Communication University of China. Taylor is a globally recognised scholar and has published his interdisciplinary work in leading international journals in the areas of education, sociology, and sexuality studies. He is the co-editor-in-chief of the international journal *Diversity & Inclusion Research* (Wiley). He serves on the editorial boards of the *European Journal of Education* (Wiley), *Gender Sex and Sexualities* (Frontiers), and *Societal Impacts* (Elsevier).

Email: cuile595595@gmail.com

Profile: https://www.linkedin.com/in/taylor-le-cui/

Lin Song 宋林

Lin Song a scholar of media and cultural studies, and currently an Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism & Communication, Jinan University in Guangzhou, China. He holds a PhD in Gender Studies from The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His first monograph, *Queering Chinese Kinship: Queer Public Culture in Globalizing China*, is available in Hong Kong University Press's Queer Asia series. He researches on Chinese popular and digital cultures, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality.

Email: songlinhk@gmail.com

Profile: https://thelinsong.wordpress.com/

Abstract

Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 Chinese queer international students from New Zealand's tertiary institutions, this paper explores their motivations to pursue higher education transnationally, and unpacks the interconnected power structures underpinning their experiences. We find that despite the imagination and initial perception of New Zealand as one of the most queer-friendly higher education destinations, Chinese queer international students are confronted by the "ethnic closet" – a heteronormative power structure simultaneously disciplining racial/ethnic and sexual identities. The interplay between these two key aspects of students' identity has meant that Chinese queer international students, as migrants who occupy disadvantaged positions in local racial power relations, frequently experience heteronormative microaggressions on campus; these students' ethnic identity, which lies in the heart of their social support system, has also become a hindrance in their queer identity development. Our findings challenge the perceived dichotomy between China as homophobic and "the West" as queer-friendly, and reveal the need for a more nuanced understanding of queer international students' experiences, in order to better support them in a higher education setting.

Keywords

international student; queer; New Zealand; Chinese; ethnic closet; heteronormativity

Introduction

> "My gay identity played a very important role in my decision to study in New Zealand. Because New Zealand has legalized same-sex marriage and has a tolerant social environment, [...] I feel like I can see hope."

Ka, a self-identified gay man, left China in his early 30s to pursue a graduate diploma in a private tertiary institution in New Zealand (henceforth NZ). His motivation to become an international student in NZ is representative among our Chinese research participants, who identify as members of the sexual- or gender- minority. The growing presence of Chinese international students in NZ is a result of China's rising economic power, which has produced greater outward higher education mobilities (Xu & Montgomery, 2018). Whereas the rationales underlying Chinese students' choice to study overseas are varied, for Chinese queer[1] subjects, going abroad (*chuguo*) is particularly significant since it not only offers a way to negotiate China's heteronormative values but also opens possibilities for legal recognition of one's sexual identity, thereby further facilitating long-term life course planning (Kam, 2020; Wei, 2020).

Existing literature on international queer migration from China draws mostly upon the experiences of young professionals (Kam 2020; Wei, 2020; Yu & Blain, 2019; Yue, 2016; Zhou, 2021). Through investigating migrants' overseas life trajectories, this body of research highlights the multifacetedness of transnational Chinese queer mobility in a global capitalist environment. Notably, scholars point out that the queer migration experience is always intersectional. Kam (2020) finds, for instance, that going abroad is intimately associated with coming out for urban middle-class Chinese queer subjects because mobility has been embraced as a "new normative value" (p. 132). Huang (2020, p. 84) directs attention to a "racial hierarchy" in Chinese queer subjects' transnational

1 Queer is used in this paper as an umbrella term for non-normative gender and sexual identities, i.e., identities outside of heterosexuality or gender binary. Queer is also used as a theoretical concept in this paper, indicating the perspective of queer theory.

move, which, she argues, fundamentally complicates the desired mobility and destabilizes the imagined dichotomy between the oppressive Chinese state and the sexually progressive West. By far, research on Chinese queer migration tends to evoke a conventional conceptualization of "migration-as-resettlement" (Martin, 2022, p. 25), which risks neglecting the transient, trans-local, and multiple attachments that characterize the international student experience (Martin, 2022). As Martin (2018) observes in the case of Chinese female international students in Australia, studying overseas offers a "zone of suspension" (p. 693) from the normative life course, enabling students to re-negotiate gender, sexuality, and intimacy. Based on these observations, Martin further conceptualizes international students as "student transmigrants", whose experience is marked by "multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and … public identities [that] are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state" (cited in Martin, 2022, p. 25). In studying Chinese queer international students' experiences, we follow Martin's conceptualization to think beyond issues of transnational resettlement, which has been amply explored in existing literature, and examine the aspirations, transformations, and struggles in the making of mobile queer subjects.

We employ intersectionality (Carastathis, 2014) as a lens through which to unpack Chinese queer international students' experiences in NZ. These experiences exceed the reductive rhetoric of sexual liberation, intertwining with heterogeneous social, cultural, racial/ethnic, economic, and political factors. In this article, we focus on how race/ethnicity and sexuality interact to shape these students' self-understanding and identity formation. Specifically, we ask: what motivated Chinese queer students to study in NZ? How have their experiences enabled or restricted the development of their queer identity? What role does their racial/ethnic identity play in this process? In answering these questions, we engage with the concepts of heteronormativity (Berlant & Warner, 1998) and what we call the "ethnic closet" – the simultaneous disciplining over racial/ethnic *and* sexual identities – to critically reflect on the dual oppression

facing Chinese queer international students as they seek to become queer mobile subjects.

In what follows, we start with an overview of studies of Chinese international students and transnational queer migration, and a discussion of the concepts of heteronormativity and the ethnic closet. After introducing our methods, we present the results and discussion in two sections. We first explore how studying in NZ, both in imagination and practice, shapes Chinese queer students' identity development. Then, we focus on the students' experiences of heteronormativity and homophobia on campus, with particular attention to the interaction between sexual and racial/ethnic identities. We use the concept of "ethnic closet" to unpack the dual, intertwining oppression Chinese queer international students face, namely heteronormative microaggressions based on their sexual and racial/ethnic identities, and the difficult and often oppressive encounters with their own ethno-cultural communities. We conclude by discussing our findings' implications.

Chinese Queer Students on the Move

Chinese international students have been increasingly put under the spotlight as they become a significant part of global higher education mobility. However, as Xu (2022) points out, Chinese international students are often problematically portrayed in a monolithic manner in state policies, media discourses, and scholarly discussions. Drawing on a thematic narrative review, Xu (2022) finds that recent English-language scholarship sees Chinese international students predominantly as neoliberal, pedagogic, and racialized subjects. Such an understanding, Xu critiques, "fit[s] seamlessly with the neoliberalism western universities to reproduce and exacerbate global inequalities" (p. 161). Hence, she calls for more attention to the historical and political aspects of student experiences, in order to combat the "epistemic injustice" (p. 162) on Chinese international students. Echoing this position, recent research increasingly focuses on the complexity of Chinese international students' experiences, exploring them in relation to issues such as stereotyping (Heng, 2016), intercultural identities (Ye, 2018), and racism and othering (Koo et al., 2023). In her recent book on Chinese women students in the West, Martin (2022) focuses on the micro- and everyday- levels to show how gender shapes mobility and how mobility shapes gender in these students' experiences. Viewed in such light, Chinese international students are not merely "cash cows" for the West or "human capital resource" for the Chinese government (Xu, 2022, p. 155), but agential subjects who encompass complex spatial, temporal, and political dynamics.

Furthering this line of research, we suggest that studies of Chinese international students have much to gain from a close engagement with queer migration studies. Exploring the conjunctions between sexuality and migration, queer migration scholarship situates transnational experiences within "multiple, intersecting relations of power" (Luibhéid, 2008, p. 170), such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, and citizenship status. In rejecting a simple developmental narrative, queer migration studies attend to "specific, unequally situated local, regional, national, and transnational circuits"

(Luibhéid, 2008, p. 170). In Chinese queer migration studies more specifically, research on international (Kam, 2020; Wei, 2020; Choi, 2022) and intranational (Liu, 2019; Luo, 2022; Gong and Liu, 2022) queer migration has demonstrated how a sustained focus on both macro social structures, such as class and kinship, and micro individual life trajectories could yield nuanced findings about how queer persons construct and negotiate their subjectivities on the move. Put differently, a focus on sexuality does not equate to taking a sexuality-centric approach; quite the contrary, it aims at mapping out "heterogeneous, multi-sphere trajectories" and "various familial, social, cultural, economic, and political forces" that shape migrant lives (Zhou, 2021, p. 57).

The growing presence of Chinese queer international students in the West owes to the escalating tensions between two co-existing discourses in China today: a neoliberalist discourse that promotes "enterprising selfhood and competitive self-advancement" (Martin, 2022, p. 15; Rofel, 2007), and a neo-traditionalist discourse that re-asserts the centrality of the heteronormative family (Martin, 2022; Song, 2020). While China's globalization and neo-liberalization have enabled a plethora of queer representations, identities, and cultures (Bao, 2021; Song, 2022; Tan, 2023), queerness is at the same time confronted by an increasingly conservative and homophobic social, cultural, and political environment (Song, 2021). On university campuses in China, specifically, queer-related issues have been repressed in classroom teaching (Cui, 2023b, 2023d) and academic research (Cui, 2022b, 2023a). Chinese queer students and academics must manage their stigmatized identities on campus (Cui, 2022a, 2023c, 2023e), and those who come out publicly are subject to harassment and punishment by authorities (Song, 2021; Zhang, 2020). Given the shrinking space for transgressive genders and sexualities, "development-induced mobilities in pursuing educational, cultural, social, and economic capital [...] offer a slim hope through which a privatized, depoliticized queer future may be possible" (Wei, 2020, p. 9). However, whether such an imagined queer future is still attainable when queer subjects confront multiple, interconnected systems of power remains an underexplored aspect, especially in the case of Chinese queer international students.

To address this lacuna, we adopt an intersectional approach in our analysis. Developed first in black feminist theorization, an intersectional analysis rejects theorizing oppression as unitary or addictive, and insists that “multiple, co-constituting analytic categories are [...] equally salient in constructing institutionalized practices and lived experiences” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 307). In migration studies, intersectionality functions as a key tool, since it “allows one to approach processes of post-migration as embedded in multiple and interconnected projects of domination and subordination” (Lutz & Amelia, 2021, p. 58). Earlier research on Chinese queer international students has focused predominantly on the interaction between their transmigrant identities and familial duties (Yu & Blain, 2019; Zheng, 2022). In analyzing their campus experience, which is key in students’ development of queer identities and subjectivities (Garvey & Rankin, 2015), we further draw on two interconnected concepts, namely heteronormativity and the ethnic closet. Initially defined by Berlant and Warner (1998, p. 547) as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent ... but also privileged”, heteronormativity has been developed into a critical project that examines how normative ideologies form and function in the intersection, constitution, and reconstitution of social systems (Battle & Ashley, 2008). In other words, heteronormativity is also intersectional, as it “maintains itself by oppressing and marginalizing certain bodies based on certain identity categories” (Battle & Ashley, 2008, p. 5). To better tease out the dynamics between racial/ethnic and sexual identities, we also adopt the term “ethnic closet”, which has been used in critical race studies to examine identity-management strategies employed by racial minorities (Meghani, 2015; Shin, 2004). But unlike earlier scholars who use the term to unveil how minorities cover their racial/ethnic characteristics, we appropriate the term to highlight the simultaneous functioning of and interaction between student migrants’ racial/ethnic and sexual identities. As we will show, the ethnic closet means that Chinese queer students have to manage their sexual identities vis-a-vis their perceived “Chineseness” both in local communities and within their own

ethno-cultural community. The ethnic closet thus raises questions about the possibilities and limitations of becoming a queer subject as an international student.

Methods

As a descriptor, "Chinese" can be an ambiguous word referring to various nationalities, ethnicities, languages, and/or cultures. In NZ, international students who identify as "Chinese" can be a diverse group with huge internal differences in terms of origin, mother tongue, national identity, and sense of cultural belonging.[2] To narrow the focus and deepen the qualitative analysis, this research focuses only on students from mainland China. The justification for this focus is twofold. First, statistically, students from mainland China make up the largest proportion of the international student population in NZ and many other Western countries. According to the latest 2022 statistics, China (59%) is the primary source for international students enrolled in New Zealand universities, with India (5%) a distant second (Universities NZ, n.d.). Secondly, a full representation of international students' experiences abroad requires a close examination of their study motivations and everyday struggles, which are significantly shaped by their origins and national identities. In the context of China's changing political climate during Xi's presidency and the intensifying geopolitical tensions with the West, the experiences of international students from mainland China merit attention.

This project was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. A total of 15 participants were recruited through convenience sampling from 2022 to 2023. Recruitment criteria were that a participant should be: 1) a member of the sexual- or gender -minority, i.e., self-identifying as outside of heterosexuality or gender binary; and 2) an international student from mainland China; and 3) currently studying at an NZ tertiary institution (e.g., university, polytechnic, or private tertiary institution) or graduated from one in the last five years. Participants

2 This group of students may include, for example, a student from Mainland China, a student from Hong Kong or Macau who holds a different passport to those from Mainland China and enjoys greater political freedom in China, a student from Taiwan (Republic of China) - a democracy where same-sex marriage was legalised in 2019, a student from Singapore who speaks both Chinese and English as the first language, and a student from Australia who is a third-generation Chinese immigrant and does not speak Chinese. Each of these students may have different experiences and face unique challenges shaped by their identities.

were recruited using a poster for voluntary participation without financial compensation. The poster was circulated via WeChat, the most popular social media app among overseas Chinese communities in New Zealand. The first author posted the poster in his WeChat Moments, as well as in a WeChat group of Chinese queer people in NZ with 500 members.

Of the 15 participants, six were male, eight were female, and one was non-binary. Regarding their sexuality, seven were gay, six were lesbian, one was bisexual, and one was asexual. All the participants were in their 20s or 30s. Their educational institutions covered different types of tertiary institutions in NZ, including universities, polytechnics, and private tertiary institutions. The qualifications they pursued ranged from vocational training certificate to bachelor's degree, graduate diploma, postgraduate diploma, master's degree, to doctorate. Their fields of study included natural sciences, social sciences, and the arts. Table 1 provides detailed demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Participant demographics

pseudonym	age	gender	sexuality	qualification pursued	field of study	education institution	time spent studying
Fu	30	man	gay	Master's	computer science	university	2 years
Ka	33	man	gay	graduate diploma	education	private tertiary institution	4 months
Jin	34	man	gay	postgraduate diploma	business	private tertiary institution	2 years

Shan	28	man	gay	vocational training certificate	healthcare	private tertiary institution	1 month
Liu	29	man	gay	PhD	education	university	3 months
Zhen	27	man	gay	PhD	sociology	university	5 years
Chu	34	Non-nary	gay	graduate diploma	education	private tertiary institution	1 year
Xin	34	woman	bisexual	PhD	business	university	2 years
Ku	31	woman	lesbian	Master's	science	university	2 years
Ma	26	woman	lesbian	bachelor	science sociology	university	3 years
Sheng	33	woman	asexual	graduate diploma	education	university	1 year
Mou	37	woman	lesbian	postgraduate diploma	business	polytechnic	1 year
Jiao	21	woman	lesbian	bachelor	design	university	4 years
Yan	26	woman	lesbian	bachelor	science	university	6 years
Bang	38	woman	lesbian	Master's	management	university	6 months

Each participant took part in a 30–40-minute semi-structured in-depth interview in Mandarin, either online or face-to-face in Auckland. The interviews aimed to explore their experiences of sexuality, particularly concerning their ethnicity and nationality. Topics included, for example, their perception of the campus climate for queer students, experiences of racism and political self-censorship. In this paper, we focus mainly on

their experiences of sexuality, a topic that dominated the interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent and transcribed verbatim by the first author. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset, generating themes at both semantic and latent levels. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of participants, and some data were slightly altered or deliberately blurred.

This research was informed by the positionalities of both authors. The first author used to be an academic at a mainland Chinese university. Due to coming out as gay and teaching about queer issues, he was punished by his institution and forbidden from discussing queer issues in his classroom and on the internet (Zhang, 2020). This oppressive experience led him to come to NZ to complete a PhD on gay academics in Chinese universities. His experiences in NZ further inspired him to research Chinese queer international students. The second author studied for a PhD in gender studies outside the Chinese mainland, focusing on Chinese queer culture. During his PhD studies, he spent time as a visiting international student at an Australian university. The authors' familiarity with Chinese queer communities facilitated the process of recruiting participants, building rapport, and empathizing with participants' experiences.

“Breathing the Air of Freedom”: New Zealand as a Higher Education Destination

When asked about their motivation for pursuing higher education in NZ, most of our participants cited familial pressure and an unaccepting social environment in China as push factors contributing to their decision to leave. Mou, for instance, described the environment in China as “hopeless” for a lesbian: “When I was 30, my family pushed me to get married and have children. I couldn’t come out because they would never accept my identity.” Chu, who is a gay man, shared the same concern and explained that the main reason for him to leave China was because his then-boyfriend wanted to marry a woman. “I felt hopeless,” Chu said.

The emotion of hope, as Ahmed (2003, p. 185) points out, is about “keeping something open”: it points to progressive social change at a collective level and “the ability to make expectations fluid” (cited in Ahmed, 2003, p. 185) at an individual level. For most of our participants, the feelings of hopelessness derive from a palpably heteronormative environment in China. Ahmed argues from the perspective of emotions that heteronormativity functions as “a form of public comfort” by allowing certain bodies to fit in while rejecting others, making them feel “out of place, awkward, unsettled” (Ahmed, 2003, p. 148). The negative feelings of discomfort and hopelessness, in this sense, are distinctly *queer* feelings, which are “‘affected’ by the repetition of scripts that they fail to reproduce (Ahmed, 2003, p. 155). These feelings motivate Chinese queer subjects to seek alternative possibilities and life arrangements – in order to become hopeful. Shan told us that his gay identity is “*the* reason” why he decided to leave China and study abroad: “I worked in the government and it was impossible for me to come out. I just want to live freely with the man I love. So I gave up everything in China and moved here”. Similarly, Liu, who taught at a middle school in China, also expressed his concerns over potential repercussions at work:

> The moral standards for teachers were very high. If parents and students knew I was gay, the consequences would be serious. So I carefully hid my identity at that time. It was depressing. In NZ, I can breathe the air of freedom.

Compared to China's heteronormative environment – experienced as repressive, omnipresent, and persistent – NZ is imagined as queer-friendly, signifying hope. Central to this imagination is the legalization of same-sex marriage, which, achieved in August 2013, made NZ the first country in the Asia-Pacific region to offer same-sex couples legal protection. This monumental event exerts considerable influence over participants' choice of higher education destination. Yan, for example, confessed that when she faced the choices between Australian and New Zealand universities back in 2015, she chose NZ because same-sex marriage was then not legal in Australia. Other participants echoed this sentiment. Both Ku and Zhen described New Zealand as "the most queer-friendly" in their list of potential higher education destinations, while Bang said that same-sex marriage was "an important reason for [her] to choose this country", as she "wanted to live openly with [her] partner".

In her study of Chinese female students in Australia, Martin (2022) identifies the negotiation of sexuality and intimate relationships as a key theme in their migrant experiences. Against the backdrop of rising neo-traditionalist familialism in China, Martin argues, education mobility has become an important channel through which female students postpone or resist the normative gendered life course and challenge heteronormative gender roles. Our results further reveal that for Chinese queer subjects, education mobility has come to symbolize hope – the opportunity to break away from heteronormativity and lead a queer life. Such hope is indeed attainable in many instances. All our participants, for example, perceived the campus of their educational institution in NZ as queer-friendly. This positive assessment of the campus climate stemmed from various forms of queer visibility across key aspects of their campus life. The safe and accepting campus culture not only allowed some participants to be relaxed

about their sexuality or even to come out, but also enabled them to gain a deeper understanding of their own identity and the world around them.

The first thing that many of our participants noticed upon the start of their campus life was a heightened sense of queer visibility. As Liu recounted, he was "struck by the diversity" on his very first day in NZ, when he saw rainbow posters for queer-related activities at his school. Similarly, Jin also mentioned that the sight of "rainbow posters with slogans" left him with the impression of "an inclusive and anti-discriminatory space". This queer-friendly institutional setting gave Chinese queer international students opportunities for identity development. Yan offered a detailed account of how she gradually embraced her lesbian identity in NZ:

> When I was in China, I had little information about homosexuality, and I didn't understand it. Homosexuality is seen as something wrong in China. When I first came to New Zealand, I didn't accept my sexuality. At that time, I was closeted and scared. I couldn't change my sexuality and felt helpless. My sexuality weighed on me like a mountain and was the source of all my pain. Then I got into a relationship and tried to come out, first to my friends and then to people I didn't know. Nothing as horrible as I thought it would be. Slowly, after opening up, I got rid of that fear. The friendly environment of my university and the support of people allowed me to accept who I was. The first year I came to New Zealand, I went to the Rainbow Parade on my own, just as a spectator, and was afraid to meet people I knew. A few years later, I marched in the parade with people under the banner of my university.

Evidently, on NZ campuses where non-normative sexualities are better represented, queer students feel empowered to explore their sexualities. This was also the case with Sheng, who identified as heterosexual when she was in China, but gradually came to identify as asexual, a label that, in Sheng's own words, "accurately describes [her] experience and expands her language". It is also worth noting, however, that such an identity development process is in no way smooth, but, as is reflected by Yan's experiences, could be slow, difficult, daunting, and painful, and involves struggling with queer identities, navigating the environment, considering potential risks, and

combating fear. Although participants overwhelmingly reported a queer-friendly campus climate, their accounts also revealed that their campuses remained heteronormative spaces where heterosexuality was the default, desired, or "normal", while queerness was still marginalized, othered, or degraded. This problem is especially prominent in their interactions with people from the Chinese community. We explore this issue in the following sections.

The Dual Oppression of the Ethnic Closet

Critical race studies scholars started to use the term "ethnic closet" in the early 2000s as an analogy drawn from the gay closet (Shin, 2004). Just like the gay closet is essentially about the management of minority identities to cope with social stigma, the ethnic closet, when used in earlier literature, refers to how ethnic minorities cover or downplay their ethnic behaviors to make them less visible or salient (Rosenberg, 2003; Shin, 2004). The meaning of the term has been broadened through the incorporation of an intersectional perspective by feminist and queer scholars. In a review of Sedgwick's influential book *Epistemology of the Closet*, for instance, Somerville (2010, p. 194) challenges the separation of the sexual closet from other forms of oppression. "Ethnic/religious/cultural status", she argues, is itself "inextricable from questions of sexuality". Later scholars exploring the identity development of diasporic queer subjects also emphasize that the analysis "must resist the parameters of a minoritizing single-issue political logic" (Meghani, 2014, p. 172). Following such a conceptualization, we examine how the ethnic closet functions in the experiences of Chinese queer student migrants, with particular attention to the *interplay* between their racial/ethnic and queer identities. As we argue, the ethnic closet represents *dual* oppression: first, the students' racial/ethnic identity makes them an easier target of heteronormative microaggression on campus, hindering them from claiming a full queer identity; second, encounters with their own ethnic group also significantly, and often negatively, impact students' identity management process, inflicting social pressure and even inducing self-censorship.

Grappling with Heteronormativity on Campus

Although participants generally reported experiencing a more queer-friendly campus climate compared to their home country, their accounts revealed that NZ campuses remained heteronormative spaces. This situation was exacerbated by the often covert

discrimination against the students' ethnic identity. Ku shared the story of how her teachers misgendered her partner in their communication:

> They asked about my future plans as a student from China. I said I wanted to stay in NZ and mentioned my partner using the pronoun "she". Apparently, they thought I made a slip of the tongue because of my limited English. So they replied, replacing "she" with "he" in the following conversation. They only came to realize my sexuality when I deliberately used "she" again to correct them. After that, they used she without showing any surprise.

Ku is not alone in this experience. Bang also shared with us a similar account where, after she did a self-introduction in class and mentioned that she lived with her partner, her classmates used "he" to refer to the partner. Bang speculated that this might be due to her Chinese identity and limited English skills. She corrected her classmates, who then apologized.

Setting out from a psychological perspective, Platt and Lenzen (2013) find that endorsement of heteronormative culture is an important form of sexual orientation microaggressions. Although microaggressions, in the form of everyday slights, insults, and indignities, are often done by well-intentioned, moral, and decent individuals (Sue, 2010), they have "a cumulative negative impact on the psychological well-being" of the receivers (Platt & Lenzen, 2013, p. 1012). Racial/ethnic minority individuals frequently face microaggressions based on racial/ethnic stereotypes (Platt & Lenzen, 2013). In a study of Asian international students in Canada, for example, Spanierman and Tafarodi (2014) find that these students are ridiculed for their English accent and perceived lack of language proficiency. While confirming earlier findings about racial and sexual orientation microaggressions, Ku's and Bang's experience further points to the *interplay* between these microaggressions. These young Chinese lesbian students were regarded *at once* as heterosexual by default *and* as lacking English proficiency. The simultaneous functioning of racial/ethnic and sexual policing does not stop at the level of microaggressions. It could also develop into much more explicit and hostile forms of homophobia. Ma shared her experience of volunteering for the local pride

parade in an activity organized by her university to help international students mix with locals and practice English. Catching her off guard, a local man started to verbally attack her:

> The local I was talking to was an old white man. He suddenly turned hostile after hearing about my volunteer experience and told me that I shouldn't participate in the parade. He also said that my family would be ashamed if they found out. My English wasn't very good at the time and he was speaking very fast. I freaked out completely. I stopped going to these mixing events after that incident. It had a great impact on me. I came to realize that my imagination of NZ was just a fantasy and that not every New Zealander considers being queer OK. It turns out that even in NZ, you can still be attacked for being queer.

Drawing on student experiences at a NZ university campus, Allen et al. (2020) find notable discrepancies between the university's official support for LGBTTIQA+ students and the students' self-reported experiences of homophobia. The university campus, they conclude, is "responsive but not inclusive" (p. 1083), creating an environment that is "safe but not safe" for students (p. 1081). While confirming these findings, Ma's account further points to the urgency of considering the issue of race and ethnicity. For Ma – a Chinese, queer, female international student, the hierarchical power relations underpinning her conversation with a local straight white man have rendered her defenseless to homophobia. A full queer identity thus becomes unattainable. The fact that race functions in tandem with heteronormativity, hindering the formation of queer identities raises sharp questions about the perceived inclusiveness of NZ campuses. Just like the incident directly resulted in Ma's disillusionment of NZ as the ideal queer-friendly place, the ethnic closet also destabilizes the perceived dichotomy of China as homophobic and NZ as liberating, prompting us to attend to the nuances of queer international students' experiences.

Challenges from Chinese communities

Research on queer migration has revealed an uneasiness between queer migrants' non-normative identity and their own ethno-cultural communities (Badali, 2019; Tiven et al., 2016). "Geographic distance from the country of origin", as Dhoest and Szulc (2016, p. 7) observe, "does not take away all fears for context collapse, [...] because people from the home country [...] could report back". This tension between sexual and ethnic identities could amount to obstacles for queer international students, who are often very lonely in a new environment characterized by language and cultural barriers, academic and financial difficulties, loss of social support, alienation, and homesickness (Sherry et al., 2010; Yeh & Inose, 2003). As Zhang and Zhou (2010) find in the case of Chinese international students in Canada, friendship and communication with Chinese communities are important sources of social support, particularly when attempts to make local friends are often troubled by language and cultural barriers. Attitudes from fellow Chinese students and people from the local Chinese community, therefore, could significantly influence Chinese queer international students' self-understanding and identity development. But from our interviews, we find that these attitudes are overwhelmingly negative, thereby hindering queer international students' identity development.

Liu shared with us that he would not come out publicly mainly because he was concerned about the Chinese community. Studying in a department with a considerable number of Chinese faculty members and students, Liu observed that his compatriots would "often joke and gossip about queer people". As a result, he had to "always pretend to be straight". Ma faced a similar dilemma when negotiating her lesbian identity. "It was easier to come out to local Kiwis than to Chinese people", she concluded, because "Chinese people may have a stereotype of homosexuality as abnormal or perverted". Therefore, like Liu, Ma decided not to disclose her sexual identity to her Chinese classmates and professors.

Participants' concerns about coming out to Chinese people were not groundless. Generally, our participants reported experiencing negative attitudes upon coming out to people from their own ethno-cultural community. As an example, Ku told us that she was treated with surprise and uneasiness after she came out to several Chinese classmates:

> After my classmates met me, they asked me if I was studying in New Zealand alone, and I naturally mentioned my partner. When I came out to local Kiwi classmates, their reactions were usually friendly and warm. But when I came out to several Chinese male classmates, they were all surprised and uneasy. Their attitude seemed to be: I could accept it as long as this thing didn't happen to me. Their reaction made me feel homosexuality was an undesirable weakness. In a course this semester, most students are Chinese, and I don't plan to come out.

Sarno et al. (2021) find that experiences of heterosexism within one's racial/ethnic communities may lead to internalization of those negative attitudes. As a result, people who are dually marginalized as racial/ethnic and sexual minorities tend to feel that their "sexual orientation and racial/ethnic identities must remain separate" (p. 408), in order to maintain the connection to one's racial/ethnic community. In the case of Chinese international students, such internalized sexual stigma is compounded by a generally unaccepting attitude both from the local Chinese community and from the home country. The pressure of identity management could be immense for these students, particularly because some of them might return to China after graduation. Xin shared with us the experience of a closeted Chinese gay man, who cautiously hid his sexuality and kept a distance from queer people to avoid being outed. Such painstaking efforts derive from the fact that he had a government job in China and was awarded a scholarship by Chinese officials to pursue further education in NZ. "He deliberately kept a distance from me and my queer friends on campus, because we are openly out. He might be worried that if he came out, his acquaintances in China would know about his sexuality, and that would ruin his career and life back home."

Beyond the classrooms, participants also encounter heteronormativity and homophobia in their interactions with Chinese people off-campus, including their landlords, education agents, and people in the church. Although the focus of the article is on the participants' campus life, these off-campus experiences, which constituted an integral part of their lives as queer international students, warrant a close look. For instance, several participants had problems when seeking accommodation because of their queer identities. When Zhen went to look at an apartment with his ex, the Chinese landlord asked him directly: "Are you gay?" After Zhen replied yes, the landlord said he was a Christian and that homosexuality was not allowed in his religion, and refused to let them rent the room. Hall (2006, p. 140) argues that there is a "comfortable 'fit' between the conservative social values of Confucianism and the religious values of Christianity". Such an overlap in conservativeness has exposed Chinese queer international students more frequently to homophobia in their interactions with the local religious Chinese community. Chu, who self-identifies as non-binary, told us that their gender expressions became a major source of stress when interacting with local Chinese people:

> My behaviour is effeminate and people can easily guess that I am gay. Many of my friends, flatmates, and landlords are Chinese. They're always curious about my sexuality and pry and gossip about it. Once I went to an activity in a Chinese church and one person kept prying about my sexuality. They have no sense of boundaries, which I find very disgusting. In contrast, my sexuality has never been pried by local Kiwis.

Because of overt homophobic reactions from local Chinese communities, our participants often had to walk a tightrope when deciding whether or not to disclose their queer identities. This could mean that contrary to the initial imagination of NZ as a destination of queer liberation, students are once again confronted by a heteronormative environment that they must carefully navigate. Ma shared that the local Chinese communities' resistance against sexuality education in NZ played a key role in her identity management, forcing her to reconsider the risks of coming out:

> I used to have an education agent who was Chinese and provided me with consulting services. There was a time when many parents from the Chinese community were resisting sexuality education in New Zealand. They believed that schools would teach their children to be homosexual and transgender. They circulated a petition to the parliament in many WeChat groups. My education agent also posted this petition on his WeChat. I was shocked and realized that he didn’t accept queer people. I was living with my partner at that time, and he asked me about my relationship with her. I had to hide my sexuality and told him that I was living with a relative. I was worried that he wouldn't take my consultation seriously if he knew about my sexuality.

Writing on migrant queer refugees, Wimark (2021, p. 647) argues that queer migrants face a state of “perpetual liminality”: stuck between detachment and reattachment, and in a stage of transition and uncertainty. While Wimark’s focus is on homemaking practices, the same sense of liminality also underpins queer international students’ identity development, which usually starts with leaving home as a point of departure and culminates in claiming a full queer identity as a desired destination. As we have demonstrated, however, transnational education mobility does not always lead to the realization of a fulfilling queer identity. Quite the contrary, as transmigrants, queer international students navigate complex spaces and cultural politics, which often subject them to intertwined structures of heteronormative oppression. Therefore, despite the perceived contrast in terms of social climate and queer friendliness between Chinese international students’ home and host countries, whether these differences could result in substantial empowerment of individual lives remains a contested question.

Conclusion: The End of the Rainbow?

At the beginning of this article, we raised questions about the motivations of Chinese queer students to pursue higher education in NZ, and how that transnational travel has shaped the development of their queer identities. We hope to provide a tentative answer to the questions with the phrase "the end of the rainbow", which refers to something highly desired, yet almost impossible to obtain or achieve. Our intention is not to discount Chinese queer international students' positive experiences in NZ. Indeed, as we have discussed in earlier parts of the article, as a higher education destination, NZ provides valuable symbolic and practical resources for queer international students to negotiate the heteronormative constraints in their home country and seek a fulfilling queer identity. Nevertheless, we do want to draw attention to the slippages of this "migration as liberation" celebratory narrative, in which "the West" appears to be the savior. As we have shown, despite institutional support for the queer community in NZ higher education, NZ campuses remain heteronormative spaces. This is particularly true for Chinese queer international students who must navigate two interconnected systems of oppression – heteronormativity and racial/ethnic politics. We have proposed the term "ethnic closet" to highlight how these two systems intersect and interplay: first, heteronormative microaggressions are frequently directed at racial/ethnic minorities, who occupy a disadvantaged position in local power relations; second, these students' ethnic identity, which lies in the heart of their social support system, would also become a hindrance in their queer identity development. If as transmigrants, international students' daily lives "depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders" (Schiller et al., 1995, p. 48), then our study has revealed how these interconnections can be highly heteronormative and oppressive.

Setting out from a queer perspective, our study contributes to the study of Chinese international students in particular and transnational education mobility more broadly. By far, little has been written about Chinese queer international students' campus experiences, and the growing field of Chinese queer migration research focuses more heavily on settled migrants. By unpacking the experiences of Chinese queer

international students as transitional and sometimes transient migrants, we shed light on the interconnected relationship between sexuality and race/ethnicity, and how these power structures could become barriers to queer identity development and social inclusion. As such, this study has implications for diversity and inclusion practices in higher education and beyond. To support students with multiple marginalized identities, education institutions should adopt an intersectional approach that acknowledges how multiple dimensions and systems of inequalities interact with each other and create distinct educational experiences. This approach is particularly vital for assisting international students who identify as both racial/ethnic minority and queer, as they are frequently neglected in the student support services of educational institutions and therefore invisible. This task can be achieved by increasing the visibility of students who experience multiple disadvantages and educating people about the particular challenges faced by these groups. Highlighting marginalization through an intersectional lens could help to challenge the ways that heteronormativity and systemic racism are entrenched and intertwined in institutional practice and interpersonal interaction on campus.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all participants for their participation. This research is supported by the New Zealand Rule Foundation's Rainbow Wellbeing Legacy Fund. We would like to thank the community group China Pride NZ for their support in applying for funding.

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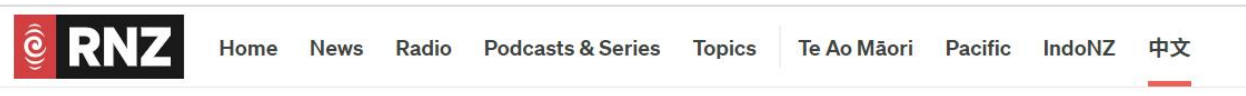
Appendix

RNZ (10/8/2023). Chinese rainbow communities struggle with life in the ‘ethnic closet’

https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/chinese/495437/chinese-rainbow-communities-struggle-with-life-in-the-ethnic-closet

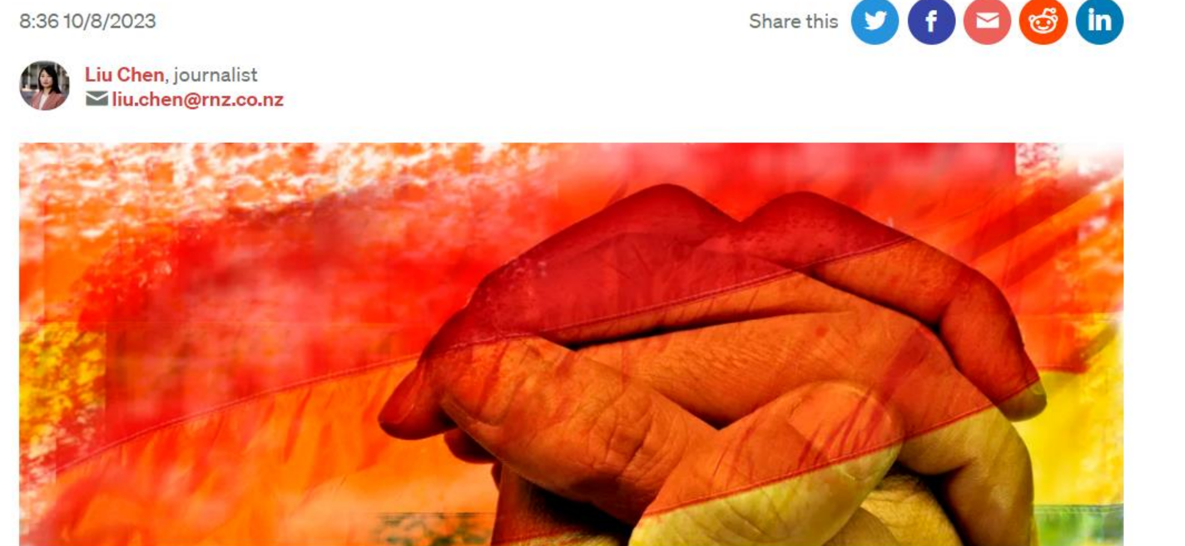
RNZ Chinese (19/7/2023). 华人彩虹社区：边缘的边缘，和“族群的柜子”

https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/chinese/493962/article



RNZ中文 / RNZ中文 英语新闻

Chinese rainbow communities struggle with life in the ‘ethnic closet’



'Ethnic closet'

Taylor Cui, a sociologist at the University of Auckland's Faculty of Education and Social Work, has been conducting research into issues on rainbow communities.

Cui says those who are willing to share their experiences are just the tip of the iceberg, with many others still hiding in the closet.

He interviewed 15 Chinese queer international students, with a focus on their experiences related to their sexual identity, race and immigration status.

"Their experiences are varied," Cui says. "Some are very proud and very happy to reveal their identities and come out to everyone; others are very cautious and prefer to hide in the closet, and even pretend to be heterosexual."

Cui says many people came here because of a "push" from China and a "pull" from New Zealand, and many intended to stay in New Zealand after graduation.

"In China, especially in recent years, the social and cultural climate has become more and more conservative and repressive," he said. "Gay issues, as well as feminist issues, have become more sensitive and politicised."

Taylor Cui of the University of Auckland's Faculty of Education and Social Work says many Chinese tend to keep their interests to themselves when living abroad. Photo: Supplied

The open environment in New Zealand, especially the legalisation of same-sex marriage, is very attractive to Chinese rainbow communities, Cui says.

Apart from society in general, many think New Zealand's university culture is also very friendly. However, people tend to hide their identities when speaking with other Chinese students, friends or landlords - a tendency Cui described as being an "ethnic closet".

"They tend to think that the Chinese community is more conservative than mainstream society and lacks understanding of issues in relation of sexual orientation," Cui says. "Therefore, they will choose whether to disclose their identities when facing different people.

"As an overseas student or migrant, it is actually very difficult to integrate into mainstream society and it takes time. They often just interact with Chinese people ... and get information from Chinese media platforms, so their concerns have a big impact on them."

Other ethnic groups have some common experiences, including people from India or the Middle East. He says that the perspective of being a migrant as well as an ethnic and sexual minority have resulted in some unique experiences.

"Universities and other institutions need some intersectional perspectives," he says, adding that it is often difficult for staff responsible for equality and diversity to involve overseas students, and yet the work targeting international students rarely concerns rainbow communities.

"Queer Chinese international students are very marginalised," he says. "They are invisible in mainstream society, and even invisible in the Chinese community. They are not heard at all."

Europeans still dominate many queer activities, Cui says, adding that universities and other education providers should emphasise diversity more and be more aware of who they choose to show their faces and share their experiences.

"I think people need to see the experience of different identities intertwined together and see the (queer) minorities within these minorities," he says.

Cui notes that it is difficult for international students to find community organizations and seek help. Many also worry that if they come out, they will face difficulties in their career and family relationships if they return to China.

"Many people are very isolated. Even if they find some other queer people online, they might still be wary of each other and keep some distance, worried about revealing their identities," he says. "Building a community that can support them is a big gap that needs to be filled."

Home News Radio Podcasts & Series Topics Te Ao Māori Pacific IndoNZ 中文

RNZ中文 / RNZ中文 精选新闻

华人彩虹社区：边缘的边缘，和“族群的柜子”

8:58 19/7/2023

Liu Chen, journalist
liu.chen@rnz.co.nz

今年，新西兰的同性婚姻合法化迎来十周年纪念。在这样一个对彩虹群体更加开放和包容的国度，很多华人在"勇敢做自己"方面，仍然感到阻力重重。有些人即便对自己在新西兰的生活圈完全坦白，但在面对国内的父母和亲人时，还是需要遮遮掩掩。移民、少数族裔、彩虹群体等多重身份的交织，构成了华人彩虹团体的独特经历。有的人骄傲地走在阳光下，有的人则躲在"族群的柜子"里，很多人也表达了对华人传统文化和道德观念的反思，对中国日益严格的文化控制的担忧，以及对新西兰在教育、社会环境等方面的期望。本文对几位彩虹社群成员、学者和社会工作者进行了采访，希望能展示这个群体的一些情况。

崔乐是新西兰奥克兰大学教育与社会工作学院的博士，他说中国的同志留学生是非常被边缘化的，他们在主流社会中是不可见的，即便在华人社群中也是不可见的，他们的声音也不被听到。 Photo: Supplied

崔乐：族群的柜子

崔乐是新西兰奥克兰大学教育与社会工作学院的博士，一直在从事同性恋议题的研究。他说，那些骄傲地愿意出来分享自己故事的人，只是冰山一角，还有很多人躲在柜子里。

他最新的研究，访问了15名来自中国的同志留学生，对他们的性身份、种族和移民身份相关的经历进行关注。

"他们的经历很多样，有的非常骄傲，非常乐于公开身份，向所有人出柜；还有的人非常小心地躲在柜子里，甚至伪装成异性恋的身份。"

他说，很多人来到这里，是因为中国的"推力"和新西兰的"吸力"，而且也倾向于毕业后留在新西兰。

"国内，尤其是近些年，社会文化环境越来越偏保守和压抑，同志议题，包括女权议题，都越来越敏感化和政治化，比如前几年反对'娘炮'和对'耽美剧'的审查，整个环境都会让他们更倾向于离开国内这种环境，而新西兰这种同性婚姻合法、对同志友善的环境对他们也是一个吸引," 他说。

崔乐说，除了社会大环境，很多人都认为校园环境对同志很友善，但是很多人的顾虑都来自华人社区。在面对华人同学、朋友或者房东的情况下，倾向于隐藏自己的身份。崔乐称之为 "族群的柜子"。

"他们会倾向于认为华人社区与主流社会相比更保守、对性倾向这些议题缺乏了解，因此，会根据情况，面对不同的人选择是否公开身份，"崔乐说。

"作为留学生、移民，其实真正融入主流社会是很难的，而且需要时间，他们的人际接触常常都是面对华人的，比如很多华人同学、朋友、或者房东，通过中文媒体来了解租房和兼职信息等。这方面的顾虑对他们来说是一个非常大的影响。"

他说，不同的族群都有些共通的经验，比如印度和中东，作为移民、少数族裔和性向上的少数群体，这些身份相互交叉，相互影响，会造成一些独特的经历。

"高校和其他机构需要有些交叉的视角，"他说。负责平等和多样性的工作人员，往往难以涉及到留学生，但是面向留学生的工作，又很少涉及到同志群体。

"作为中国的同志留学生，他们其实是非常被边缘化的。他们在主流社会中是不可见的，即便在华人社群中也是不可见的，他们的声音是不被听到的。"

他说，很多的同志活动，仍然以为欧裔为主体，少数族裔比较少见。而高校活动更应该强调多样性，比如选择什么样的人去露脸，分享什么人的经历。