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The im/possibility of home: Chinese queer international students' homing experiences in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of Chinese queer international students in New Zealand as they leave behind a heteronormative past home and seek a new queer home and future. Departing from conventional conceptions of 'home' as a static location or predetermined condition, this paper adopts 'homing' as a theoretical concept to capture the ongoing, processual, and often incomplete formation of home. Based on 15 in-depth interviews, this study reveals that students' homing experiences are shaped by the intersection of sexuality and ethnicity, as evidenced by their marginalization and exclusion within both the Chinese community and the local queer community. They also deal with ongoing political censorship from China, which forces them to practice self-censorship and adopt self-protection strategies. These experiences with local structures of inequality and the enduring influence of the past home illustrate that queer migration is not a straightforward path toward liberation and empowerment. By capturing Chinese queer international students' feelings of displacement and their ongoing negotiations with both their country of origin and the host society, this paper highlights homing as an embodied, non-linear, and continuous process shaped by transnational power structures and intersecting identities, including sexuality, ethnicity, citizenship, and migration status.

Introduction

Ma, a 26-year-old self-identified lesbian woman, shared that her queer identity was central in her decision to leave China and pursue a university degree in New Zealand (henceforth NZ). 'Back home, my family won't accept who I am. It's also hard to come out to people around you. It's just more difficult on all levels. It's easier to be myself in NZ. I want to make my new home here'.

On the surface, Ma's transnational move might appear as a journey of queer liberation. Yet her attempt to make a new home has entailed a new, complex set of negotiations between visibility and discretion, inclusion and exclusion, and belonging and otherness. As this paper will demonstrate, she navigated homophobia within Chinese diasporic spaces, marginalization within local queer communities, and the intricacies of identity management shaped by the

lingering pressures from Chinese political censorship. Over time, as Ma confessed, she came to realize that NZ 'is not always an open and harmonious place'. Her quest for home, evidently, is less about arrival at a destination than it is about navigating multiple, intersectional layers of constraints when striving to make a new home against new norms of sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality.

Ma is not alone in these contested experiences. From our interviews with self-identified Chinese queer international students in NZ, aspirations for tolerance, safety, and belonging almost invariably entangle with feelings of estrangement, repression, and marginalization in the search for a new home. While Chinese international students have been the subject of extensive research, much of this scholarship has confined them to narrow subject positions (see Xu's literature review in Xu 2022), with limited insight into their lived experiences and the development of gender and sexual identities Xu 2022. As Martin (2017) has convincingly shown, student-migrants are not merely economic migrants; instead, they tactically engage with mobility to negotiate gendered expectations and standard life courses. Following this line of inquiry, our paper delves into the underexplored topic of how mobility is lived out by Chinese queer international students as they embark on a migration journey from a queerphobic and unwelcoming home towards aspired queer liberation.

The paper's use of the term 'queer' encompasses two layers of meanings. First, it refers to a capacious, self-claimed identity position for non-normative gender and sexual expressions. Second, it is also a theoretical lens that unsettles normative assumptions about identity and desire (Burford and Allen 2018; McCann and Monaghan 2019). In bringing these two definitions together, we explore how self-identified members of the gender and sexual minority engage with mobility to negotiate with multi-layered, transnational structures of heteronormativity. Our approach to queer mobility aligns with scholars who emphasize *queering* as a theoretical practice (Song 2021; Woods 2024), that is, seeing queer more than a static identity category to foreground its worldmaking capacity. Research on queer migration has long challenged the linear migration-as-liberation narratives (Murray 2014; Raboin 2017) by shedding light on how queer mobilities are conditioned by differential access to legal status and state welfare under a transnational framework of neoliberal governance (Bhagat 2018; Giametta 2020;; Jung 2015; Saleh and Tschalaer 2023). While these works meaningfully illuminate the material, legal, and structural challenges confronting queer migrants, they seldom directly deal with the lived, embodied, and emotional dimensions of queer migration (Gorman-Murray 2009).

Our study of Chinese queer international students' quest for home in NZ responds to Sheller and Urry (2006) call to recenter 'the corporeal body as an affective vehicle through which we sense place and movement' (216). As Martin (2022) succinctly puts it, our concern is with how mobility *feels* (29, emphasis in original; see also Martin and Song 2023). These embodied experiences matter because they show how 'home' is not a fixed location, but a space charged with emotion, shaped through ongoing negotiations with transnational structures of normativities. By attending to these embodied feelings – such as safety, exclusion, longing, and uncertainty – we uncover how queer mobilities are simultaneously constrained by, and negotiated within, dominant normative ideals.

We zoom in on 'homing' as an analytical category that looks at 'the lived experience of home as an attempt to tread the line between past ascriptions and future-oriented potentialities, and as a visible manifestation of group, societal and existential inequalities' (Boccagni 2022, 585). This analytical lens allows us to tease out the intricacies of queer mobilities as Chinese international students move across multiple and interlocking structures of inequality and oppression. Inspired by feminist theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), we approach these forms of oppression not simply as additive, but as creating compounded modes of subordination that require multifaceted analysis. As we will show, while these students' transnational journey was motivated by a desire to leave behind a heteronormative home in China and establish a new

queer home in NZ, their homing practices are nevertheless continually shaped by recursive and overlapping heteronormative forces of displacement and political precarity. The dialectics between the possibility and impossibility of home thus highlight home as not a stable endpoint, but an ongoing negotiation across uneven terrain (Woods 2024).

In what follows, we begin with a literature review on queer migration and the theoretical concept of 'homing', followed by an introduction to the research methods. The findings are presented in three sections. The first section explores participants' experiences of displacement and a sense of not feeling at home in China. It shows that their transnational journey of education is intertwined with a desire to leave behind a heteronormative home in China and establish a new home in NZ. However, their efforts to create a new home are deeply entangled with local structures of inequality and political constraint. The second section examines participants' experiences of discrimination and exclusion within both the Chinese community and the local queer community, highlighting how the intersection of sexuality and ethnicity shapes their homing practices. The third section examines the impact of participants' home country on their current lives in NZ, highlighting how, despite their physical departure from China, the enduring influence of Chinese political forces prompts ongoing self-censorship and homing practices.

Queer mobilities and the politics of home

Scholarship on queer mobilities has illuminated 'home' as a fraught yet central concept imbued with longing, imagination, and contestation. Home could mean multiple things: fundamentally, it is the lived experience of locality (Ahmed 1999, 341; Brah 1996, 192); emotionally, it is a matter of 'how one feels or how one might fail to feel' (Ahmed 1999, 341). Early works on queer diaspora laid the groundwork for investigating the relationship between mobilities and home. In *Impossible Desires*, Gopinath (2005) suggests that queer diaspora could function as a critical framework that brings together sexuality and displacement to challenge fixed notions of identity and belonging. Viewed in this light, queer diasporic subjects' experiences of home-making destabilize both heteronormative assumptions and nationalist narratives that render some lives and bodies out of place (ibid.). Building on diasporic theory, scholars have further examined how queer mobilities often manifest a search for home by leaving oppressive environments and crafting new homes elsewhere. Fortier (2003) reminds us that the quest for home is always configured in relation to motions of attachment: 'the motions of journeying between homes, […] of 'moving on' or 'going back', […] of continual reprocessing of what home is/was/might have been' (130–131). Queer mobilities should thus be seen as active processes of transforming what home means (ibid.). Echoing this view, Ahmed et al. (2003) problematize the perception of home as a naturalized place of origin, and of mobility as romanticized sites of transformation. As they argue, 'being grounded is not necessarily about being fixed; being mobile is not necessarily about being detached' (1).

In examining Chinese queer international students' quest for home in NZ, we follow queer mobilites scholars in viewing home not as a fixed destination, but as a series of open-ended movements. As Woods (2024, 5) writes, movement is 'not just about travelling between points: it can also be about rejecting points and embracing processes of becoming'. Queer migrants articulate what Avtar Brah (1996) has called 'homing desire' – the affective yearning for belonging that does not necessarily involve returning to a physical homeland, but instead reflects complex, often ambivalent engagement with identity and the politics of place. Marking a theoretical departure from 'home' as a noun – as a static place and a predetermined condition – 'homing' is conceptualized as an intransitive verb to account for 'the processual and often incomplete constitution of home' (Boccagni 2022, 586). Homing represents both spatial and temporal movements, as it is the culmination of practices aimed to 'move towards a state, condition, or feeling of home' under restricted resources and unequal opportunities (593). Importantly, homing practices do not occur in a vacuum; rather, it is shaped by transnational power structures,

including state policies, global inequalities, and heteronormative norms that cross borders (Woensdregt 2023).

The concept of homing bears particular relevance for Chinese queer subjects, for whom the Confucian home functions as a central nexus of power and thus a key site where queerness is regulated, negotiated, and embodied (Song 2021). With the country's rapid economic development and social transformation over the past decades, mobility – both intranational and transnational – is increasingly embraced as a desirable channel for queer subjects to negotiate with heteronormativity (Kam 2020; Luo 2022; Wei 2020). Kam (2020) observes that going abroad is imagined by middle-class queer women as the predominant route through which they build a new home offering legal protection and social recognition of queer identities (136–137). Wei (2020) goes further to argue that mobility has given rise to fundamentally new ways for Chinese queer people to envision 'home': since the original home is seen as an impossible location to return to, queer people physically and emotionally distance themselves to build a new home through migration (25).

Whereas existing research tends to stress the empowering aspects of Chinese queer migration, scholars are also starting to pay attention to the complexities and difficulties of homing. Writing on the Canadian context, Poon et al. (2017) find that the racialization of Chinese queer migrants poses risks of social violence and cultural marginalization. Huang's (2020) auto-ethnographic account of migrant experiences in the United States also highlights how becoming a queer subject is impossible for Chinese queer migrants, when legal recognition requires assimilation into white cis-heteronormativity. In the Australian context, Wang and Gorman-Murray (2023) suggest that Chinese queer students have to navigate incompatible identity expectations across national and cultural contexts, leaving them with a feeling of 'spiritual homelessness' (118) where all aspects of their identity will never be fully accepted. Cui and Song (2024) also point out in the case of NZ that the interplay between heteronormativity and ethnic identities function as a key facet in Chinese queer international students' identity management on campus. Extending this line of inquiry, our study explores how Chinese queer international students in NZ experience homing as an ongoing and uneven negotiation across multiple axes of power. Rather than experiencing migration as a clear rupture from repression to liberation, participants describe a sense of being suspended between shifting regimes of heteronormativity, intersectional marginalisation, and political constraint. By foregrounding homing as a process shaped by affect, precarity, and transnational politics, we show how queer mobility is not a straightforward path to belonging, but a complex navigation of what it means to feel at home in the world.

Methods

Following approval by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, a total of 15 participants were recruited through convenience sampling from 2022 to 2023. The participants were required to meet the following criteria: (1) self-identified as a member of the sexual-or gender-minority; and (2) an international student from mainland China; and (3) currently studying at a NZ tertiary institution or graduated from one in the last five years. Participants were recruited using a poster for voluntary participation and the poster was circulated via WeChat, the most popular social media app among overseas Chinese communities in NZ.

The study involved 15 participants, of whom six identified as male, eight as female, and one as non-binary. Regarding their sexuality, seven participants identified as gay, six as lesbian, one as bisexual, and one as asexual. All participants were in their 20s or 30s. The educational institutions represented a diverse range of tertiary institutions, including universities, polytechnics and private tertiary institutions. The qualifications pursued ranged from vocational training certificates to doctoral degrees. The participants were engaged in studies across a range of disciplines, including natural sciences, social sciences and the arts. Table 1 provides comprehensive demographic data on the participants.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Self-identified gender	Self-identified sexuality	Qualification pursued in NZ	Field of study	Education institution	Time of having studied in NZ
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-binary	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 was interviewed for approximately 30–40 minutes in Mandarin, either online or in person in Auckland. The interviews were conducted to gain insight into their experiences as Chinese queer international students in NZ. Topics included, for example, participants' experiences of sexual identity management, marginalisation, and political self-censorship. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013) was used to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms have been used throughout this study and some data have been altered or deliberately blurred.

Leaving the heteronomrative past home

Our interviews reveal that Chinese queer international students' motivation to study abroad could be significantly influenced by their queer identities. Mobility was imagined as a pathway to escape the constraints of a heteronormative home environment and build a more livable queer home. When recounting their move from China to NZ, many participants drew a contrast between having to live in secrecy, repression, and fear, and the aspiration to fully embrace their queer identities. Yan, a 26-year-old self-identified lesbian woman, shared with us her feelings of loneliness and alienation associated with China as the past home:

> When I was in China, I was not exposed to much information about homosexuality and did not really understand it. The society saw homosexuality as wrong. On the one hand, I wanted to learn more about it. On the other, I was also consumed by fear and could never talk about it. I was afraid that I would end up being alone my whole life. That's why I came to NZ, where queer people are accepted, and can build their family and their home. Even in my first year in NZ, I was still in denial. I could not accept that I was like that. I was helpless. This identity weighed on me like a mountain. It was my everything, but it also only gave me pain.

Yan's narrative reflects a deep sense of emotional disconnection from her past home, where queerness was pathologized and silenced. Her fear of 'ending up alone [her] whole life' expresses a deep desire for belonging, a driving force behind her search for a new home where she can live her queer identity openly and without shame. This narrative of feeling out of place in the past home is a common thread throughout our interviews. Ka (33, gay man), for example, recalled being repeatedly urged to 'change his sexual orientation' in China, including one

disturbing instance where a peer suggested he hire a female sex worker to 'correct' himself. Against this backdrop of coercive heteronormativity, participants described their experiences in NZ as a stark contrast, where cultural and legal norms offered greater acceptance. Ka noted that, for the first time, homosexuality was treated as 'normal' by people around him. Similarly, Yan shared that her time in NZ allowed her to gradually come to terms with her sexuality. The more queer-friendly climate in NZ plays a crucial role in motivating most participants to study overseas, offering queer youth the opportunity to envision a future where they can openly embrace their identity and feel at home. For Bang, a self-identified lesbian student, a significant factor in choosing NZ was its legalization of same-sex marriage, allowing her to 'live openly with [her] partner'.

Even for participants whose queer identity did not directly impact their decision to study abroad, experiencing NZ's queer-friendly environment often led them to reconsider the locality of home. Liu originally planned to find a faculty position at a Chinese university after completing his PhD in NZ. However, after spending three months in NZ, he changed his mind: 'When I was studying at a university in China, going on dates had to be done very discreetly. I was deeply closeted. Now that I'm in NZ, expressions of same-sex intimacy and love can be very open. It's a different environment, so I'm considering staying here'.

Through their transnational journey, our participants negotiate and reimagine the meanings of home. Discussions on queer migration have highlighted that the childhood home typically functions as a heteronormative space where queer subjects feel out of place, thus bringing discomfort, estrangement, and trauma (Eng 1997; Sinfield 1996). The move away from the childhood home, therefore, is usually conceived as a movement toward a new home that allows for queer belonging (Sinfield 1996). Our findings partially confirm this: considering the stark differences in social outlooks and policies regarding diversity between China and NZ, the participants' transnational movement does provide new opportunities for them to imagine a new, queer home. Central to such an imagination is emotional connection and the possibility to build queer intimacy. While heteronormative structures back in China have created an alienating and unsafe space that restricted participants' capacity to form emotionally fulfilling connections, NZ's more inclusive legal framework and cultural climate enabled participants to express intimacy more freely, allowing for deeper emotional bonds and a sense of ease in one's own body and relationships. This endeavor to leave the past home and create a new one is nevertheless entangled with local structures of inequality and political constraint, which we explore in the following sections.

Homing experiences shaped by the intersection of ethnicity and sexuality

While NZ is often regarded as a queer-friendly society, this does not guarantee that Chinese queer international students are free from discrimination. Many continue to encounter prejudice shaped by the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. While anti-discrimination policies in higher education institutions are in place to safeguard international students on campus, it is evident from our interviews that many still encounter discrimination once they step outside this protective environment. Several participants shared experiences of exclusion and marginalisation – particularly in the context of housing – highlighting discriminatory treatment by Chinese landlords. For example, when Zhen, a gay student, was viewing a house with his boyfriend, the Chinese landlord asked if he was gay and stated that he would not rent to gay people. Zhen is not alone in facing such blatant discrimination from landlords. Ma, a lesbian student, also recounted her experience of being rejected by a Chinese landlord while she and her partner were viewing a house:

> My partner and I moved house last year. We were looking for rentals on platforms that are popular in the Chinese community – it's just easier and pretty common for Chinese international students. When we went

to view a place, the landlord – a Chinese woman in her 50s – opened the door. My partner has short hair and dresses in a more androgynous style. As soon as the landlord opened the door, she just stood there staring at us for one minute without saying a word. After we went inside, she acted very unnaturally – it felt a bit strange. We were, of course, looking at one room, since we were planning to live together. But she said the two of us couldn't stay in the same room, that we'd have to live separately. She also said, in a disapproving tone, that there are more and more girls like this in China now, dressing in a very androgynous way. I think she assumed we were a couple, but she didn't accept it.

Recent research on housing experiences in NZ reveals that home environments can be sites of vulnerability for LGBTIQ+ individuals living in shared housing or flatting arrangements (Fraser and Buchanan 2025). These individuals face significantly higher levels of housing-related discrimination compared to their non-flatting LGBTIQ+ peers (Fraser and Buchanan 2025). Our participants' housing experiences within the Chinese community add an additional layer of vulnerability to shared housing. For Chinese international students, challenges in social integration – combined with strong ties to the Chinese community (as also evidenced in Liu's account below) – often compel them to rely on ethnic networks for housing, thereby placing queer students at greater risk of encountering queerphobic Chinese landlords. This compounded vulnerability – at the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality – underscores the challenges Chinese queer international students face in finding and maintaining a safe home.

To mitigate the risk of discrimination from Chinese landlords and housemates, queer Chinese international students may find it necessary to strategically manage the disclosure of their sexual identity within their housing experiences. For example, Liu, a gay student, deliberately concealed his sexuality from both his Chinese landlords and housemates. This concealment required ongoing identity management in both everyday interpersonal interactions and digital spaces, particularly on social media platforms.

Chinese international students often search for rental listings through NZ Chinese BBS websites, on WeChat, or by word of mouth from other Chinese students. The landlords are usually middle-aged Chinese, and you never know if they might be homophobic. Many Chinese are conservative and unaware of queer issues. I've lived in several different houses with various Chinese housemates. To avoid discrimination, I never come out to Chinese landlords or to my housemates, who are often my Chinese schoolmates. I carefully manage my WeChat posts, using friend groups to hide my identity. Once, when my boyfriend came to visit me from China, I told the landlord he was just a good friend. It's kind of funny – here I am, all the way in NZ, and I'm still living in the closet.

Existing queer studies in the Chinese educational context have examined the identity management strategies employed by queer individuals in response to the campus climate at Chinese universities (Cui 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025; Cui and Burford 2025), and how this repressive environment has contributed to motivating the transnational mobility of Chinese queer students as international students (Cui and Song 2024). Ironically, as illustrated by Ma and Liu's accounts of their housing experiences, even in the host country – where a sense of liberation and belonging is often anticipated – Chinese queer international students remain vulnerable to queerphobia and may be compelled to inhabit what Cui and Song (2024) term the 'ethnic closet,' which involves continuous identity management. Liu's housing experiences in NZ were marked by cautious closetedness in his interactions with members of the Chinese community, including his landlord, housemate, and schoolmate. These experiences stand in contrast to the dominant narrative of queer migration as a linear journey toward liberation and empowerment, instead highlighting the complexity of queer migration and homing as an ongoing process of negotiation and engagement with intersecting power dynamics.

As theories of intersectionality highlight, multiple co-existing identities – such as race, gender, class, and sexuality – function collectively to shape people's experiences of privilege and discrimination (Crenshaw 1989; Collins and Bilge 2020). Although NZ may offer a more queer-friendly social atmosphere, the extent to which Chinese queer international students can access or experience a sense of home also depends on other facets of their identity. In addition to

participants' experiences within the Chinese community, their sense of marginalization also manifested in their interactions with the NZ queer community, shaped by the intersectional dynamics of sexuality and ethnicity. Ma, for example, shared that despite her efforts to find housing and fit in, she still felt like an outsider in local queer communities both offline and online:

> I tried to find housing through a local LGBT housemate group on Facebook, where posts looking for housemates are shared within the LGBT community. But no one responded or seemed interested in me. I have used a local same-sex social app for girls here, called Her. I've chatted with many people, but when I say I am a foreigner, haven't been here for long, or mention that I am Asian, the conversations would often just stop. I've also attended some small LGBTQ events at uni, but I often feel like an outsider. People stick to their own groups, and I rarely get approached. I also felt like everyone didn't seem interested in getting to know me, not interested in taking the initiative to talk to me.

Ma's experiences of exclusion attest to research findings that people who possess more than one stigmatized identity may experience unique microaggressions that exert significant influence on their cognitive, emotional, and physical functioning (Fattoracci, Revels-Macalinao, and Huynh 2021). Boccagni (2022) remarks that people's homing ability is significantly influenced by their unequal access to infrastructure, opportunities, and resources, as well as the level of societal recognition they receive to establish a sense of belonging. What we have observed in the experiences of Chinese queer international students in NZ is a constant feeling of out of place – both prior to and following migration, and within both the local Chinese community and the NZ queer community. Whereas the understanding of the past home as a place of discomfort is accurate, we note that leaving the past home does not lead to a journey of liberation. Instead, making a new home in a supposedly queer-friendly environment entails painstaking efforts to navigate complex, often intersecting identity politics that poses difficulties for racially marginalized queer subjects' homing practices. One point that has not been sufficiently explored in existing literature is the persistent influence of the past home. In the host country, queer migrants' ethnic identity and national belonging significantly shape their sense of connection to their former home. In this regard, it is important to consider how the past home continues to shape queer migrants' homing practices. We discuss this in the next section.

Navigating China political censorship in NZ

In her analysis of queer homing practices, Fortier (2003) points out that narratives of migration often portray the past home as not-home – a place of alienation – in contrast to the queer home as a desirable destination. Fortier counters this binary view by illustrating how queerness could rewrite the meanings of the past home as well. Building on Fortier's perspective, we understand homing as informed by both the memories of the past home and the hopes for the future one. The past home is not simply a place left behind, but remains emotionally and politically present. For Chinese queer international students, this ongoing influence is evident in their encounters with China's political censorship, an apparatus that extends beyond national borders and continues to govern speech, identity, and affiliation abroad (Human Rights Watch 2021; Wang et al. 2020). In this way, political censorship functions as a transnational heteronormative force that complicates our participants' efforts to build a sense of home, undermining the emotional and psychological safety that homing seeks to establish.

Several of our participants noted an increasing silencing of, and hostility toward, feminist and queer communities in state-led public discourses in China. They referred to what they see as worrying trends of regression, such as the crackdown on queer WeChat Public Accounts and the systematic erasure of queer characters from mainstream television and film. These queer-phobic and heteronormative developments not only impacted the domestic political landscape, but also significantly influenced the self-expression of Chinese queer international students overseas. Sheng, a self-identified asexual woman, confessed that since she felt a stronger

repression from the Chinese government, she became extra careful about expressing her political views on queer issues:

> The political climate's shifting, and criticizing China, including on queer issues, is getting more and more sensitive. I don't want to leave behind any recorded opinions here that might conflict with the dominant ideology back home. When I express political views online, I make sure to protect my identity and avoid sharing any personal information, because sensitive content could lead to repercussions – such as my social media account being blocked or my parents in China facing consequences. In everyday life, I carefully choose who I talk to about China – I don't discuss political issues with people I don't know well.

Scholars have written about the 'long shadow' of China's authoritarianism, where China's ideological control and censorship extend globally into media, publications, and higher education (Cook 2013; Human Rights Watch 2021; Scholars at Risk 2019). At the heart of such a censorship regime is the production of fear (Roberts 2018), which operates by forbidding and deterring individuals from sharing or accessing information. In digital environments, such a fear is amplified by the awareness of omnipresent government surveillance, which further incites self-censorship (Song 2023). Among our participants, fear and self-censorship emerged as significant barriers to homing, since they disrupt the emotional ease, interpersonal trust, and sense of belonging necessary to feel at home. This atmosphere of precarity also extended into social relationships, where participants had to carefully manage what they disclose and to whom. Ma told us that because her partner is from Taiwan, she had to carefully curate how she respond to questions from her friends, in order to avoid conflict or judgement:

> Many Chinese international students are quite nationalistic and patriotic, and they follow the official view that Taiwan is a part of China. They deny Taiwan's own history and national identity, and sometimes even label people with different views as separatists – which can lead to consequences from Chinese authorities. Although my partner is from Taiwan, I usually don't directly respond to those comments because I have a lot of concerns – like whether I might be marginalized, or whether others would see me differently, maybe think my views are biased, and whether that would affect my relationships with them.

Ma's example illustrates how the persistent influence of Chinese political forces impacts homing practices: homing is not just about seeking safety and intimacy, but also about managing risks in new environments that remain to be shaped by the ideological pressures of the past home. The fear of being judged, marginalized, or misunderstood because of one's political stance introduces a form of self-censorship that continuously displaces the sense of trust and openness essential to feeling at home. In fact, several of our participants highlighted the difficulty of 'coming out politically' (*zhengzhi chugui*, 政治出柜) – being able to fully express their political opinions on Chinese issues. These constraints over political subjectivity become hurdles in building a home where one's identity could be fully acknowledged and affirmed. Shan's account vividly captures this situation:

> I came here because I wanted to make NZ my home – a place where I can be open and show people who I truly am. After arriving, I came out to my family, and now they're accepting. But coming out politically is a much more complicated matter – it involves many factors, including teachers, classmates, and the people and environment you live around. You have to maintain good relationships with them and be cautious of potential consequences.

This narrative illustrates how homing as a queer process of becoming, recognition, and belonging is incomplete when political self-expression must be withheld. While Shan has achieved one form of 'coming out' related to his sexual identity, concerns about being marginalized within local interpersonal networks makes political silence a necessary strategy for survival. Yet this silence also compromises the emotional safety and authenticity central to the feeling of home. The example thus shows how homing is shaped by the persistent need to navigate risk and power.

Even under these constraints, our participants continue to engage with structures that suppress them, strategically navigating censorship in ways that enable political selfhood to emerge. Liu, for instance, told us that he frequently talked about Chinese political topics with a small circle of friends in NZ, including events such as the White Paper Movement. He would even discuss these topics with

friends from China – but only on international platforms such as Facebook or Zoom, where the content of conversations is not subject to surveillance and censorship by Chinese authorities. Discussions of Chinese political issues often involved first gauging a person's political stance before determining how much he can safely disclose his own views. As Liu confessed:

> It is difficult to come out both sexually and politically in China. But it is easier in NZ. In NZ, when I discuss Chinese politics with someone, I usually first sound out their political views to determine whether they lean liberal or conservative – so I can decide how much of my own political stance to reveal. I don't have to constantly hide like I did in China, always afraid that someone might find out. And honestly, if someone were to find out about my sexuality and political orientation one day, I think I'd be okay with it.

Liu's shift from total concealment in China to guarded openness in NZ, along with his attempt to build a small community of like-minded friends, reflects what can be understood as a form of resilient homing, where home is not achieved through the full resolution of fear or oppression, but through the tactical cultivation of safety, recognition, and self-expression.

The tactics employed to cultivate a sense of safety in the process of homing extend beyond interpersonal interactions concerning Chinese political issues; they also encompass engagement with legal processes and migration institutions. For Sheng – who, at the time of this study, had obtained NZ resident visa following years of education and employment – NZ was the only place she considered home. However, as a sexual minority and political dissident critical of China's dominant ideologies, she felt increasingly unsafe when returning to her parents' home in China and experienced her Chinese nationality as fundamentally misaligned with her values. To enhance her sense of security, align more fully with her values, and render NZ a 'real home', she planned to change her nationality to NZ. As she accounted:

> Over the years in NZ, I've held different types of visas – student, work, and now a resident visa. It's only since becoming a resident that I've really started to feel like NZ is home, much more so than when I was an international student. But to be honest, I don't think NZ will truly feel like home to me until I change my citizenship. As someone who's a sexual minority and holds dissenting views, I've been feeling more and more disconnected from China's ideologies – and increasingly fearful of the regime. Every time I return to visit my family, I feel nervous at the border and even delete some international apps from my phone beforehand. In NZ, my Chinese passport and nationality are things I often want to hide. I see myself as ethnically Chinese, but hopefully not when it comes to citizenship. I'm definitely going to change to NZ citizenship in the future. That's the only way I'll feel truly safe – and feel like NZ is really my home.

Sheng's account is particularly illuminating in demonstrating that homing is a protracted process involving sustained engagement with both one's past and new environments, requiring ongoing efforts to cultivate a sense of safety and belonging. The range of visa types Sheng held in NZ, along with the varying degrees to which she experienced a sense of home at different stages of her life there, illustrates how the process of homing entails both an internal affective dimension of self and identity, and an external dimension of recognition by migration institutions. For Chinese queer international students, the pursuit of home thus can be shaped and driven by the intersectional dynamics of their sexuality, citizenship and migration status, as these facets of identity critically inform their perceptions of security and belonging.

Based on an understanding of homing not as a linear journey, but as a complex set of practices and negotiations, we have considered how the past home exerts continuous influence over queer subjects' experiences of home in the context of migration. For Chinese queer international students, negotiating with the past home could entail experiences of fear, of once again being caught in between concealment and disclosure; but it could also produce new perspectives and political positions. On the one hand, our participants' quests for home echo discussions of liminality (Brun and Fábos 2015; Wimark 2021) – the in-between phase where an individual is no longer connected to their previous state but has not yet been integrated into a new one. On the other hand, they also characterize homing as a distinctly queer process of careful improvisation and situated openness. Through strategies such as self-censorship, selective speech, platform-switching, and even changes in visa or citizenship status, participants navigate the intricate dynamics of identity management to carve out limited – and

often ambivalent – spaces of community and belonging. Their experiences highlight homing as non-linear, adaptive processes that allow personal subjectivity and collective bonds to emerge.

Conclusion

Through a lens of 'homing' (Boccagni 2022), this paper has explored how Chinese queer international students' queer identity influenced their decision to pursue international education and, more importantly, their desire to cultivate a queer future and efforts to establish a new home. As we have demonstrated, this journey is not a straightforward path toward liberation and empowerment. It entails intense feelings of displacement and ongoing negotiations with both the country of origin and the host country, which we hope to capture with the dash in 'im/possibility of home' in our title. As we have shown, the possibility of home is critically conditioned by intersectional identity categories such as sexuality, ethnicity, citizenship, and migration status. More specifically, Chinese queer international students experienced exclusion and marginalization in their homing practices, both within the Chinese community and the local queer community; they also faced the continued influence of political censorship from China, compelling them to practice cautious self-censorship and adopt self-protection strategies. For Chinese overseas migrants, their homeland serves not only as the initial point of their transnational migration and a place left behind, but also continues to influence their overseas experiences and govern their daily practices. This study contributes to queer migration studies by illustrating that the process of homing is not linear but ongoing and continuous, encompassing personal, social, and political navigation.

Disclosure statement

Research ethics and consent

This study received ethical approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Informed oral consent was obtained from all interview participants. To protect participants' anonymity, pseudonyms have been used, and some data have been altered or deliberately obscured.

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Data availability statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the data and to safeguard participant anonymity, the original research materials cannot be made publicly available or shared through repositories.

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