

Queer migration, heteronormativity and the 'ethnic closet': Chinese queer international students' intersectional experience in New Zealand

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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

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

1 | 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 queer¹ 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 facilitating long-term life course planning (Kam, 2020; Wei, 2020).

NZ has become an attractive higher education destination for Chinese queer students owing to its long history of migration and established reputation of diversity. As immigration and immigrants are central to NZ's ongoing nation-building project, minority group recognition is considered critical by state authorities (Spoonley, 2015). The legalization of same-sex marriage in the country since 2013 has also made it more appealing to queer subjects. Nevertheless, there are also potential hurdles facing Chinese queer students. Inter-ethnic equality, though officially acknowledged, 'often remains notional', with visible problems of racism and discrimination (Spoonley, 2015, p. 658). And although there is no longer overt state discrimination against queer subjects, the church could be a significant source of homophobia, particularly given that the dominant Christian church discourse has constructed a binary between religion and queer identities (Bird, 2018).

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 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; Martin & Song, 2023). 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.

2 | 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 (Martin & Song, 2023).

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 (Choi, 2022; Kam, 2020; Wei, 2020) and intranational (Gong & Liu, 2021; Liu, 2019; Luo, 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 reasserts 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; Ding & Song, 2023; 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 additive, 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 & Amelina, 2021, p. 58). Earlier research on Chinese queer international students has focused mainly on the interaction between their transmigrant identities and familial duties (Yu & Blain, 2019; Zheng, 2022). In analysing 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, 2014; 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.

3 | 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 NZ universities, with India (5%) a distant second (Universities

NZ, *n.d.*). Second, 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, that is, 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 5 years. Participants 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 NZ. 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 diverse 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](#) supplies detailed demographic information of the participants.

Each participant took part in a 30–40-min 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.

4 | 'BREATHING THE AIR OF FREEDOM': NZ 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.

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-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

The emotion of hope, as Ahmed (2004, 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, 2004, 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, 2004, 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, 2004, 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 extremely 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 NZ 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 NZ 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'.

For several participants whose queer identity did not influence their decision to study abroad, they were impressed by NZ's queer-friendly climate during their time as international students. Consequently, they chose or considered staying in NZ after graduation instead of returning to China. For instance, Sheng chose to study in NZ because of its natural environment, and 'sexuality wasn't a factor'. However, she 'felt the friendliness of this country towards the queer community, which became an important factor for [her] to work and stay here'. Similarly, Liu did not consider queer identity as a factor in his decision to pursue a PhD in NZ and planned to look for an academic job in China after graduation. However, he changed his mind and 'considered staying in NZ after [he] found that same-sex relationships can be expressed openly here'.

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 familism 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 NZ, 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 NZ, 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.

5 | 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 behaviours 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.

5.1 | 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, Houshmand et al. (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 defenceless 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.

5.2 | 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 an unfamiliar environment characterized by language and cultural barriers, academic and financial difficulties, loss of social support, alienation and homesickness (Sherry et al., 2009; 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 NZ 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, flat-mates, 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 tight-rope when deciding whether 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 NZ. 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 shown, 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.

6 | 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 saviour. 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.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

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

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