

# JUST FOR FUN

## Playfulness as Self-Entrapment among Elderly Working-Class Queer Men in Shanghai

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Qing Shen

**Abstract:** This article investigates queer socializing among elderly working-class queer men in Shanghai through two ethnographic examples. The first concerns the men's parodic redeployment of socialist revolutionary repertoire. By framing it as 'just for fun', the men precluded a politics of resistance, but this frame sometimes exceeded itself when play became a critique of the state. The second example focuses on how the 'just for fun' frame constrains the men's outlook on queer friendship, which was perceived as volatile and relegated as nothing—just play. However, communal activities such as commensality create a sub-junctive world where this constraint could be potentially transgressed. I argue that the 'just for fun' frame operates as a form of self-entrapment, deliberately placing constraints on the men's queerness. This article challenges the tendency in queer scholarship, including queer anthropology, to politicize and idealize queer play.

**Keywords:** fun, leisure, limits, play, queer anthropology

Not long after starting my fieldwork among elderly working-class queer men in Shanghai, I became intrigued by how frequently the colloquialism *wan* (meaning 'play' in Mandarin Chinese) appeared in their everyday language. *Wan* serves as an umbrella term for the various communal leisure activities that the men I was working with would engage in, such as bantering in parks, eating together in their homes or at restaurants, singing karaoke, joining sightseeing tours to other cities, and cruising for sex. It also reflects a playful attitude of non-seriousness. "It's just play" or "just for fun" were recurring reminders that the ludic was the sole pursuit and reward of their social relationships, and nothing discussed in queer gatherings was meant to be taken too seriously. This frame of 'just for



fun' extended to how they defined their sexuality and queer intimacy, signaling that their relationships were inherently non-committal and light-hearted.

My main interlocutors were aged between 60 and 85, most of them married to heterosexual women who, according to the men at least, were largely unaware of their husbands' sexuality. When I met them in 2021–2022, they were pensioners, having previously worked as low-level state employees or industrial workers in state-owned enterprises. Their age and working-class status place them on the margins of mainstream queer culture in China, which is primarily shaped by younger middle-class individuals (Monteil 2015). The men frequented older cruising spots, such as parks and public restrooms—spaces often stigmatized and associated with marginalized, older queer individuals—unlike gay bars, which tend to attract younger, well-educated gay men (Bao 2018; Qian 2017). Joy Park, my primary field site, is one of the largest parks in Shanghai and the most popular queer spot among working-class older queer men. The men spent their afternoons in the northern part of the park, bantering, gossiping, and laughing together—moments when they could escape the confines of heterosexual domesticity and perform their queer identities. As they visited the park regularly, everyone knew each other to varying degrees.

I refer to the men as 'queer' due to the contrast between their perception of homosexuality as play and the way in which homosexuality and gayness are typically understood in identity politics as central to one's core identity. For the men I worked with, a question regarding sexuality was typically formulated as "when did you start to play this [i.e., homosexuality]?" The word 'hobby' (*aihao*) recurred when they referenced their sexuality, which most of them treated as compatible with heterosexual marriage. As some of them say, "After you get married, you can still play this hobby."

Play evokes the characterization of male same-sex relations in pre-twentieth-century China as *pi* (obsession or hobby) (see Kang 2009) and is associated with (self-)identification practices among the older queer generation that did not adopt a clearly defined homosexual identity before the emergence of gay identity politics in China in the late 1990s (Chou 2000; Li and Wang 1992). This framing is consistent with the labels the men used to identify themselves. These include ambiguous, coded phrases such as 'this kind of person' or derogatory terms like 'ass devils' (*pijing*) and pathologized terms like *tongxinglian* (lit., 'same-sex love'), which traditionally connotes medicalized homosexuality. For the men I studied, *tongxinglian* carries a lingering historical burden of stigma. Elderly queer men's use of *tongxinglian* stands in stark contrast to how the younger gay generation have reclaimed this pathologized and historically stigmatized term as a badge of resistance and pride (Zhou 2022). My interlocutors also used the term *tongzhi* ('comrade' in Chinese), the most widely used term within the homosexual community in China. *Tongzhi* denotes a self-affirming and politicized homosexual identity and is commonly

favored in queer activism. But the men I knew used the word in a non-standard way to label homosexuality as play.

From the standpoint of gay identity politics, the idiom of ‘play’, which my interlocutors employ to refer to their homosexuality, is a trap—a hindrance to the political goal of equal rights (Fugazzola 2023; Wei 2012). In a way, the suggestion goes, play entraps sexual minorities in China from achieving a political identity. In an online article, Hu Zhijun (2020), also known as Aqiang, a prominent LGBT rights activist, denounces a common view among the older queer generation, often expressed in statements like “I am not homosexual. I just play.” He asserts that this viewpoint implies that homosexuality is merely a game that one can abandon at will, reflecting internalized homophobia within this group. Aqiang emphasizes that times have changed, and queer individuals in China should embrace coming out and living self-affirming queer lives. From the point of view of the men I worked with, however, framing sexuality through the metaphor of play, game, or hobby underscores their keen awareness that, as married men, the stakes of enacting a visible queer identity outside the queer circle were too high. In other words, they could not afford to treat their sexuality as anything but play.

In this article, I examine the claim made by queer activists that play functions as a trap and that queer men from all walks of life should adopt a politicized gay identity. In conversation with these claims, I highlight how the ‘just for fun’ framing that my interlocutors employ serves as a form of self-entrapment or self-constraint, deliberately limiting their queerness while simultaneously holding the potential for transgression.

This argument is built upon two ethnographic examples. The first concerns the men’s parody of socialist revolutionary repertoire, which they downplayed as ‘just for fun’. The second focuses on the men’s active engagement in communal activities like commensality while relegating queer friendship to the realm of mere play. I explore how this ‘just for fun’ framing operates as a self-imposed entrapment within these contexts. By considering queer play through its constraints, I challenge the tendency in queer studies, including queer anthropology, to politicize and idealize queer play, as will be discussed in the following section.

## **Queer Play through Limitations**

Although play is notoriously ambiguous and resists clear definition (Sutton-Smith 1997), in this article, it refers to commonly understood recreational activities like partying and dancing. Moreover, while play is not inherently synonymous with fun, and the notion of play as inherently positive has been critiqued as Western-centric (Trammell 2023), my focus is primarily on playful

activities. Play is seldom treated as a theoretical concept in queer anthropology or given prominence in queer theory, because of the latter's longstanding obsession with negativity. However, the importance of play has implicitly underpinned much of queer experience and culture (Ruberg 2018). For instance, camp—a central element of gay culture—is closely tied to playfulness (Newton 1972; Sontag 1966). More than just playful, camp humor has historically been considered a strategy of survival, a means of building solidarity, and a form of resistance to dominant power exerted by marginalized groups, such as gay men (Dyer 1977; Halperin 2012; Newton 1972). In recent years, there has been a steady rise in interest in queer play, particularly in the context of queer partying and nightlife, highlighting the role of play in queer world-making, self-making, and activism (Adeyemi 2022; Adeyemi et al. 2021; Bailey 2013; Gong 2021; Hilderbrand et al. 2024; Horton 2021; Joseph and Bain 2024; Khubchandani 2020; Schroeder 2012; Warner 2012). In these works, what is often taken for granted is that queer play is more than just for fun. A common interpretation in many studies is that queer people dance, party, and have fun in order to disrupt, challenge, and critique the structural forces that exclude, marginalize, or victimize them. Queer play is often framed as a political project or politically charged act, although it is not necessarily always conceived as resistance. Furthermore, queer play is frequently equated with queer politics. Additionally, most writings paint an idealized picture of queer play, often associating it with solidarity, liberation, and utopia.

Despite the immense value of these works, a question that is seldom raised is whether queer play might simply be for fun. What happens if our informants insist that their play is purely for enjoyment, and they reject our interpretations that frame them as politicized subjects? What do we gain by taking an emic perspective seriously and grounding our analysis in the idea of 'just for fun' rather than foregrounding the opposite perspective? I am not suggesting that we should accept our interlocutors' words at face value. Rather, I caution against the tendency to politicize play in contexts where our interlocutors may not see themselves as politicized subjects or even actively disavow the political potential that scholars seek to attribute to them. My caution here aligns with Margot Weiss's (2016) reminder that the tendency in queer studies to equate queerness with transgressiveness and anti-normativity may actually reflect queer scholars' own political desires, which are frequently projected onto their subjects.

By contrast, my point is that queer play in the context of the men I worked with can be better understood as self-entrapment. This argument echoes studies that approach play as a governing technique in China. In post-Mao China, the proliferation of consumer culture, including leisure, has been a state-led project functioning as a mechanism for social control and moral regulation that delineates boundaries between acceptable, proper forms of play and those deemed problematic or subversive (Festa 2006; Oakes 2019; Rolandsen 2011;

Steinmüller 2013; J. Wang 2001; S. Wang 1995). Scholars have also emphasized how Chinese citizens' embrace of consumer culture works as a form of self-governance by producing a normative consumer subject in compliance with neoliberal governance (Rofel 2007; Yan 2008; Zhang and Ong 2008). Similarly, studies on queer China have highlighted how queer play is shaped by significant limitations, often requiring careful negotiation of queerness, adherence to normative expectations, and the cultivation of a socially acceptable self (Kong 2010; Miège 2017; Qian 2017; Wortham 2021).

Thinking of queer play as self-entrapment resonates with works in queer anthropology that question queer theory's abiding romance with anti-normativity by documenting how lived queerness in many social situations requires some degree of complicity with, rather than only vigorous antagonism toward, different forms of heteronormativity in specific contexts (Decena 2011; Engebretsen 2014; Horton 2018; Lewin 2016; Miller 2023; Weiss 2016; Yau 2010). My article builds on this scholarship by interpreting play as self-entrapment, challenging the tendency to politicize and idealize queer play. It extends this perspective by demonstrating how self-entrapment can also be subject to transgression.

## **Methods**

This article draws on material gathered from 14 months of fieldwork conducted in Shanghai between 2021 and 2022. I regularly met with my elderly queer male interlocutors in various locations, including a park, a garden next to a temple, a mahjong parlor, and a gay bathhouse that catered to an older clientele and those who were attracted to them. Additionally, I participated in other leisure activities with the men, such as singing at karaoke parlors, dining at restaurants, and taking sightseeing trips to nearby cities.

My gay identity allowed me easy access to my informants because everyone saw me as part of their community. The age difference between me and them also made my entry to the field easier since the men enjoyed spending time with younger men. At the same time, my self-proclaimed researcher identity was first met with suspicion since most of the younger men who frequented these places were migrants from rural areas who were either unemployed or had low-paid jobs. Over time, the men gradually came to recognize and accept my researcher identity.

Among the many people I met and spoke with—both offline and online—during my fieldwork, I regularly engaged with 55 older queer men, most of whom desired younger men. I initially planned to conduct 30 interviews but managed only 20, as recruiting older men for interviews proved challenging due to their extreme discretion. Many refused to participate or have their interviews recorded, even after knowing me for over a year and forming what I considered

friendships. After leaving Shanghai, I stayed in touch with about ten informants through WeChat, China's most popular messaging app. As a result, my material also incorporates insights from these subsequent online interactions.

Because the men were highly private about their personal information, they all used nicknames to address one another. To further protect their anonymity, I have modified these nicknames, as well as the names of the places mentioned in this article.

## Queering Red Classics

My first example is the men's spoofing of 'red classics' (*hongse jingdian*), which refer to the canonized literary and artistic works produced in the Mao era, particularly during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). After Mao's period, these works lost their prominence as their ideological revolutionary content and style became incompatible with China's reintegration into the capitalism-driven global order. However, since the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Communist Party has revived these works to reinforce its socialist and revolutionary legacy (Liu 2010). While the revival of socialist classics is rigorously promoted by the state, it also has a genuine element of grassroots spontaneity. It is common for urban retirees, who spent their formative or younger years during the Cultural Revolution, to gather in parks in Chinese cities and join in singing Mao-era tunes in chorus.

Hong, a man I came to know, readapted red classics with vulgar words. He was famous for his playful renditions of Mandopop ballads, traditional Chinese opera, and *yangbanxi*, or revolutionary opera from the Cultural Revolution. *Yangbanxi* were designed to educate the masses and indoctrinate revolutionary ideologies. The scripts featured clear-cut roles of heroes and villains who stood in stark moral and aesthetic opposition. Heroic characters were lofty, glorious, and intelligent, while the villains were base, deceitful, and foolish. Although revolutionary operas were notoriously rigid and ideologically ossified, they were immensely popular at the time. Part of their popularity stemmed from their forceful nationwide implementation by the state. They were performed on stages, broadcast on radio, made into films, and sung by millions. Throughout the period, they were the only form of mass theatrical entertainment in the country. Many of the men I worked with mentioned that they liked *yangbanxi*.

Hong's reworking of revolutionary repertoire was not particularly sophisticated. In many instances, he replaced the names of revolutionary protagonists in opera arias with the term 'semen' (*miqing*), an in-group reference to male homosexuals, and peppered the lyrics with words like 'cock', 'cunt', 'cunt sellers', 'condoms', and so on. For example, a line from *Zhiqu Weihushan* (Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy), a revolutionary opera, was humorously rewritten

from “Country fellows, we are the People’s Liberation Army” to “Country fellows, we are the People’s Miqing Army.” This crude travesty of the revolutionary repertoire was the primary reason the men found Hong’s rendition amusing.

Such parodic redeployment of socialist and patriotic works is symptomatic of the profound cultural trend in contemporary China known as *egao*. *Egao*, literally meaning ‘evil doing’, is an online-specific form of satirical humor and grotesque parody. *Egao* involves making fun of, satirizing, and parodying authorities, traditions, and celebrities (Nordin and Richaud 2014). In the past decade, since Xi Jinping came to power, the state has intensified its control over *egao*, particularly regarding revolutionary culture. In 2018, China’s Ministry of Culture launched a crackdown on the parodying of revolutionary culture and its heroes, overseeing the deletion of thousands of online videos that spoofed popular red classics and heroes (BBC 2018).

The men I worked with were largely oblivious to the state’s crackdown on online content, and Hong told me that he didn’t think his parodic mockery was particularly politically risky. “Times are different now,” he said, explaining that his performances were strictly limited to the close-knit queer community. Hong told me he sang these repackaged tunes at karaoke parlors, gay saunas, and queer gathering places like Joy Park. At one point, someone jocularly remarked that Hong’s versions of the *yangbanxi* were reactionary (*fandong*), a Maoist term that indicated an ideological deviation from communist orthodoxy. Hong simply shrugged and said, “What’s reactionary about them? They are just about cocks and cunts.”

Burlesque renderings of official culture in China are often examined as a form of Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which is (mis)read as political resistance. The late literary critic and Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo ([2006] 2012: 185) recognized the political potential in *egao* as “an important and widespread form of popular resistance in post-totalitarian society.” On a representational level, it is tempting to read the grotesque and the obscene in Hong’s recreations as a form of resistance to official culture. However, Hong’s own assertion and those of his audience run counter to this assumption. “It’s just for fun!” was the typical response when I asked the men about their participation in and co-production of these performances. My attempts to extract political connotations were usually met with cynicism. “You intellectuals always think too much,” one man told me dismissively. The men clarified that they did not mean to criticize the state.

My interlocutors’ stated concern points to two key facts. First, the men’s outrageous fun, which demonstrates an explicit camp sensibility, has its own limits in several respects. Their burlesque of revolutionary repertoire rarely touched on sensitive issues such as the Communist Party’s corruption or class inequality, and never involved political leaders. In fact, most of the men I spoke with rarely discussed politics in their gatherings. They generally regarded politics as a boring topic, believing that criticizing the government wouldn’t make

any difference. Unlike the straight older men in the park who liked to dissect national and international politics for hours, the men I spoke to shared the view that they came to the park simply to “talk about cunts and cocks” (*jiangbi jiangluan*). Whenever politics came up, the conversation would inevitably be ‘queered’ by peppering it with talk about cocks and cunts. Furthermore, these performances were strictly confined to gatherings within the group and did not extend beyond their queer circle. Video recordings of these performances were shared exclusively among themselves, with a mutual agreement that they would not be circulated outside their community. Second, the radical nature of transgressive fun is continually limited by the ‘just for fun’ frame, which prevents any resistance against or critique of the state from happening. It also suggests that ‘queering’ socialist and official culture is, for them, a resolutely non-political act.

That said, there were moments when the men’s parody could take on a political edge. One day, Hong sent me a video in which a group of male and female retirees were singing “I Love You, China,” a well-known patriotic song. He ridiculed the retirees, wondering whether they would sing the song with visceral sincerity if their pensions were shortchanged or even discontinued by the government. “If it were the Mao era and I was asked to sing this song, I would have sung it wholeheartedly. But look at today’s society—all you see is embezzlement and corruption. What’s so good about the Communist Party? Motherfucker! Were they ever truly sincere when they sang this song?” Hong asked me. In response, I asked him whether he thought the retirees should perform the song the way he burlesqued *yangbanxi*. He chuckled and nodded.

Hong deemed singing a song laden with patriotic ideology in a non-parodic way as a genuine acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the state. Seen in this light, it is fair to say that Hong’s lampooning of official culture came close to a critique. This potential shift from ‘just for fun’ to critique in the playing process can be understood in reference to what Astrid Nordin and Lisa Richaud (2014) write about Beijing university students’ *egao* of the official language of the Chinese Communist Party. Like the men I spoke with, the students refused to characterize their humorous redeployment of Party language as a challenge to the Party-state’s politics. Nordin and Richaud point out that scholars who treat *egao* as resistance against authoritarian power actually conflate politics with the political. They encourage us to return to the classic distinction in modern political theory, which holds that politics refers to a specific domain of activity, namely, the institution of the state. As political scientist Jenny Edkins (1999: 12) notes, the political is associated with “moment[s] of openness or undecidability” outside of institutionalized politics—a way “to interrupt discourse, to challenge what have, through discursive practices, been constituted as normal, natural, and accepted ways of carrying on.” The students’ *egao* does not amount to an intervention in the domain of politics in the

narrow and traditional sense. In fact, what scholars typically see as politicization in *egao* is closer to depoliticization in Edkins's terminology. They suggest that *egao* should be located in the realm of the political because it disrupts and hollows out the dominant discourse. In this reading, *egao* is imbued with the potential to repoliticize, as it marks a radical undecidability. But Nordin and Richaud (2014) caution that this repoliticization is unstable, and *egao* is repeatedly depoliticized by the students (e.g., by being designated only as escapism). Therefore, the authors emphasize the undecidability of the meaning-making process. As they conclude: "The point, precisely, is to reopen the question of *egao* as potentially political, even if it does not lead to a revolutionary politics" (ibid.: 63).

Nordin and Richaud's analysis illuminates the undecidability inherent in the 'just for fun' frame. The men's spoofs represent their efforts to carve out a space removed from institutionalized politics in the narrow and traditional sense. What they meant by 'just for fun' was that their expressions were not commonly understood as political in this narrow sense, and they did not see themselves as engaged in politics. From the perspective of politics, the men's play, in parodying socialist culture, functions as a form of depoliticization that prevents a politics of resistance. By contrast, from the perspective of the political, as defined by Edkins, it can be understood as a 'queer riposte' to the state's effort to recycle the ideological underpinnings of socialist cultural works, which are disrupted without being contested head-on by the men. In other words, making these works unserious and farcical is also a form of repoliticization. However, this repoliticization is unstable; it can be depoliticized by the men's insistence on its purely non-political purpose—namely, in-group entertainment. This undecidability accounts for the tension between an etic reading of my interlocutors' play as a form of resistance and an emic reading of it as simply entertainment.

The men's rejection of political subversiveness and a politics of resistance in their queer fun was rooted in the enduring entrapment they had been accustomed to throughout their lives in an authoritarian state, where freedom of speech was severely restricted and political discourse was fraught with risk. They constantly argued that one should remain subservient to the state. As they put it: "We are no match for the Communist Party," "The Communist Party is an elephant, but we are just ants," "People like us are not in a position to confront the Communist Party. At most, we can be festive and crazy in the park." The habitual enactment of the 'just for fun' frame reflects the men's cultivated capacity to comply with state governance by entrapping themselves.

Matei Candea (2011) cautions that the widespread application of the politics of almost everything in post-Foucauldian anthropology has naturalized the realm of the political, making it difficult to conceptualize the non-political as an ethnographic category. He argues that this ontology of politics overlooks

the fact that non-political spaces must be actively produced. Candea urges us to take seriously our interlocutors' assertions about the kinds of spaces they consider non-political. In the men's context, naturalizing the political risks overlooking their efforts to carve out a space for the non-political—a significant achievement for those who lived through Maoist China (Richaud, forthcoming). The men accomplished this by entrapping themselves and positioning themselves as non-oppositional subjects. The 'just for fun' frame allowed them to play with the state in their pursuit of queer fun, even though this frame, by its very nature, carried the potential for transgression.

### Queer Friendship 'Just for Fun'

My second example concerns how queer friendship is constrained by the play frame. Play, in this case, refers to eating together or commensality in restaurants or in the men's homes, which was a prominent part of their queer social lives and a major way of organizing queer friendship. During my fieldwork, I found myself fascinated by the frequency and enthusiasm with which the men regularly joined shared meals on a weekly basis. Commensality among the men was a site of intensified conviviality or 'craziness' (*feng*). The performance of 'craziness' essentially entails bantering, boisterous bickering, telling lewd jokes or tales, as well as singing smutty tunes or performing lascivious skits. As one man put it: "When normal [i.e., straight] people eat together, it is also fun, but not as crazy as us homosexuals are!" These occasions were also filled with verbal acknowledgments of queer friendship, such as, "It's rare that we, as friends, can still sit down and eat together."

However, the men I worked with lauded queer commensality only to disparage it in the same breath, saying that frequent commensality not only breeds bonds between queer friends—it also breeds conflict and leads to separation. They repeatedly reminded me that freeloading, disagreements about the invitee list, and complaints about food quality were common in their circle and often resulted in quarrels and fractured relationships. They attributed this barbed dimension of queer commensality to what they described as male homosexuals' tendency to be meddlesome, effeminate, waspish, and narrow-minded. Dismissive remarks such as, "This minute they are sisters, but the next minute they fall out," and "If [connections between them] evolve, they eat together and sing karaoke together. But a good time doesn't last long. [What follows are] quarrels and fights," were common. These observations underscore the inherent limitations of queer fun, emphasizing its fleeting nature and the fragility of queer bonds. Indeed, I personally witnessed and frequently heard about my informants severing ties with their queer friends.

To pre-empt potential conflicts, some men abandoned the practice of commensality completely. One informant, after experiencing a protracted meal-related dispute with a friend, had refused any invitation to join commensal events in the circle since then. Some men deliberately maintained their interactions with queer peers at a surface level, restricting these relationships to the park and avoiding deeper connections. They referred to each other merely as ‘chat friends’ (*liaoyou*) and knew little about each other’s personal lives, even though they met regularly. These queer connections bear resemblance to the ‘activity-oriented friendships’ identified by Lisa Richaud (2018) among Beijing retirees who participated in collective leisure activities like choral singing in public parks. The retirees’ ludic encounters were not a “communitarian mode of sociality” (Hertz 2001: 277), which entails reciprocal commitments, nor were they fleeting, faceless, or anonymous encounters. Instead, these friendships were practiced on a daily basis but involved an ethic of indifference or ‘being together at a distance’ (Thireau 2021). For the men I worked with, this ethic of indifference and detachment felt particularly necessary in light of the prevailing stereotype of homosexual men as meddlesome. As one man said, “It is worthless picking fights in this circle. If you don’t feel comfortable with the person you’re chatting with, you can just go away. It is also worthless treating anyone in this circle to meals.” Another informant expressed pride in the fact that since he wasn’t particularly close to anyone in the community, he could leave at any time without any hassle.

One way of phrasing this kind of cynical indifference was suggested by a man who, in talking to me about queer friendships, invoked the phrase *fengchang zuoxi*, which refers to an impromptu show, drama, or play put on by street performers. Other possible translations could be “join in the fun on occasion,” “act according to circumstances,” or “take part in merely accidental amusement.” The phrase is sometimes used by heterosexual men when their extramarital affairs with women are exposed. They often try to assuage their wives by saying something like, “I was just *fengchang zuoxi* with her, whereas my feelings for you are true love.” Once I asked a man if he was particularly close to anyone in the circle. “[They are] more or less the same [in terms of emotional intimacy]. After all, it’s just *fengchang zuoxi*,” he answered matter-of-factly. It’s just impromptu fun.

In addition to the ingrained negative stereotypes they held about themselves, another reason the men enacted the ‘just for fun’ frame to constrain queer friendship was to ensure that queer fun remained confined to the playground, without spilling over into the non-queer sphere. Most of my married interlocutors rarely brought their queer friends home or to events like their children’s weddings, fearing that such actions might reveal their sexuality. As one man put it, “What you can do with friends in this circle is simply ‘get crazy’ [*fafeng*] in the park.”

The men's devaluation of queer friendship resembles a familiar trope in which queer men, especially from the older generation in China, view queer intimacy as non-serious and fleeting, with participation in the queer community often framed as a temporary youthful phase (Cummings 2022; Zheng 2015). This perception, according to queer activists, underscores queer men's entrapment within structural stigmatization and internalized homophobia, hindering their ability to achieve respectable gayness (Fugazzola 2023; Wei 2012; Wortham 2021).

Such trivialization of queer friendship also contrasts with the rosy picture of queer friendship in much extant literature, which valorizes it as the most important social institution in queers' lives when it comes to survival, self-actualization, and emancipation (Allen 2011; Bailey 2013; Eribon 2004; Nardi 1999; Weeks et al. 2001; Weston 1991). Most notably, queer friendship is fundamental to Kath Weston's (1991) classic conceptualization of the 'families we choose', which are social constellations composed of queers who have been expelled by their family of origin and who find shelter and form alternative families through non-familial interpersonal ties. Where blood kinship is experienced in terms of disconnection, abandonment, and disownment for queers, queer friendship is extolled as its opposite. This idealized and normalized narrative of queer friendship, while indisputably true in many cases, glosses over the often conflictual and frustrating nature of the actual queer community, where unity, support, connectedness, and endurance do not necessarily characterize queer networks (Allen and Garrison 2022; Pang 2024; Ridge et al. 1997). Likewise, queer friendship among the men I worked with, in addition to providing queer fun for many, also sowed conflicts and frustrations, confirming the men's stereotype of homosexuals as quarrelsome people.

The men's perception of queer friendship also contrasts with a common narrative that queer fun or playing together translates into a critical mechanism of support for queer people. For example, Marlon Bailey (2013) observes that for working-class Black and predominantly unmarried queers in Detroit, playing and dancing together in regional ballrooms created an intimate and supportive friendship network. The patrons referred to each other in kinship terms and understood the queer friendships they developed in dance scenes as authentic kinship. For them, playing and dancing was a way of doing kinship.

This is far from what I observed among most of my informants. When the men I worked with invoked kin-related terms to address their queer friends, they weren't being serious. Usually, they meant it for fun. Unlike the Black queer dancers in the ballroom community portrayed in Bailey's work, all of whom had been ejected from their biological families, most of the men I worked with were married and had spent the majority of their lives with their biological families. The queer circle was not their home but rather their playground. Therefore, it is understandable that they organized and practiced queer friendship with a

collective commitment to just having queer fun. That said, I came to realize that although the men explicitly expressed cynical views about queer friendship and constrained it through the ‘just for fun’ frame, they sometimes transgressed this self-imposed boundary. For instance, an informant who proclaimed his mistrust of friends within the circle as reliable sources of support during critical times was, paradoxically, considering experimenting with cooperative elder care alongside queer friends in the future. Another informant, who cynically claimed that he had seen through the fleeting nature of queer friendship and vowed to quit the circle, nevertheless continued to participate in communal leisure activities. Similarly, an informant who lamented that joining leisure activities with queer friends was ultimately meaningless also admitted that these were some of the happiest and most meaningful days of his life.

These transgressions made me realize that the men might not be as cynical as they claimed to be. The men’s characterization of queer friendship as *fengchang zuoxi* or ‘just for fun’ appears to reflect the ubiquitous cynicism in contemporary Chinese society. However, Hans Steinmüller (2016) cautions against the totalizing tendencies of cynicism as an ethnographic concept. Instead of cynicism, which indicates a radical declaration of disbelief, he argues that irony offers a privileged entry point for understanding everyday experiences and interpretations, given its emphasis on openness and contingency (ibid.: 5–6). Sharing sentimentalized friendship at the banquet table but disparaging queer friendship afterward is an act of irony. The *fengchang zuoxi* at the banquet table operates within the limits of queer friendship’s fleeting nature, while still creating an ‘as if’ or subjunctive universe (Seligman et al. 2008) that allows the men to interact in ways that foster a shared ethos of queer camaraderie. In this space, they act as if they are truly good friends. This universe forms a ‘community of complicity’ (Steinmüller 2013), where everyone involved shares an intimate understanding of irony and is complicit in both enacting the ‘just for fun’ frame and potentially surpassing its limits. Therefore, instead of asserting that the men are hopelessly trapped by internalized homophobia and the prevailing cynicism in contemporary China that undermines trust in interpersonal relationships (Osburg 2016), I have argued, first, that the men themselves impose constraints on queer friendship and, second, that this process of self-entrapment carries an inherent potential for transgression.

## Conclusion

For the older queer men I worked with, living a queer life involved deliberate acts of self-entrapment. Their queer play came with significant limitations, and they actively reinforced these constraints by framing their play as simply ‘just for fun’. Queer fun was pursued with the understanding that its potential for

transgression remained restricted by this framing, preventing it from evolving into a politics of resistance. Likewise, queer friendships were seen as short-lived and confined to the realm of play, further constrained by the same logic.

However, this process of self-entrapment is imbued with indeterminacy and might ultimately exceed its own limitations. This analysis challenges the prevailing perspective among Chinese queer activists that viewing queerness through play reflects a pre-gay stage that should inevitably give way to gay identity politics. Among these men, queerness manifests in acts of self-entrapment that may appear incapacitating yet contain the potential for their own transgression.

By foregrounding the self-entrapment aspect of the men's queer play, my interpretation also challenges the often idealized depictions in queer anthropology that celebrate queer play's role in bringing about social change, advancing queer politics, and fostering solidarity. Taking these men's life experiences into account requires us to seriously consider an emic perspective—that queer fun is pursued solely for enjoyment, even if this intention might be transgressed in the process.

On a final note, my analysis contests the scholarly habit of interpreting play as “symbols of something more important,” such as “mechanisms of political engagement, symbols of domination, fleeting acts of resistance against social inequalities, or bearers of cultural difference” (Anjaria and Anjaria 2020: 234). While it is tempting to read the men's queer play as a form of resistance, this approach overlooks the fact that living a queer life for these men hinges on avoiding the treatment of play as a political project. Thus, beginning with the concept of ‘just for fun’ serves to critically limit the inclination to default to broad and familiar theoretical frameworks that may not fully capture the lived realities of our subjects.

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**Qing Shen** earned his PhD in Anthropology from Uppsala University in 2024. His research interests are aging, gender, sexuality, and digital queer culture in contemporary China. He is currently working on a thesis-turned-book on social lives among elderly working-class queer men in Shanghai. He is also developing a new research project that explores how elderly people in China navigate aging through digital media and technologies. ORCID-ID: 0009-0008-4243-0830. E-mail: shen.qing@antro.uu.se

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