


# Sustaining Heteronormativity in Marriage: How Chinese Newspapers Frame Heterosexual Marriage Undertaken by Chinese Queer People

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## ABSTRACT



Family members often cite broader societal discourses and norms when forcing Chinese queer people to engage in heterosexual marriage (referred to as HMQ; heterosexual marriage undertaken by Chinese queer people). It is unclear what these social norms entail and how the norms are maintained. This paper examines 89 Chinese newspaper articles to uncover the societal discourses driving families to pressure queer people into heterosexual marriage. We identified three framings: (1) Highlighting problems of formality marriage (the marriage between two queer people) and gay's wife marriage (the marriage between a queer man and a heterosexual woman); (2) portraying people involved in formality marriage and gay's wife marriage as suffering from heteronormative pressure to engage in marriage; and (3) presenting formality marriage in a collaboration frame and gay's wife marriage in a deception frame. These framings suggest heteronormativity in marriage is upheld in societal discourses about HMQ and sustained by two hierarchies created in Chinese newspaper articles: one degrading queer marriage practices, which made heterosexual marriage undertaken by queer people inferior to ideal heterosexual marriage; another stratifying queer marriage practices, which made the marriage between a queer man and a heterosexual woman less acceptable than the marriage between two queer people.

## KEYWORDS

Heterosexual marriage; heteronormativity; queer people; China; newspapers; media framing; family pressure

## Introduction

Coming out of the closet in public is courageous, and this is especially true in China. Most homosexual people would choose to avoid [facing stigmatized homosexuality], disguise [their queer identity], or reluctantly engage in a legitimate marriage with an opposite-sex person [to act as heterosexual people]. (Jin Wanbao, 2014)

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This quote from a journalist in a Chinese newspaper article highlights the significant role of normative heterosexuality in Chinese society, compelling queer people to enter into heterosexual marriages. The situation described in the above excerpt is not an exception; rather, it reflects a common experience among many Chinese queer individuals who face pressure to marry someone of the opposite sex (J. Zhu et al., 2022). To take the appearance of heterosexuality and fulfill the reproductive demands of parents, queer people often marry either an opposite-sex queer or a heterosexual person (Choi & Luo, 2016; J. Zhu, 2018). This paper uses the abbreviation HMQ to refer to heterosexual marriage undertaken by Chinese queer people. People involved in HMQ experience substantial challenges, such as the need to fabricate a married life (Choi & Luo, 2016), emotional distress (J. Zhu et al., 2022), and marriage dissatisfaction (X. Li et al., 2016; Y. Wang et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, Chinese queer people still seriously contemplate—and often participate in—heterosexual marriage, primarily in response to family pressure (J. Zhu et al., 2022). Family members cite broader societal discourses (e.g., preserving family reputation, regarding heterosexual marriage as an essential part of life) to justify pressuring their queer children into heterosexual marriage (J. Zhu et al., 2022). However, there is a lack of clarity around what these broader societal discourses actually entail and how the norms embedded within them are created or maintained. Gaining a deeper understanding of societal discourses surrounding HMQ is crucial. It can illuminate the adverse experiences of queer people and offer context for why family members pressure them to marry. Revealing the mechanisms through which norms are created or maintained can expose the hegemonic power that influences queer marriage practices, ultimately enhancing the wellbeing of queer people.

The media is recognized as a powerful platform that both showcases and shapes social norms (Arias, 2019) and may therefore play a pivotal role in outlining the societal discourses and dynamics surrounding the pressure to engage in heterosexual marriage. Through the information they provide, media outlets not only describe public attitudes on HMQ to some extent, representing the existing societal discourses. More importantly, they also actively shape public attitudes toward HMQ (Arias, 2019). Consequently, the media may further (re)produce social norms (e.g., normative heterosexuality, upholding familism) that profoundly affect how queer people and their families perceive and react to queer marriage practices (J. Zhu et al., 2022).

This paper analyzes Chinese newspaper articles to investigate how the Chinese newspapers frames HMQ, with a view to shedding light on media representations of HMQ and how they produce or reinforce social norms related to HMQ. These insights serve to contextualize family pressure on queer people to engage in heterosexual marriages within broader social norms and discourses.

## Literature review

The current scholarship identifies three types of HMQ. The first is formality marriage (*Xinghun*), hereafter referred to as FM. Also termed as contract marriage (Engebretsen, 2009), nominal marriage (Choi & Luo, 2016), or marriage of convenience (Ren et al., 2021), FM describes the marriage between a queer man and a queer woman (Liu, 2013), with both partners having disclosed their queer identities to one another (Ren et al., 2019). The second type of HMQ is gay's wife marriage (*Tongqi*), hereafter referred to as GWM, which refers to a mixed-orientation marriage where a closeted queer man marries a heterosexual woman (J. Zhu, 2018). The term *Pianhun* (marriage fraud) is also often used to refer to this type of marriage. The third type of HMQ is lesbian's husband marriage (*Tongfu*), hereafter referred to as LHM, which is a mixed-orientation marriage between a closeted queer woman and a heterosexual man (J. Zhu et al., 2022). One study has pointed out that HMQ is typically discussed through a gendered lens in the Chinese context: the primary focus in scholarship has been on FM and GWM, whereas there has been limited exploration of LHM (J. Zhu, 2018).

The challenges associated with HMQ have been extensively documented in the existing literature. Queer people in FM may try to distance themselves from their families of origin and their spouse to maintain a balance between marital/familial life and their private same-sex desires (J. Zhu et al., 2022). However, keeping this balance presents difficulties, including setting boundaries with their spouse, maintaining sexual autonomy post-marriage, and fabricating a false married life to cope with questions from parents and relatives (Choi & Luo, 2016). In the case of queer people involved in GWM, studies have emphasized their perception of sex with heterosexual women as a duty. They either reluctantly perform this duty with their wife or ignore their wife's sexual requests (Song et al., 2023; S. Wang et al., 2015). Additionally, heterosexual wives in GWM often feel deceived to engage in such marriage, are exposed to health risks (e.g., HIV infection), and experience sexual dissatisfaction (X. Li et al., 2016; Y. Wang et al., 2020).

Despite these challenges, HMQ is not only widely discussed among Chinese queer people (Huang, 2018) but it is common practice, as evidenced by the increasing popularity of FM (Choi & Luo, 2016) and by the millions of queer individuals who engage in LHM and GWM (Tang & Liu, 2015; Tang & Yu, 2014). This is largely due to the significant pressure exerted by family members and parents on Chinese queer people to enter into heterosexual marriage (Choi & Luo, 2016; Kam, 2007; J. Zhu et al., 2022). J. Zhu et al. (2022) discovered that this pressure is driven by parents' adherence to heteronormative beliefs, which dictate that heterosexual marriage is the norm of marriage/relationships. The researchers posited that this belief may be rooted in Chinese

societal discourses that perceive heterosexual marriage as the default when evaluating relationships.

Chinese society is dominated by compulsory heterosexuality (Gong & Liu, 2022), contributing to discrimination against queer people due to heteronormative beliefs. Xu et al. (2017) found that heteronormative Chinese society has led to a negative attitude to queer people, resulting in high levels of internalized homophobia among gay and bisexual men. Consequently, heteronormativity in Chinese society and its stigmatization of queer individuals influence the dynamics within families and their approach to the marriage and intimacy of queer family members. For example, Ren et al. (2019) suggested that social stigma surrounding homosexuality diminishes parental support and understanding upon disclosure of the non-heterosexual identity. These parents felt uncomfortable and offended by their children's non-heterosexual identity, pressuring them to live a heterosexual life. This underscores the belief within families that heterosexual marriage and relationships represent the normal way of living and acting. These discourses also affect queer people, who may feel compelled to enter heterosexual marriages to take the appearance of heterosexuality, disguise their queerness, and live a "normal" life (J. Zhu et al., 2022).

While the literature clearly indicates that queer people and their family members often perceive homosexuality as "abnormal" and heterosexual marriage as "normal," what remains less clear is the specific nature of social norms related to HMQ and how these norms are produced and/or reinforced by prevailing discourses. Examining media framing is one way to elucidate these societal discourses and norms, as the media plays a central role in shaping sexual attitudes and practices (Lenskyj, 2013). Hegemonic views of gender and sexuality can be cultivated through media content. For instance, the media often promotes heteronormative images of athletes, emphasizing athletic masculinity despite the diversity of sexual orientations. This focus on athletic masculinity is deemed as the product of conforming to heteronormative standards (Lenskyj, 2013). The media not only mirrors public attitudes to some extent but, more significantly, it can reconstruct the reality of social phenomena in specific ways that promote a particular viewpoint and define the terms of a debate in order to achieve a specific outcome (Tankard, 2001). For example, in its efforts to use sexual orientation as a discernible category for market segmentation, the media has been known to frame queerness in a negative and stereotypical way, disregarding the diverse spectrum of sexual orientations (Nölke, 2018; Saucier & Caron, 2008; Tsai, 2004; Um, 2012). These distorted framings raise concerns about potential adverse effects, including the possibility of queer people internalizing these media representations within their self-concept (Nölke, 2018; Tsai, 2012).

In our study, Chinese newspapers may not only reflect public attitudes toward HMQ but may also shape public opinion on HMQ and related

norms. In turn, these discourses may impact family members, who as a result may pressure queer people into heterosexual marriage (J. Zhu et al., 2022). Identifying societal discourses associated with HMQ might help uncover the social background of family pressure experienced by Chinese queer people to engage in heterosexual marriage. Given the important role of media in representing and producing societal discourses about HMQ, this paper thus examines how Chinese newspapers frame HMQ to uncover associated societal discourses. Specifically, this study aims to answer how Chinese newspapers frame heterosexual marriage undertaken by Chinese queer people.

## Method

### Data collection

The data collection was carried out in the China Digital Library, where around 140 million national and regional Chinese newspaper articles are archived. Combining keywords related to marriage and the queer people involved, we conducted 10 separate keyword searches in the database and extracted articles published up to November 2021 for further steps. For example, we connected *Tongqi* with *Tongzhi* by using “AND,” and this search string produced 98 records. The 10 searches yielded a total of 894 records. Details of the Chinese search queries and results are displayed in Table 1.

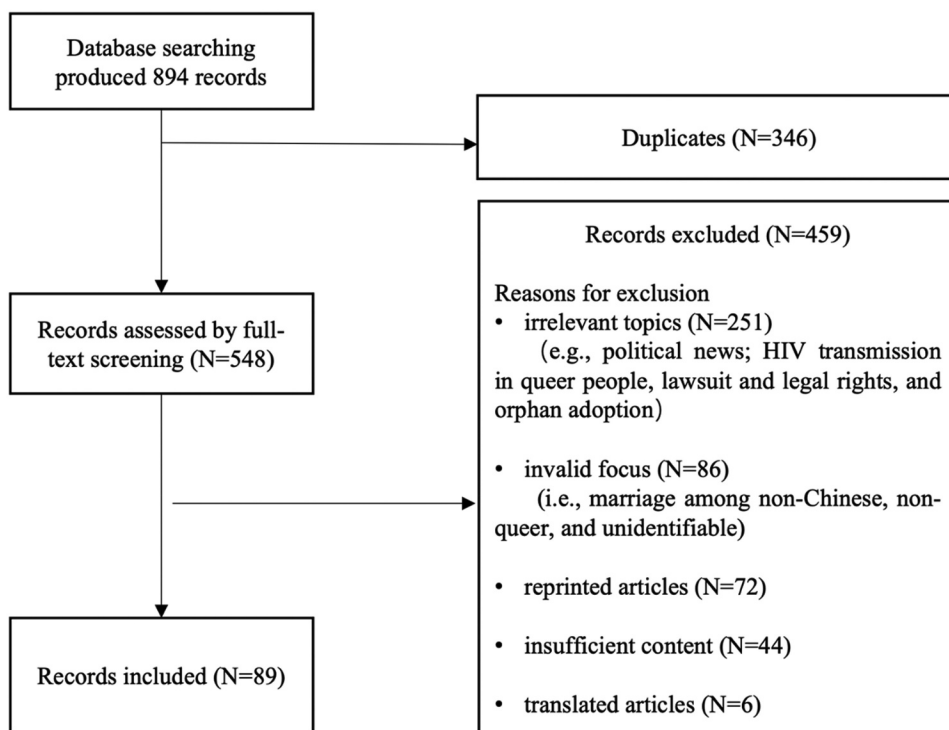
### Data selection

The following criteria were used to screen newspaper articles for eligibility. To be included, articles had to (a) discuss HMQ; (b) report on mainland Chinese queer people and/or heterosexual people in HMQ; (c)

**Table 1.** Search string combinations.

Marriage type	Queer people	Number of records
Tongqi ( Gay's Wife Marriage )	Tongzhi (originally meaning 'comrade,' often referring to queer people)	98
Tongqi ( Gay's Wife Marriage )	Tongxinglian (originally meaning 'homosexuality,' often referring to same-sex-loving people)	212
Tongfu ( Lesbian's Husband Marriage )	Tongzhi	24
Tongfu ( Lesbian's Husband Marriage )	Tongxinglian	20
Pianhun ( Marriage Fraud )	Tongzhi	79
Pianhun ( Marriage Fraud )	Tongxinglian	117
Xinghun (The abbreviation of Formality Marriage)	Tongzhi	78
Xinghun ( Formality Marriage )	Tongxinglian	37
Xingshi Hunyin (Formality Marriage)	Tongzhi	117
Xingshi Hunyin ( Formality Marriage )	Tongxinglian	112

A total of 346 duplicates were removed, resulting in a final database of 548 articles to be screened for eligibility.

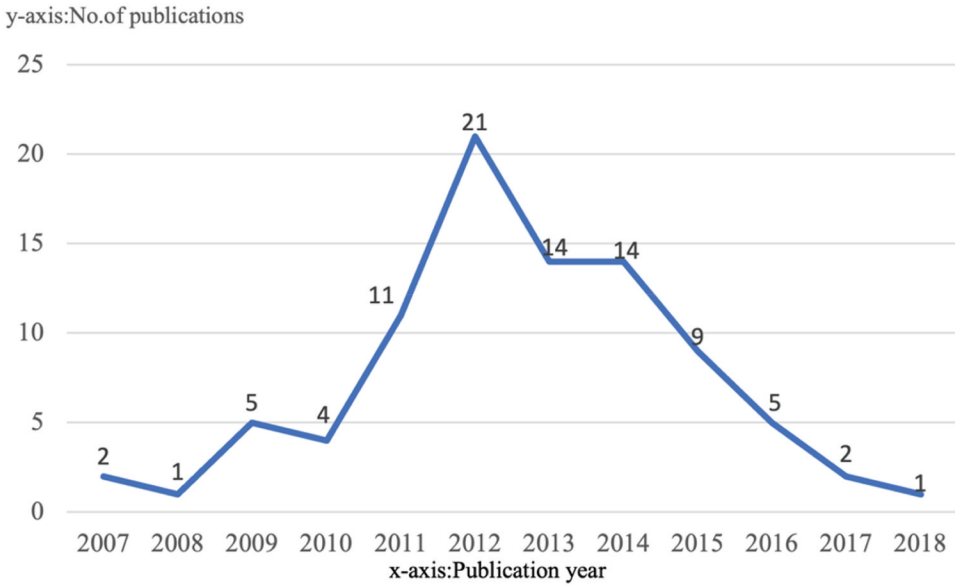


**Figure 1.** Article identification and screening process.

report substantial content about the experiences/feelings/actions of people involved in HMQ or journalist comments/attitudes on HMQ—articles simply mentioning HMQ as a term without showing the experiences or attitudes were excluded; and (d) be original and published in Chinese newspapers. The identification and screening process is detailed in [Figure 1](#). After applying our inclusion criteria to screen the newspaper articles, we retained 89 articles for analysis in our study.

### **Data characteristics**

The newspaper articles included were published between 2007 and 2018. The majority of included articles reported on FM and GWM. FM was exclusively presented in 26 articles, while 59 articles discussed only GWM. A total of four articles described both FM and GWM. LHM was mentioned as a term in nine GWM articles without providing substantial details. For this reason, LHM will not be further discussed in this paper. [Figure 2](#) demonstrates the distribution of newspaper articles by year. The spike in 2012 can be attributed in part to an incident where a heterosexual woman in a GWM took their life.



**Figure 2.** Number of articles by publication year.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to examine the content of the newspaper articles. Using an inductive approach, we first coded the articles through line-by-line open coding to generate initial codes. Next, we grouped the codes into sub-sub-themes. We then identified patterns among these sub-sub-themes and grouped those sharing similar patterns into sub-themes. Finally, we organized these sub-themes into higher-order framings.

The research team of this study comprises researchers from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Chinese and European, as well as diverse sexualities (i.e., queer and heterosexual). The team members are also diverse with respect to gender and represent multiple disciplinary backgrounds (i.e., sociology, psychology and interdisciplinary social science). The diversity of the research team enhances the robustness of data analysis and reduces biases in data interpretation.

### **Results**

Our analysis distinguished three prevalent framings in the newspaper articles:

- (1) Highlighting problems of FM and GWM: This framing showcased characteristics of HMQ, illustrating its divergence from the heterosexual “love—sex—marriage” alignment (Huang, 2018) and the lack of



protection of institutional infrastructures (i.e., financial safety, health, and legal protection). Most newspaper articles highlighted these “problems,” and this framing appeared most frequently in the newspaper articles.

- (2) Portraying people involved in FM and GWM as suffering from heteronormative pressure to engage in marriage: This framing emphasized the reasons why people participate in HMQ, pointing to heteronormativity in society and in intermediate social networks as a driving force. The heteronormative pressure was also frequently focused upon in the articles, and this framing appeared the second most frequently in the newspaper articles.
- (3) Presenting FM in a collaboration frame and GWM in a deception frame: This framing showed how FM and GWM were practiced. This framing contrasted the two types of marriage, with FM linked to collaboration and consent and GWM linked to deception and a lack of consent, making FM more acceptable. Compared to the previous two framings, this framing appeared relatively less and least frequently in the articles.

### ***Highlighting problems of FM and GWM***

#### ***Problematizing GWM and FM for the absence of romantic heterosexual love***

In Chinese newspapers, one of the most frequently highlighted issues concerning GWM and FM centered on the absence of romantic heterosexual love—the love between a woman and a man. GWM news articles tended to blame queer husbands for trapping their heterosexual wives in loveless marriages where their needs for love could never be satisfied. As one article put it, “Not only are the wives unable to get love and sexual satisfaction from their husbands” (Yi, 2013). The articles treated love as the fundamental element that underpins the quality and happiness of a marriage. The absence of love, in contrast, was often presented as a source of pain to heterosexual women: “It is the lack of interactions and love between married partners that makes married life painful for the wives. Marriage was only a relationship without real substance; the quality and happiness of marriage were consequently flowers in water/the moon in a maze [fake]” (Yang, 2012). One heterosexual wife in a GWM described the distress she felt when her husband rejected her affection: “I saw hatred [for me] in his eyes. Whenever I tried to get close to him, his hatred stabbed me painfully like a sword” (Gao, 2014). Stories like this underscore how the absence of romantic heterosexual love caused misery for the wives. In other words, the misery presented in the newspaper articles served to emphasize the importance of heterosexual love upheld by the articles and to



portray GWM as “problematic” because of the absence of heterosexual romantic love.

The articles also problematized FM, which was depicted as loveless by design due to the rejection of love by the queer spouses in this marriage. As one article described, “[A queer woman] even wanted to squeeze sweetness from lies. [The queer woman] took this fake marriage seriously and even expected her husband to show true love to her” (Meiri Xinbao, 2010). This excerpt underscores the normative expectations of romantic heterosexual love in an “ideal marriage,” where love would naturally make the marriage serious.

The articles about FM frequently linked the absence of love to other marital issues, especially the need of signing prenuptial contracts. For example, “Because FM lacks the basis of love “[...] couples [in FM] [...] usually sign a prenuptial property agreement” (C. Zhu & Cui, 2013). Articles also suggested that the lack of love made FM more fragile. One article, for example, asserted that “this marriage [FM] couldn’t be sustained by a solid foundation of love and emotion, thus this marriage was more likely to be problematic” (Bao, 2012). In the articles, FM was thus “problematic” because this marriage lacked a solid foundation of marriage—romantic heterosexual love.

### *Problematizing GWM for sex and health risks*

In addition to the absence of romantic heterosexual love, news articles also highlighted concerns with GWM in relation to sexual and health risks. Sex, as depicted in these articles, referred to sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. Articles emphasized the indispensability of sexual intimacy in establishing and sustaining a marriage. In contrast, they problematized sex in GWM in three ways: sexual intimacy in GWM was portrayed as completely absent because of the disinterest of queer husbands, as manipulative because queer husbands engaged in sexual intercourse solely for procreative purposes, or as unsatisfactory because it failed to meet the expectations of heterosexual wives. GWM, a marriage where sex was absent, manipulative, or unsatisfactory was thus presented as problematic, and most articles on GWM concluded that this kind of marriage could not be happy. As one journalist opined, “A marriage with sex is not necessarily happy, but a marriage without sex will definitely not be happy, and this has been the truth since the beginning of time” (Hou, 2012). The emphasis was further reinforced through a visual representation with an illustration of a man and a woman sitting back-to-back on a bed, accompanied by stories of the suffering endured in a sexless marriage.

GWM was also criticized for its detrimental impact on the sexual, physical, and mental health of the heterosexual women involved. News articles noted how wives suffered from infection of HIV/STDs unknowingly transmitted by their husbands and endured physical abuse within the marriage. Newspapers often cited scientific results or expert opinions from health studies to stress the

severity and prevalence of the abuse and HIV infection in GWM, thus problematizing GWM for having these risks. “Among the 30 wives of gays surveyed [by a university], 94% of the participants suffered from mental or physical abuse during the marriage” (Jin Wanbao, 2014). As for the mental health impact of GWM on heterosexual wives, the newspaper articles accentuated the psychological distress endured by these women, stemming from feelings of being cheated into GWM and the shame of marrying a queer man. The articles expounded on these women’s desire to avoid facing the pain caused by the marriage experience. Further, the heterosexual wives were portrayed as having to disguise themselves from being recognized as the spouses of gay men within their intermediate networks. As the following quote illustrates, heterosexual wives tolerated the shame and suffered in silence: “It can be either the worry of ‘losing face’ that makes the wives remain silent or the difficulty that prevents the wives from effectively vocalizing themselves. The wives have trouble finding an outlet for their sunken voices” (Yang, 2012).

#### ***Problematizing FM for financial and legal risks***

Articles addressing FM problematized this marriage for imposing financial burdens and risks on the married partners. The following quote exemplifies the financial risks associated with FM and the challenges of navigating such risks within the framework and expectations of marriage: “Financial problems are an underlying risk for couples in FM. If a partner in FM, especially a woman, does not have sufficient income to support themselves, the other half is expected [by society and family] to take over the financial and caring responsibility during the marriage. This is totally unacceptable to FM candidates” (C. Zhu & Cui, 2013).

Legal risks were also a recurrent problem highlighted in coverage about FM. Newspaper articles often emphasized the necessity for pre-nuptial agreements, which served to avoid financial disputes during marriage, clarify marital duties (e.g., performing as a couple at family gatherings, visiting parents), and establish the boundaries for married life. As one journalist wrote, “If [queer people] decide to enter into FM, various preparations should be made. For example, signing contracts and property notarization” (Wen, 2014). In another example, “a queer person believes the marriage is risky because the contract made for FM is invalid and unprotected by laws. [...] There is no guarantee the contract could be implemented [...]. The feasibility of implementation depends on the personalities of the married couples” (Guangzhou Ribao, 2015). As illustrated in the previous quote, newspaper articles dismissed the legal validity of prenuptial contracts in FM, rendering these agreements—and consequently FM—problematic. Lawyers and judges were often quoted to support the assertion that such agreements were invalid.

For example, the following article cited legal experts to suggest that the agreement between a queer man and a queer woman was essentially worthless: “[The quality of] FM relies heavily on the personality and relationship between married couples. A queer woman asserted that the contract was not effective/useful [for avoiding risks and maintaining the quality]” (Yuan et al., 2015).

### ***Portraying people involved in FM and GWM as suffering from heteronormative pressure to engage in marriage***

In both FM and GWM articles, queer people were depicted as experiencing stigmatization within a heteronormative society, compelling them to participate in heterosexual marriage as a means of concealing their non-heterosexual identity. It was also suggested that the pervasive pressure of heteronormativity constrained queer people’s freedom to disclose their queer identity, and newspaper articles suggested to reduce stigmatization and exclusion. The quote at the opening of this paper underscored the underlying sense of shame associated with non-heterosexuality and highlights the need to engage in marital unions as a way to assume a heterosexual facade.

Pressure from heteronormative society translated into pressure from immediate social networks, where heterosexual marriage was viewed as an indispensable life stage. Consequently, news articles described how queer individuals were pressured to address expectations related to courtship, marriage, and reproduction, including attending blind dates arranged by parents. For example, “[A queer man] was in a same-sex relationship for years, he was constantly under pressure from his parents to get married” (C. Zhu & Cui, 2013).

The pressure to enter into marriage was not exclusively limited to queer individuals but also experienced by heterosexual women. In GWM articles, the heterosexual wives/women were depicted as experiencing pressures to enter into marriage and comply with parental arrangements for blind dates. “We [a heterosexual wife and a queer husband] got to know each other on a blind date [. . .] under the pressure from my parents, I [the heterosexual wife] reluctantly attended many blind dates arranged by my parents” (Gao, 2014).

### ***Presenting FM in a collaboration frame and GWM in a deception frame***

The final framing observed in the news articles was the distinction of how the two marriages were practiced: The final framing distinguishes between FM, characterized by collaboration, and GWM, characterized by deception. In articles about FM, some journalists attempted to establish a moral hierarchy of HMQ, portraying FM as superior to or more acceptable than GWM because FM did not deceive heterosexual women. As one article

explained, “Compared with this [queer people deceive heterosexual people into marriage], homosexual men negotiate with homosexual women, and they engage in formality marriage. This [FM] is less harmful” (Cao, 2014). Another article shared a similar view: “This [FM] is an innovative form of marriage. Although it is still a bit helpless, it is better than marrying a heterosexual” (Zhao, 2012).

### *GWM as deception*

News coverage of GWM highlighted the duplicitous actions of queer husbands, who tricked heterosexual women into GWM. When the wives uncovered the deceptive nature of the marriage, their husbands pretexted various excuses, such as claims of bisexuality or physical problems, to respond to the inadvertent disclosure of their queer identity.

Just a week ago, she [a heterosexual wife in GWM] came home due to the cancelation of her flight. She saw her husband lying naked with a person on her bed. What destroyed her was the fact that her husband was having an affair with a man. After a 16-year marriage, it brutally came to her that her husband was gay. She suddenly understood why her husband always used the excuse of erectile dysfunction. [...] The wives of gay people—this was a special group of people caused by gay men. (C. Li, 2009)

The articles highlighted these actions as characteristic of deceptive marriages, with queer husbands portrayed as the architects of the deceit experienced by unsuspecting heterosexual wives. One article opened with a quote from a heterosexual wife, vividly illustrating the stark contrast between her idealized vision of a heterosexual family and the harsh reality of a marriage founded on dishonesty: “I married him [the queer husband] with the hope of sharing love and spending my life with him. However, the man who promised to give me happiness turned out to be gay after we got married” (Guangzhou Ribao, 2012). Statements like this draw a clear divide between heterosexual women who entered marriages in good faith and queer men who, through their deception, precluded any possibility of “happiness” for their wives. Consequently, numerous articles urged queer men to refrain from engaging in heterosexual marriage to put a stop to GWM. As one journalist cautioned queer people, “Experiencing stigmatization is never a reason to make [heterosexual] women victims” (Yi, 2013). In this way, news articles presented gay men’s individual agency as the solution to an issue stemming from heteronormative social structures. It is also important to notice the absence of journalistic discussion about situations where the roles of deceiver and deceived were reversed, namely in LHM.

### *FM as collaboration*

In contrast, articles about FM framed the marriage as a collaborative venture. Queer people were depicted as actively negotiating their participation in FM,

discussing the pressure of conforming to heterosexual marriage and contemplating their personal preferences and standards on marriage. Newspapers also highlighted how spouses in these marriages collaborated to present themselves as heterosexual couples, such as when dealing with visits from parents. Guangzhou Ribao (2015), for example, painted a romanticized image of the collaboration between two queer individuals in a FM:

“Do you want to perform in this show [FM] together with me?” [A queer man] extended such an invitation to [a queer woman] after they had known each other for six months. [The queer woman] nodded. So, the two built a collaborative relationship [...] the parents of [the queer man] lived in a different city, and parent visits at spring festivals became the pressure of performing [...] like a normal couple [heterosexual couple], holding hands [...] whatever made us look like an intimate couple.

## Discussion

Our analysis revealed three prevalent framings concerning Chinese queer people entering heterosexual marriage: (1) highlighting problems of FM and GWM; (2) portraying the queer people in FM and GWM as suffering from heteronormative pressure to engage in marriage; (3) presenting FM in a collaboration frame and GWM in a deception frame. The newspapers used these three framings to illustrate the characteristics of HMQ, explore the reasons behind individuals engaging in HMQ, and examine how HMQ is practiced. Previous studies have indicated that heterosexual marriage is the norm of marriage and relationships (J. Zhu et al., 2022). The three framings identified in this study also point to the important social norm compelling Chinese queer people to participate in heterosexual marriage: heteronormativity in marriage. More importantly, the three framings show how Chinese newspapers contribute to the maintenance of heteronormativity in marriage. Below we explain how these three framings in Chinese newspaper articles sustain heteronormativity in marriage.

### *Sustaining heteronormativity in marriage*

Prior research has shown that the media can adopt a perspective, strategically framing debates to achieve a specific outcome and thereby (re)shaping public opinion around particular societal issues (Tankard, 2001). Instead of challenging and deconstructing heteronormativity in marriage, the Chinese newspapers analyzed for this study create two distinct hierarchies: (1) the hierarchy between HMQ and the ideal marriage, which made HMQ subordinate to heterosexual marriage; and (2) the hierarchy within HMQ, which made GWM less acceptable than FM.

The Chinese newspapers unfavorably compared HMQ with the ideal marriage and spotlighted the “problems” of HMQ. This hierarchy casts a normative order of marriage practices: heterosexual marriage undertaken by queer people is less acceptable than the ideal marriage because of the “problems.” The newspapers also essentialized FM as collaboration and GWM as deception, explicitly ranking FM as more acceptable than GWM, framing it as a less harmful choice. This differing acceptability reconstructs FM as a more “viable” pathway than GWM, despite both being framed as problematic under heteronormative standards. These two hierarchies in newspaper articles that report HMQ unveil how societal discourses sustain heteronormativity in marriage.

Heterosexuality is imposed as a compulsory condition of social existence (Seidman, 2020). It is often unquestioned, taken for granted (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009), and treated as a normative element that differentiates good sexuality from bad sexuality (Rubin, 2002). Heterosexuality was consistently endorsed in the first framing (highlighting problems of FM and GWM), portraying marriages involving heterosexuality as inherently “problem-free.” FM and GWM were considered problematic because they lacked heterosexual love and sex. The suggestion within these newspaper articles was that the health, legal, and financial risks could have been avoided if the marital partners had been heterosexual. In other words, such risks are constantly suggested to be minimal, unnecessary, or nonexistent in the marriage undertaken by heterosexual people. The problematization of HMQ highlighted that these news articles relied on heterosexuality as the default, or standard against which all marriages should be evaluated. Put simply, the Chinese newspapers created a hierarchy that positioned HMQ as less acceptable than the ideal marriage. This approach sustains heteronormativity in marriage by prioritizing heterosexuality while categorizing queer marriage practices as problematic and outside the norm.

Heteronormativity was an apparent driver as the newspapers sought to explain the reasons/motivations behind queer people participating in HMQ. This forced the newspapers to reevaluate HMQ and to depict queer people in such unions as victims of heteronormative pressure (the second framing). This entanglement between heteronormativity and marriage in China (Davis & Friedman, 2020) makes it difficult to decouple heterosexuality from marriage. Consequently, discussions around marriage in China tend to dictate upholding heteronormativity. The third framing demonstrates how heteronormativity in marriage is further sustained—by creating a hierarchy within HMQ to disguise it.

When discussing this intra-HMQ hierarchy, the newspaper coverage cast GWM in a less favorable light. This corresponds to the third framing, which presented FM in a collaboration frame and GWM in a deception frame. The journalists strongly discouraged queer men from deceiving heterosexual

women into GWM. Notably, there was an absence of challenging and deconstructing marital heteronormativity in the newspaper articles, for example, the absence of unpacking and highlighting the “problems” with the ideal heterosexual marriage. Instead of questioning the normative status of heterosexual marriage, the third framing upholds heterosexual marriage, the institutionalized heterosexuality, by blaming queer men for the unhappiness experienced by heterosexual women in GWM and underscoring FM as a more “acceptable” form of matrimony. By contriving FM as a more acceptable and viable queer marriage practice, the newspaper articles propose an individualized solution that respects structural heteronormativity. They imply that heterosexual marriage remains a necessary institution, and queer people should opt for FM instead of GWM. This hierarchy effectively shifts the responsibility, capability, and choice of marriage onto queer individuals. The emphasis on individual choice is used by Chinese newspapers to reinforce structural heteronormativity in marriage, preventing it from being challenged, especially in contrast with queer marriage practices that are presented as problematic.

Heteronormativity in marriage is sustained by two hierarchies created in the three framings of Chinese newspaper articles: one that positioned HMQ as inferior to the ideal heterosexual marriage, and another that portrayed FM as “more acceptable” than GWM. Our work adds a nuanced perspective to better understand how societal discourses play a pivotal role in solidifying the normative status of heterosexuality in marriage. These findings reveal that heteronormativity in marriage is sustained not only by degrading queer marriage practices as problematic (Seidman, 2020) but also by stratifying these practices into what is deemed acceptable and less acceptable/unacceptable.

### ***Strengths and limitations***

The original contribution of this work is twofold. First, previous research revealed that family members often force queer people into heterosexual marriage due to the perception that heterosexual marriage is the norm (J. Zhu et al., 2022). Our study goes further by uncovering the social background of family pressure: societal discourses uphold marital heteronormativity, and this may motivate family members to exert pressure on queer individuals to enter heterosexual marriage. This insight deepens our understanding of the social factors underlying the family pressure experienced by Chinese queer people. Future studies could expand upon our current findings by investigating the motivations of Chinese newspapers in presenting the three framings in their articles. This investigation may offer insights into the causes of sustaining heteronormativity in marriage, thereby contributing to mitigating the influence of societal discourses on the pressure to engage in heterosexual marriage. Second, and even more importantly, this work adds a nuanced perspective to



better understand how the normative status of heterosexuality in marriage is sustained through the moral hierarchy of marriage (J. Zhu, 2018). It emphasizes that this normative status is sustained not only by degrading queer marriage practices but also by stratifying them. Specifically, our research clarifies how the “collaboration” and “deception” labels are used to stratify queer marriage practices into what is considered acceptable or unacceptable. By revealing the mechanisms that sustain heteronormativity in marriage, our findings offer insights into how to mitigate and deconstruct these norms, which may ultimately benefit the wellbeing and sexual autonomy of queer people in marriage. Third, this study brings to light the invisibility of lesbian women in societal discourses about HMQ. LHM was addressed in merely nine GWM articles and only mentioned as a term, without substantially addressing “problems” related to this type of marriage, the reasons why lesbian women may engage in this type of marriage, or comparisons of this type of marriage with other types of HMQ. This invisibility suggests that Chinese newspapers frame HMQ not only from a heteronormative perspective, but also through a masculine lens.

As in all studies, this work is not without limitations. First, it focused exclusively on one media genre (i.e., newspapers). It is important to note that the ideologies of different media genres can vary significantly. Chinese newspapers are operated by authorities or governments (Qin et al., 2018), which may result in distinct positionality and ideological influences when compared with “we-media” platforms (e.g., Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok), where content creators can be both authorities and the general public. This limitation prevents us from fully understanding how different media outlets frame HMQ and how the social norms behind these framings diverge. Future studies should investigate different types of media (e.g., television programs, books, exhibitions) and compare the findings to produce a more comprehensive body of knowledge.

Second, our study did not examine changes over time. The articles we analyzed were published between 2007 and 2018, encompassing all relevant and qualified newspaper articles archived in the China Digital Library. The primary aim of this study was to map out societal discourses related to HMQ, and we therefore did not investigate the shifts in these discourses over time. This limitation hinders the ability to form a comprehensive picture of how societal discourses about HMQ may have evolved. We recommend that future studies investigate newspapers published at various time periods and examine the evolution.

## Conclusion

This paper unveils three newspaper framings concerning heterosexual marriage undertaken by Chinese queer people, shedding light on how these

framings sustain normative heterosexuality in marriage. Building on the insights of J.Zhu (2018), our aim in discussing HMQ in this paper is to contribute to research into the perpetuation of heteronormativity. Our intent is not only to provide a Chinese perspective on queer marriage practices but also to provoke inquiries into the sources of hegemonic power within heteronormativity, how heteronormativity collaborates with other hegemonic powers in shaping marginalized groups, and how to emancipate these groups from pervasive hegemony. The dismantling of hegemonic power can only occur through the persistent questioning of how these powers attain and maintain their normative position and dominance.

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