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Constructions of Asexual Identity in China: Intersections of Class, Gender, Region of Residence, and Asexuality

Day Wong and Xu Guo

In this study, asexuality is transcended beyond the spectrum of desire when defined against other identities that offer power, resources, networks, advantages, and disadvantages. Drawing on the insights of intersectional feminism, we use an intersectional lens to examine how Chinese assigned-female-at-birth asexuals in different socioeconomic standings understand and give meanings to asexual identity when they navigate marriage and reproductive norms, and other hegemonic representations and relations. The paper presents three constructions of asexual identity that are derived from different intersectional locations: asexuality as the pinnacle of evolutionary success; a globalized discourse of asexual pride; and indifference to asexual identity. We find that socioeconomic status at the individual and community levels contributes to a sense of asexual pride, albeit in different manners, thus legitimizing an otherwise unaccepted identity. Nevertheless, there are individuals who cannot find pride in their asexual identity. Instead of merely attributing this to oppression, an intersectional approach points to other positionings that enable personal agency. In doing so, we can facilitate a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of globalized asexualities. We also propose that the interplays between resistance and hegemony and inclusion and exclusion are elucidated when asexuality is analyzed through the interactions of social identities.

Keywords: Asexual / China / class / gender / globalization / identity / intersectionality / sexualities

There is a limited but growing body of literature on the extensive diversity within the asexual population and the ways that asexuals use different identity categories to position themselves. However, research on the multifaceted nature of asexuality has mainly focused on the spectrum of desire and largely neglected the intersectional experiences of asexuals. We argue that there are limitations to understanding the construction of identity without careful consideration of the ways that asexuality interacts with other identities, such as gender and social class, in the

meaning-making process. Drawing on the insights of intersectional feminism, this paper discusses how particular intersectional locations are associated with differential access to privileges, resources, advantages, and disadvantages, all of which have impacts on constructing identities and navigating social norms. Asexuality raises questions about the normative conceptions of how sex is practiced and the relationships that are formed around such practices, thus establishing subversion possibilities of hegemonic norms. We argue that some forms of resistance may rely on hegemonic social relations and reinscribe them. Only by analyzing asexuality through the intersectionality of social identities can this play between resistance and hegemony be revealed.

The globalization of (a)sexual identities has fostered aspiration among people across the world, including in China, to pursue an independent (a)sexual lifestyle. Models of identity formation tend to present a linear progression of the various stages from awareness of difference and confusion to the last stage of coming out and the stabilization of sexual identity. These models are now widely circulated as a result of economic and cultural globalization. However, they are criticized for their risk of reifying an exclusionary narrative rooted in Eurocentric experiences. As such, this study seeks to offer a nuanced, contextualized, and actor-focused account of the constructions of asexual identities in contemporary China. It emphasizes various local and global forces, including the imperative of heterosexual marriage, the retreat of the state in providing welfare for the elderly, and the promotion of eugenic health, to name a few. In response, this article calls for a critical and intersectional approach to asexuality that would provide a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of globalized asexualities.

We apply a mixed-methods approach, which includes field participation, in-depth interviews, a questionnaire, and analysis of online materials, to examine the intersectional

experiences of class, gender, region of residence, and asexuality in contemporary China. We present three constructions of asexual identity borne of this work that are derived from different intersectional locations. Shaped by a high individual socioeconomic status, the first construction demonstrates how portraying asexuality as the pinnacle of evolutionary success makes possible a sense of asexual pride. The second construction reflects the globalized discourse of pride and the development of a communal identity in metropolitan cities such as Beijing. The third construction takes place in a smaller town where the narrator is alienated by the asexual community and develops a sense of indifference to the asexual identity. This article demonstrates how intersectional locations (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, and region of residence) of being privileged and/or disadvantaged can shape the subjective meanings of asexuality, negotiations of social pressure, and imaginings of a happy life.

Literature Review

Intersectionality, a central tenet of feminist thinking, is defined as the mutually constitutive relations among social identities (Bowleg 2013; Collins 1990; Shields 2008). Gender, sexuality, and class, to name a few, are not independent categories that can be simply consolidated to explain for lived experiences. Rather, they interact and synthesize to create opportunities for different social groups or to oppress them. A major goal of intersectionality research has been to make visible the interlocking structures of inequality on everyday lives, thus enabling the possibility of transforming the matrix of domination (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989). Critics of the early formulation of intersectionality caution against the quest to identify the most disadvantaged group, because the relative nature of privilege and oppression is overlooked

(Bandana 2012; Warner and Shields 2013). Intersectionality can be applied to all identities to show how particular intersectional locations create privileges, advantages, and disadvantages that result in qualitatively distinct experiences. Critics also draw attention to the three distinct but interrelated levels of analysis: symbolic representation, identity construction, and inequality-creating social structuring, and argue for the importance of addressing their interactions (Winker and Degele 2011).

Intersectionality enriches studies of identity construction by focusing on how social identities gain meaning in relation to one another. The very meaning of *gay*, for instance, can vary when applied to one's own racial group or social class, as compared to another group's (Bowleg 2012). Damien Riggs (2013) found that in an Australian online context, white gay men construct their identities by emasculating Asian gay men and portraying them as *others*. As a result, race interacts with gender and sexuality in establishing a hierarchy within gay masculinity. Gary Kinsman (2015) argued that class relations shape the material basis for erotic possibilities and the formation of sexual identities. Class interacts with sexual identity formation in ways that engender particular sexual practices and identifications to be associated with particular classes. Donald C. Barrett and Lance M. Pollack (2005) asked the question "whose gay community?" in their study on the interactions among class, gender, and sexual identification/expression among men who have sex with men. Their findings confirmed that higher education and higher income are related to a greater likelihood of gay self-labeling and lower odds of being sexually active with women. The authors discussed the influence of working-class masculinity standards that require demonstration of heterosexual prowess.

Individuals in China and worldwide are finding hope that the globalization of (a)sexual identities will allow them to pursue an independent (a)sexual lifestyle. More contextualized

accounts that attend to both local and global forces are necessary in order to avoid the risk of valorizing western-style liberation as the only progressive trajectory. An intersectional approach moves beyond a narrow focus on the metropolitan sexual identity and expressions of gay males to unpack the entanglement of identity formation and the structures of inequality. Dana Collins (2005) argued that sexualities are mediated by social class and mobility in an ethnographic study of the construction of sexual identities among gay-identified young, working-class men in Malate, a neighborhood in Manila in the Philippines. Collins's work found that rather than resonating with the *global gay*, access to desired material, cultural, and social capital is central to the making of gay spaces and identity construction.

To date, there is scant literature addressing the issue of intersectionality in identity construction and lived experiences of Chinese sexual minorities. Scholars such as Amy Brainer (2017) draw attention to the material dimensions of family pressure and support, which show the gendering of *family pressure*. For instance, some homosexual males marry women for economic success and recognition of self-accomplishment (Pan, Wu, and Gil 1996), whereas lesbians, due to their disadvantaged position in the job market, have less freedom to move out of the parental home unless they are married (Kam 2013). Elisabeth L. Engebretsen's *Queer Women in Urban China* (2014) claims to provide a rare, ethnography-based intersectional analysis of the subjectivities of queer women in Beijing. The work seeks to demonstrate the ways in which complexities of intersectionality, including material, social, and symbolic factors, shape queer subjectivity and negotiation of same-sex relationships. However, a potential limitation of Engebretsen's work is the inclusion of a very broad range of different factors, including marital and parenting status, education and job status, type of residency, place of origin, age and generation, sexual preference, gender roles, and sexual experience in the analysis (Engebretsen

2014, 36), which leads to the risk of focusing on individual differences. As such, it is important for scholars to think about which differences really matter and the number of such differences that should be taken into consideration.

One of the drawbacks of intersectionality is a potentially endless list of cross-cutting positions and the infeasibility of attending analytically to this plurality of stances (Anthias 2013). . This article foregrounds four main intersectional axes of difference that previous research suggests are relevant—class, gender, region of residence, and asexuality—and their constitutive relations. Specifically, we examine how gender and socioeconomic status at the individual and community levels bestow meaning to an emergent asexual identity in China and how particular intersectional positions offer advantages, disadvantages, and opportunities, leading to inclusions and exclusions.

Asexuality in China

Online asexual communities have emerged and flourished in China as asexuality has gradually become a more prevalent notion globally. The Douban Group of Asexuality and the Baidu Post Bar of Asexuality are the two most popular Chinese asexual online forums. Established in September 2007, the former is a sister website of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), and AVEN's website links directly to the Douban forum. The Douban Group heavily relies on AVEN's resources; its site administrators and some of its users post articles on the different orientations of asexual people. As of August 5, 2019, Douban had 10,452 followers. The Baidu Post Bar of Asexuality is the largest online asexual community in China with 16,589 followers. Aside from a page for posting on a wide range of topics, there is a page for

participants to build affiliate groups on the site. To date, there are five groups: “Exchange Among Asexuals,” for those who seek to understand more about themselves and asexuality; “Selfless Big Love,” which welcomes aromantic asexuals; “Asexual But Not Averse,” for those who seek friendships; “Platonic Love” for romantic asexuals; and “Married Asexuals.”

WeChat, a multipurpose Chinese messaging, social media, and mobile payment app similar to WhatsApp, also serves as an important platform for asexuals to build their communities. Unlike online forums that are open to anyone, WeChat groups such as the 203-member asexual group “A Family” provide privacy by restricting members. However, WeChat does not allow searches for chat groups and each asexual group is administrated independently, so it is difficult to determine the exact number of asexual groups on WeChat. Some asexual people create WeChat groups seeking marriage, while other groups only permit chatting as friends. Apart from the above-mentioned communities, asexual people are also active on various online platforms that are predominantly non-asexual, such as Zhihu (the Chinese version of Quora) and Sina Weibo (a Chinese equivalent to Twitter or Facebook).

Lijun Zheng and Yanchen Su recruited asexual participants from the various social networks and carried out the first scientific study on the patterns of asexuality among Chinese (Zheng and Su 2018). They found that the asexual subjects masturbate less frequently, have less sexual intercourse experience, and experience less sexual and romantic attraction in comparison to their heterosexual subjects. The study confirmed that “people who experience little or no sexual attraction” appropriately define asexuality. At the same time, it highlighted the heterogeneity among asexual people based on the homoromantic participants who reported significantly higher dyadic sexual desire and higher frequency of engaging in masturbation as opposed to the heteromantic, biromantic, and aromantic participants.

On the other hand, there is research that departs from studies on asexual-identified individuals in the online communities, such as Wong (2015), which focused on sexless marriages due to loss of sexual functionality as well as sexually apathy due to traumatic experiences. That study argued that imaginings of a happy life by Chinese asexuals (broadly defined to include nonsexuals) reflect not so much a globalized asexual discourse as the cultural resources that are available in China. Cultural narratives of the big family and siblinghood provide the language for Chinese asexuals to articulate an ideal form of marriage that is not dependent on romantic love between two persons. However, the study was limited by a lack of attention to the impact of social class on asexual subjectivities and imaginings of sexless marriage (Wong 2015). This study addresses that gap, opening up new avenues for inquiry on asexuality in nonwestern contexts by taking into account the intersections of gender, class, and urban/rural difference, as well as the confluence of global and local forces in the construction of asexual identity in China.

Methods

This study understands asexuality beyond the spectrum of desire, defining it alongside other identities that offer power, resources, networks, advantages, and disadvantages. Drawing on the insights of intersectional feminism, we use an intersectional lens to examine how Chinese assigned-female-at-birth asexuals of different socioeconomic standings understand and assign meanings to asexual identity when they navigate marriage and reproductive norms and other hegemonic representations and relations including pathologization of asexuality. To this end, we conducted a mixed-methods qualitative study of self-identified asexuals in China by carrying out field participation, in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and analysis of asexual forums, websites,

and blogs.

Social class, which is operationalized as socioeconomic status (SES), is typically measured by education, occupation, and income. Drawing on Wong et al. (2019), we argue that community SES cannot be neglected in examining asexuality, as some regions of China have more resources and institutions that promote equal rights and sexual minority identification. That study's findings suggest that men's *identity concerns* are mainly influenced by familial and cultural factors, whereas women's are also influenced by region of residence (Wong et al. 2019). Therefore, aside from an individual's education level, type of occupation, and income level, we also consider the role of region of residence, which is an indicator of community SES.

Our questionnaire covered respondents' own socioeconomic status, family socioeconomic status, family relations and pressures, and attitudes on traditional values and sexual identity. The questionnaire design included two measures—*identity concern* and *traditional values*. We measured *identity concern* by *need for acceptance* and *identity dissatisfaction* subscales, comprising a total of 10 items (see Table 1). The *traditional values* scale, based on four commonly heard sayings in Chinese society, employed to examine participants' attitudes about marriage, childbearing, filial piety, and women's value (see Table 2). We integrated the questionnaire data and qualitative data in order to offer a more accurate, thorough, and nuanced intersectional account of individuals' identity construction.

Table 1: Identity Concern

Need for Acceptance	**Identity Dissatisfaction**
• I will never be able to accept my sexual orientation until all the people in my life have accepted me.	• I wish I were a (sexual) heterosexual.
• I often wonder whether others judge me for my sexual orientation.	• I am happy being asexual.

• I cannot feel comfortable knowing that others judge me negatively for my sexual orientation.	• Asexuals have less contented lives compared with heterosexuals.
• I think a lot about how my sexual orientation affects the way people see me.	• If it were possible, I would choose to be sexual.
• Being asexual makes me feel insecure around sexual people.	• I am proud to be part of the asexual community.

Table 2: Traditional Values

• A man should get married when coming of age, and so should a woman.
• There are many ways to be unfilial; the worst is not to have offspring.
• It is unfilial to go against parents' wishes.
• Without her own child, a woman's life is incomplete.

We identified three constructions of asexual identity derived from different intersectional locations: asexuality as the pinnacle of evolutionary success, a globalized discourse of asexual pride, and indifference to asexual identity. These three constructions can be treated as ideal types that many real instances might approach but cannot be expected to fit exactly into one type or another. We used the exemplary narratives of three Chinese asexual online forum participants—Gina, Eugene, and Anna—to illustrate these three identity constructions, which helped us to understand the one-sided and often mixed aspects of identity construction among asexuals in China. Gina did not respond to our invitation for an in-depth interview, hence we were not able to compare her *identity concern* and *traditional values* scores with the other two informants'. Nevertheless, we learned from her posts that she is from Beijing, holds four degrees from foreign universities, and is currently studying overseas for her doctorate. Table 3 shows the three narrators' individual SES, region of residence (community SES), and the mean scores of *identity concern* and *traditional values*.

Table 3

	Gender	**Romantic**	**Individual**	**Region of**	**Identity**	**Tradition**

		Attraction	**SES**	**Residence (Community SES)**	**Concer n**	**al Values**
Gina	Ciswoman	Heteromantic	PhD candidate with four degrees from foreign universities ; parents are senior-level intellectuals	From Beijing; currently studying in the United States	-----	-----
Eugene	Transgender	Aromantic	University education; worker in enterprise	Migrant worker in Beijing	2.4	2
Anna	Ciswoman	Heteromantic	College education; freelance designer	A small city and a rural town	2.6	2

Gina: Asexuals Are Genetically Superior

Gina is an active Douban member and also one of the group's administrators. As a doctoral candidate in medical science, she defines asexuality from a medical standpoint: "It is disinterest, and not the inability or a physical deficiency to have sex. . . . Asexual females are actually sexually mature and have regular menstruation periods; the males do not suffer from premature ejaculation or impotence, and produce a normal amount of sperm during sex." She uses a metaphor to differentiate asexuality from sexual dysfunction: "It's like roasted meat. People with HSDD (hypoactive sexual desire disorder) can't digest it at all and feel sick after eating it. Asexuals digest the meat well and feel fine after eating the meat, but prefer to be a vegetarian."

Gina's definition of asexuality coincides with AVEN's efforts and some of the previously

mentioned studies that strived to depathologize asexuality. Although such studies contribute to increasing the awareness and acceptance of asexuality, they endorse a healthy/sick binary and fail to challenge the medicalization and regulatory regime that govern (a)sexual lives. C. J. DeLuzio Chasin (2013) was critical of the emergence of a *real* asexual from this constructed notion of asexuality in contrast to others whose asexuality cannot be rightly articulated—that is, the *real* asexual who must be mentally stable and physically healthy, and not suffer from hormonal imbalance; who cannot be overtly repulsed by sex or have ever been abused, and must be old enough to have tried to be sexual without success. In other words, as Chasin argued, this faulty notion of the *real* asexual has all the characteristics of the ideal sexual person but simply does not enjoy sex (2013).

In China, the construction of the *real* asexual has proceeded beyond merely positioning asexuality as nonpathological. Holding a firm belief in the superiority of asexuals, Gina portrays them as the ultimate perfect individual. She claims that asexuals are genetically superior, which ensures excellence in all aspects: "Asexuals are a more highly evolved species than ordinary people"; "the real asexual must be good-looking, intelligent, articulate, and excel at the workplace or in school"; and "the real asexual is energetic, agile, healthy, has a longer fertility period." Gina does not ignore asexuality due to physical conditions such as impotence or the mental trauma of failed romances, but her theory of genetic superiority relegates them to the status of *inferior* or *fake* asexuals.

Gina claims that *real* asexuals are rare, but that rather than an anomaly, the rarity represents the apex of evolutionary success: "Asexuals may only account for 1 percent of ordinary people, but among straight A students, there can be 7 percent to 10 percent. Some in the literature have reported that 15 percent of the top male students are asexual." In providing her

observations about the gender imbalance in the asexual population, Gina reiterates the definition of a *real* asexual:

> The ratio between males and females is 1 to 5 or 1 to 7. Few males are innately asexual. . . . Most asexual males are so because they have a physical condition. If there are any real asexual males, they are sure to be handsome and intelligent because the asexual gene cannot be passed on without a prominent advantage. . . . They have high IQs, so they have less interest in sex.

Gina's theory of genetic superiority originates from a society preoccupied with producing superior children and preventing genetically unfit individuals from reproducing. This quest for the perfect offspring can be traced back to the eugenic vision that underpinned China's one-child policy (1979–2015), which aimed to reduce the number of people and to improve the quality of the population. This approach is premised on the belief that people are cultivated by a range of genetic, environmental, and educational factors (Greenhalgh and Winkler 2005, 235). To promote *eugenic* (i.e., healthy) births, medical workers and other agents of the state carried out premarital and prenatal testing to ensure the genetic soundness of every child (237). In 1993, China proposed a controversial eugenics law, spurring international outcry. The law, which was renamed the Maternal and Infant Health Care Law in 1994, required those with a hereditary, venereal, reproductive, or mental illness to undergo sterilization or an abortion in order to prevent *inferior* births. The implementation of population control legislation worked in tandem with the growth in the Chinese consumer economy to intensify parental investment in the health and education of their child. Mothers in particular were provided with the knowledge and

techniques for cultivating their child into a healthy, intelligent, and well-educated citizen (Greenhalgh and Winkler, 237). This obsessive quest for the perfect child permeated throughout society, especially among middle- and upper-middle-class urbanites.

However, if asexuality is considered genetic superiority rather than a defect, asexuals cannot be considered genetically unfit for reproducing. According to Gina, *real* asexuals would be gratified about their asexuality and wish to pass on that genetic trait. She argues that the ultimate desire is for a warm and harmonious family, and that a marriage has no longevity without a child. She strongly recommends that both sexes freeze sperm and eggs as early as possible, and that even if one is inclined toward a DINK (dual income, no kids) lifestyle, it is important to have a backup plan in the event that one might meet a partner who wants children. The theory of a superior gene justifies what is otherwise unacceptable in a society preoccupied with creating the perfect offspring. Rather than questioning compulsory reproduction in China, the theory affirms the right of asexuals to reproduce and serves to assimilate asexuals into the mainstream.

Although there is no evidence of such in genetics research, some Douban members are attracted to the theory of a superior gene because Gina herself is the best living proof. She is never shy about her professed superiority, and claims to be an example of a *real* asexual:

> I have four degrees from overseas universities. I'm now a PhD candidate in medical science, so I am living proof. . . . The asexual gene has been in my family for many generations. My parents are both asexuals and senior-level intellectuals; they love each other and live a happy life. All of my family members, including me, are good-looking; we're all brilliant and perform far better in our studies than

anyone else I know.

Chasin (2013) stated that in western countries, those who are touted as *real* asexuals are typically Caucasian, well-educated, and middle or upper-middle class. They are more effective at convincing a skeptical audience of asexuality's existence because they have other social identities that are seen as privileged. Gina's educational attainment and social class not only shape her understanding and construction of an asexual identity, but also afford her some level of authority and credibility in the asexual community. She has over two hundred followers on her personal site on Douban who are supportive of her views and either believe that they are *real* asexuals or are convinced by Gina's supposed academic authority. One of her supporters even rebuked a forum participant who questioned her: "How dare you challenge her? She's an expert in asexuality!" Some other members find the gene superiority theory ridiculous and argue that the asexual orientation is only one of a person's many traits, but avoid engaging in online arguments with Gina and her supporters.

The intersectional locations of gender, social class, and asexuality can further affect one's imagining of a happy life. Despite the gender imbalance in the asexual population, Gina believes that she will excel in every aspect of life, find a soulmate, and live happily ever after. She announces confidently and optimistically that asexual women would not find life challenging as they have an exceptional appearance, a higher education level, better employment skills, and higher income than non-asexual women, and hence that many heterosexual men are willing to marry them even if they are aware of their asexuality. She advises asexual women to "just leave it to the heterosexual males to deal with an asexual romance or marriage. Intense love makes everything possible."

Recognition of (a)sexual minorities is often contingent on their performances of respectability. Asexual women's claims to respectability are based on repetitive performances of normative femininity. In recent years, some private schools in China have taught chastity under the aegis of perpetuating the cultural heritage of Chinese feminine virtues in response to the sexual revolution in China. Gina holds her virginity in high regard and is proud of her lack of intimate physical contact. When a group member presented a pessimistic view on the future of asexuals in China, she responded, "That is nonsense. Asexuals are clean, and don't offend anyone. We're respected for our abstinence. That's far better than the bisexuals and homosexuals." Respectability, as Beverley Skeggs (1997, 118) claimed, is a way in which "sexual practice is evaluated [and] distinctions drawn, legitimated and maintained between groups." Respectability is thus based on a hierarchical and domination-oriented system grounded on the distinctions between the respectable and the perverted. Gina reformulates virginity to draw distinctions between clean and unclean, chaste and promiscuous, undamaged and damaged goods. Rather than simply a reiteration of traditional patriarchal values, Gina argues that focusing on emotions rather than physical intimacy is the key to finding the platonic love that defines a *real* asexual.

Gina also eagerly embraces the detachment of the ideals of romantic love and marriage from sexual, utilitarian, and financial motives. The only reason that she would marry someone, she states, is the hope that they would be able to spend every day together for the rest of her life. Sex, social and familial pressure, or the desire for children are not reasons for marriage. She adds that financial stability is important prior to marriage because a spouse is not meant to reap financial support from the other person; thus, she says, an individual should consider love once financial stability is achieved. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) pointed out, distance from necessity

produces the habitus of different classes. David Swartz (1997) elaborated that whereas the upper class considers an activity an end in itself, the daily life of the lower class is about struggling to make ends meet. Without a critical awareness of how a privileged class can promise financial independence and freedom from necessity, the articulation of the ideals of love and marriage in effect disqualify asexual women as undeserving of true love if they marry for financial and utilitarian reasons.

Aside from economic capital, the pursuit of true love is grounded on cultural capital. An essential part of the *real* asexual identity, Gina argues, is the pursuit of platonic love, which has stringent demands: "One has to be interesting, knowledgeable, and charming enough with talent in language and an attractive voice. Ordinary people are not qualified for love." Bourdieu emphasized the role of cultural capital, or informal social skills, habits, linguistic style, and taste in the reproduction of class inequalities (1984). Although romantic expressivity has been regarded as a core element of romantic love in China, Yunxiang Yan (2003) described how ordinary people, including young villagers, use pop song lyrics to express their love, and how men who can skillfully use the lyrics or similar messages are praised as romantic. Gina's requirements of platonic love are apparently beyond the cultural capital embodied by ordinary people; she emphasizes knowledgeability and language talent. She offers practical suggestions on how to cultivate a romantic relationship: "To ensure a romantic relationship is a serious one, asexuals should avoid using instant message apps such as WeChat. Rather, emailing is the best way for communication because it is much more formal." According to Gina, the intelligence and linguistic ability to communicate in an interesting way (i.e., through emails) are fundamental conditions for the development of platonic love.

As a well-educated, upper-class, heteromantic asexual woman, Gina's narrative moves

beyond depathologizing asexuality to assert the genetic superiority of asexuals. She believes that *real* asexuals excel in all aspects and are capable of producing the perfect offspring. Gina's construction of asexual pride is achieved through the classed and gendered performances of a *real* asexual. *Real* asexual women, she avows, claim respectability through virginity, and pursue marriage based on pure love rather than sexual, utilitarian, or financial reasons; and the practice of cultivating a love relationship derives (or ought to) from the endowment and accumulation of economic and cultural capital. Shaped by a high individual SES, such construction of asexual pride can be contrasted with the next identity construction—Eugene's—which relies on the globalized discourse of pride and is available for those with a high *community* SES.

Eugene: I Hope to Live with Asexual Friends After Retiring

Eugene was assigned female at birth but self-identifies as transgender and as aromantic asexual. Early on in high school, Eugene thought that ze was bisexual and began to explore gender and sexuality in LGBT chatrooms. Exposure to LGBT discourses gave Eugene a sense of self-acceptance as they affirmed zir asexuality. Ze resonates with the notion of "gay pride" and believes that individuals not only should recognize their (a)sexual identity but also be confident about this identity. Ze recognizes that the LGBT groups offer many options, but has only been able to find a sense of belonging in the asexual community. Although Eugene identifies as transgender, ze feels an unbridgeable gulf between zirself and the transgender community, as the latter has aligned with the LGB communities who find pleasure in lovemaking and do not understand a lack of interest in sex. Eugene's asexual identity is about disidentification with sexuality and positive identification with the asexual community. On our questionnaire, ze

expressed rather low levels of dissatisfaction toward the asexual identity and need for social acceptance. Overall, ze has a relatively low level of *identity concern* (see Table 1). Specifically, Eugene is strongly opposed to the view that "asexuals have less contented lives compared with heterosexuals" and affirms that ze is "proud to be part of the asexual community."

The emergence of asexuality as a sexual orientation and identity would not have been realized without internet technologies that allow for connections and exchanges among otherwise geographically isolated individuals (Mitchell and Hunnicut 2018; Scherrer 2008). This increase in digital identities and formation of online communities around asexuality are new phenomena in China. Douban, AVEN's sister website, was the first haven for Eugene; the group is indispensable for those who are interested in asexual studies and literature. The educated members are keen to share asexual research studies conducted both locally and internationally. Members post their insights into asexuality, which greatly interest Eugene, and those proficient in English translate papers into Chinese. Eugene still remembers reading about the works of Canadian psychologist Anthony Bogaert over a decade ago when ze was exploring asexuality. However, as Douban is an open forum, many non-asexuals also post prejudiced comments and racy photos. The asexual members constantly have to face *haters* who dispute the existence of asexuality, consider the website a means of meeting a virgin, and/or position themselves as saviors attempting to educate asexual women.

Aside from actively taking part in Douban, Eugene is part of a WeChat group for Beijing asexuals which recently celebrated as the number of members slowly inched to sixty people. Compared with Douban, the WeChat group is a more private space accessible to only asexuals. The privacy WeChat affords enables narratives of asexuality to be shared in a safe space, which

facilitates the formation of asexual identities (Scherrer 2008). Eugene enjoys the more active and in-depth sharing of knowledge and personal stories in the group:

> We share some experiences such as childhood memories and the most recent asexual theories and knowledge. There's so much to share. I love the topics and most of the members are enthusiastic about them too. . . . I tend to gravitate towards the categories of asexuality, the reasons for being asexual, and the point of time when we realize that we're different from other people.

A 2015 Chinese asexual survey conducted by AVEN indicated that 90 percent of respondents have never attended any offline activities related to the asexual community (AVEN 2015). Eugene is among the very few asexuals who have done so: ze participated in a group gathering in Beijing and met up with asexual individuals on a one-to-one basis on three different occasions. Eugene is excited that there are asexuals within zir proximity and enjoys bringing online friendships into real-life contexts. In 2017, a post organizing an asexual gathering in Beijing was met with enthusiasm. The members greeted the post with comments such as: "Great idea! There's more of a sense of participation in a first-tier city [like Beijing]." Other members who would not have the opportunity for a physical meeting posted "my asexual friends live too far away" and "there are very few asexuals in my city." The population size, density, and heterogeneity of metropolitan Beijing therefore foster the creation of a critical mass of diversity and the connection of like-minded individuals.

Eugene remembers fondly that afternoon gathering with ten other asexuals in 2017. The organizers had reserved an entire café for the event in the tourist area of Gulou, which features

twenty-four-hour eateries and bars, to ensure that the gathering would be in an uninhibited and safe space. Unlike many LGBT events that utilize bars as the community space, this event's organizers chose a space less fueled by alcohol and partying for a quieter environment that was conducive to conversation. The WeChat group for Beijing asexuals has held three gatherings in total, including the café gathering that Eugene attended; another was held in a small private clubhouse, and a third was in a bookshop café in Sanlitun, one of Beijing's largest international hubs with many embassies in the neighborhood. Thus, it is evident that the vibrant and cosmopolitan atmosphere and multicultural environment in Beijing, along with the ease of access to cafés and community venues, have been conducive to Eugene's exploring zir asexual identity.

After the first gathering at the café, Eugene summarized the event in a Douban post and proclaimed that "it was so nice meeting you all." The first part of the gathering was a self-introduction and informal conversation. Then, Eugene wrote, was the real highlight of the event—sharing of personal views and experiences on the spectrum of asexuality. Although the participants experience different levels of desire, they found commonality in the problems that they face, including social pressure and the anxiety of a childless future. This problem-focused approach is important for identity exploration to move beyond an introspective and psychological process and focus on analyzing the factors that prioritize the concerns most relevant to asexual people. As sexuality researcher Paula Rust argued, "while the production of identity is a social-psychological process, the consequences of identity are both social and political" (Rust 1992, 366; cited in Scherrer 2008, 622). Reflections on the common types of problems encountered, the social forces behind them, and possible solutions connect the self with others in a socially and politically meaningful way.

Eugene is 33 years old with retired parents, and worries about how ze would live zir life after zir parents pass away? Since the implementation of the one-child policy, the Chinese government has strived to increase awareness on caring for the elderly. The family is considered to be the primary social security net; the state has retreated from providing social welfare in the post-reform era. However, many asexuals—including Eugene—who identifies as aromantic asexual, do not want to marry and have children: "I would marry someone only when they put a knife to my neck!" Yet at the same time, Eugene feels very insecure and uncertain since ze has no siblings, nor can ze rely on cousins who would have to care for their own families.

Ideally, Eugene would like to live with friends from the asexual community after retiring. Ze imagines a future inspired by the Japanese film *House of Himiko* (2005), which has attracted the interest of LGBT+ communities. Ze has posted this living arrangement on Douban, and proposed a small group like the *rainbow nursing home* portrayed in the film for companionship in zir senior years. The post has been met with enthusiasm and dialogue still continues. An asexual identity has motivated Eugene to revisit the meaning of a happy life. In the questionnaire, Eugene reported an average score of 2 for *traditional values*, meaning that ze does not subscribe to traditional beliefs about marriage and reproduction. Instead, zir idea of a content and happy life is living with friends who truly understand zir. This differs from a conjugal marriage, but can provide an equally satisfying life. Eugene aspires to a future in which members, while having zir own circles of family and friends, will reside together and contribute to the asexual community.

The 2015 study by Day Wong on ways that Chinese asexuals and nonsexuals cope with pressure to marry showed that some display agency by rewriting marriage and family scripts, replacing sexual love with affectionate love and conjugal love with sibling love to accommodate

their own preferences, while others do so by opting out of marriage (Wong 2015). Asexuality holds the keys to transforming relational networks that circumvent the importance of exclusive dyadic units (Przybylo 2011; Wong 2015). In Taiwan, asexuals have also made efforts to promote families of choice, arguing that friendship, religious beliefs, and the like can provide the basis of familial commitment. The Taiwan Asexual Forum, a Douban sister website, poses an important question: "Would asexual marriage be considered invalid?" The answer provided is "Yes, as the lack of a sexual life can be considered as the irretrievable breakdown of marriage, thus constituting grounds for divorce." Working together with the Taiwan Alliance to Promote Civil Partnership Rights, asexuals in Taiwan are driving a radical reform of marriage and family institutions to provide legal protection to (a)sexual minorities. Same-sex marriage has been passed in Taiwan, but the idea of chosen families remains in a stage of infancy.

In China, the idea of a rainbow nursing home is not so much linked to a legal reform of the family institution as to a housing project. As a migrant from a second-tier city in China, Eugene has experienced the soaring rental costs in Beijing. Finding the means to secure an affordable living space for an asexual retirement community would be a great challenge. Eugene has discussed the issues with a member who is entrepreneurially inclined and owns a small clubhouse. They look to the success of a gay social network dating app launched in China called Blued as an example of a way to generate profit to subsidize the rainbow housing project. They envision their own rainbow house as a building or housing complex featuring self-contained units and communal areas, but the financial viability of doing so is a real obstacle: "We talk about the rainbow elderly home from time to time. But we don't have any concrete idea about how to bring it to reality."

Back in zir hometown, Eugene has the option to live in zir parents' house. Zir parents have not pressured zir about marriage and have long assumed that ze is homosexual based on zir nonnormative gender expression. Eugene believes that one day ze will come out to zir parents as asexual because it is zir responsibility to show zir parents zir true self. Despite the relative comfort afforded by a life in zir hometown, Eugene chooses to stay in Beijing, where ze has friends, a career, and a dream. A year ago, ze left the advertising industry because of the lack of opportunities. Venturing into a different commercial field, Eugene had to accept a lower salary and longer working hours. Nevertheless, ze keeps a positive outlook and is determined to gradually move upward in seniority to the upper management level. In a competitive and dynamic metropolitan city, individuals are inclined to strive for success and improve their financial position through personal upgrades and skill development. For Eugene, these achievements will be essential material conditions ze will need to live in out zir golden years with asexual companions in Beijing.

Anna: I Am Indifferent About My Asexual Identity

Anna is a 29-year-old female college graduate who freelances for a living. She holds a rural residency status; her paternal grandparents live in a rural town while her parents are working in a second-tier city in China. When Anna is between jobs, she returns to her hometown to live with her grandparents. Anna identifies as heteromantic asexual.

Similar to Eugene and other Chinese asexuals, Anna used the internet to explore and validate her asexual identity. Early in her adolescence, when she was 13 or 14 years old, she says she already knew that she was different. She would develop romantic feelings toward boys but

felt a psychological aversion toward sex. At the time, she informed her family that she would not marry, but after she graduated from college, her family started to pressure her to find a husband. So she went online to do some research and later confirmed her identity as asexual. She did not have a sense of superiority or inferiority as experienced by some asexual people. She also felt that her sexual orientation did not affect anyone or anything other than her prospects of marriage.

Anna recalls that she felt the most pressure about marriage in her mid-20s. The 2013 Chinese General Social Survey indicated that unlike other countries in East Asia, China has near-universal marriage—that is, almost all women marry by the age of 30, and men by 33, with median ages of 24 and 25 at marriage for urban women and men, respectively, and 22 and 24, respectively, for their rural counterparts (Yeung and Hu 2016). In 2007, the state-sponsored All-Women's Federation of China created the stigmatizing term *leftover women* to refer to single women who are over 27 years old. Aided by mass media, the government has succeeded in portraying the purported *crisis* of a growing number of educated women who cannot find a husband. Since men are expected to marry younger women, educated women are warned that they should be more receptive or end up losing their youth and become "unwanted, leftover women" (Ji 2015). The marriage pressure is particularly intense in smaller cities and towns, where people have stronger ties to relatives and neighbors. Anna's family was keen to introduce her to prospective marriage partners despite her reluctance to go on blind dates. Anna felt the most guilt toward her aging grandparents and finally promised them that she would marry before she turned 30 so that they would not worry about her. In the years that followed, Anna tried very hard to find a marriage partner in both the asexual and the LGBT communities, without success. She met an asexual man during a business trip, but he appeared passive in the conversation; when she brought up the topic of planning for the future, he was nonresponsive. They never saw

each other again.

The language of love and intimacy has shaped the practice of choosing a mate in contemporary rural China. An ideal mate is expected to be *youhuashuo*—that is, having a lot to talk about (Yan 2003). Anna says that a prospective asexual partner's financial situation would not matter as long as they could communicate well with each other. Unlike Gina, who emphasizes language talent and skills, Anna is concerned about a lack of interest in advancing the relationship, which has little to do with cultural capital. Anna has also tried to find a partner for a pro forma marriage, and to that effect, she met up with a gay man. However, she attributes their hesitance to move forward to the fact that the marriage would be purely a business deal, which she feels would be problematic if the other person has bad intentions. The man was also concerned that Anna would not be able to act appropriately in front of his parents and, as a result, would expose their charade. In the end, both were reluctant to relinquish their freedom and deal with all the issues of a sham marriage.

In the years that Anna was struggling to fulfilling her promise to her grandparents, she distanced herself from the asexual community. Anna is not like Eugene, who is inquisitive about asexuality, nor is she interested in the exchanges on daily encounters. She admits that her participation in an asexual group has been mainly focused on her search for a marriage partner, and that consequently she has not been able to develop friendships with the other members. Although she had posted her experience in trying to find an asexual partner on Douban, she hid her attempts to seek a pro forma marriage from the asexual community, where such marriages are despised for their *mudixing* (motive, or purpose). According to Lik Sam Chan (2019), *mudixing* refers to a situation in which a singular purpose is presented explicitly, overtly, and directly. Young people in China are critical that marriage sites and matchmaking are full of

mudixing, and instead prefer to use dating apps. In the asexual community, a combination of different factors—adherence to the ideal of romantic love, an awareness of the disadvantaged position of women in marriage, and a distrust of the motive of gay men in getting a free womb—has contributed to the rejection of pro forma marriages, particularly by asexual women who have a higher socioeconomic status or more resources at the personal and community levels. The rejection of pro forma marriages, however, marginalizes and silences women who marry for utilitarian reasons. Anna also feels that she has little in common with the asexual members, and subsequently reduced her activity in the online community.

Anna has not been able to seek emotional support from the asexual community. She also says that she did not find the coming out strategy advocated by asexual members to be useful in coping with the familial pressure to marry. Coming out is often regarded as the last stage of sexual identity development in models that present a linear progression from awareness of difference and confusion to stabilization of sexual identity. These models are widely circulated as a result of economic and cultural globalization. Criticisms have been raised with regard to their danger of reifying into an exclusionary narrative rooted in the experiences of Europeans and North Americans. In Chinese societies, the disclosure of sexual identity can be understood not so much as identity work but a relational strategy connected to a wider set of family practices and expectations (Brainer 2017). The era of the one-child policy has witnessed changing expectations around parent-child intimacy characterized by a shift from authoritarian parenting to affective and communicative disclosure (Evans 2010; Yan 2003). Anna has shared with her parents that she has no sexual interest or desire. Their advice to Anna was to seek medical help, which Anna rebuffed by explaining to them that asexuality is not a psychological problem and that there is no remedy. Anna has had to face not only the imperative of heterosexual marriage in small cities,

but also the pathologization and medicalization of asexuality. Although she has already come out to her parents, they do not really understand her situation, and instead question why she has such problems while others do not.

If asexuality is beyond the comprehension and empirical observation of Anna's parents, how can she seek their understanding and acceptance of her rejection of a heterosexual marriage? Anna says she resorted to sharing her observations of married life, which allowed her parents to empathize with her. She detailed all her issues with marriage and explained to her parents that she sees marriage as a burden. Anna also spelled out the problems of having children; she sees the challenges of raising children since she lives with relatives:

> A married woman has to cook, clean, care for the children and also work. There might be conflicts with the mother-in-law or problems with the husband. She needs to handle a whole range of emotions and practical issues. These are problems that a single woman would never have to face. While one may think that marriage is fulfilling, most women feel that it is a tiresome burden.
>
> I fear pain during childbirth. Raising children is also a great responsibility. Parents would have to get up multiple times during the night to care for the baby. They would have to discipline the child, and worry that the child would get into trouble.

After observing the married lives and relationships of her friends and relatives, she has come to the realization that marriage is not a fairy tale, but a risk with many different issues. This perspective is also reflected by her response on the questionnaire, on which she shows a negative

attitude toward the traditional roles of women, including marriage and children, resulting in a low score of 2 in *traditional values*. Her reflective observations fuel her desire to carve out space for her own freedom and reject the imperatives of heterosexual marriage.

In comparison to her explanations about her asexuality, Anna's perspective toward marriage and children has allowed her parents to better understand her life choices. Anna does not have close friendships with any feminists and has not been instilled with egalitarian gender ideologies. There are few related support resources in small towns, unlike the numerous feminist and LGBT groups in metropolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Anna's opinion of married life is not exactly a critique of gender inequalities, but an expression of concern about her personal freedom. She has emphasized to her parents that more than anything, she wants to be free and happy. Studies show that rural migrant women have left home to gain independence, but most of them cannot secure a livelihood in the city, yet after experiencing freedom in the cities, they are reluctant to return home and settle for traditional rural husbands. The dilemma that they face is that marriage is necessary for securing their futures and yet a constraint on their freedom (Beynon 2004; Murphy 2004). Working as a freelancer, Anna is not committed to one company or one city. Self-employment means that she enjoys more flexibility and freedom to live as she desires. She is content with a simple lifestyle and a moderate income—just enough to cover her expenses. Echoing the voice of migrant women, Anna aspires to a life that is free from the stresses and strains of marriage. At the same time, she admits that loneliness is her worst fear. She acknowledges that marriage and children can provide companionship, which is too important to simply dismiss.

Unlike Eugene, who imagines a happy future shaped by the globalized discourse of asexual identity and community, Anna is resigned to the popular Chinese concept of fate

(*yuan*)—that is, to follow what comes naturally. In her response on the questionnaire about her future life plans, Anna did not choose "remaining single" or "marrying an asexual partner," but wrote down "leave it to fate" (*sui yuan*). If one is resigned to fate, there is neither activeness nor passivity in the pursuit of (a)sexual happiness, and one can therefore exist in a state of harmony, spiritual abundance, and relief from anxiety (Wong 2015). Anna has learned to cope with her fears of loneliness in her old age by living in the moment and focusing on the present. She finds pleasure in reading, watching films, and spending time with her friends. She enjoys having new experiences with friends—for instance, learning how to skateboard—and she hopes that they can all learn to ski in the future. Anna has come out to one of her close friends and was met with acceptance. She believes that her asexuality is unimportant and would not affect their years of friendship.

On the questionnaire survey, Anna reported a rather low score of 2 in *need for acceptance* but a moderate score of 3.2 for *identity dissatisfaction*. In other words, although she is indifferent to acceptance by others, she feels neutral or somewhat ambivalent toward her asexual identity. She does not agree that leading a heterosexual life would be more satisfying than an asexual life, but she also does not agree that she is happy being asexual or proud to be part of the asexual community, thus reflecting her indifference to the global pride movement. She expressed a neutral position when asked whether she hopes to be a sexual heterosexual or be asexual. During her interview, Anna said that she feels indifferent about her asexual identity, which she said only has a marginal impact on her relationships with family and friends, and about the practicality of coming out in coping with marriage pressure. For Anna, her asexual identity entails disidentification with sexuality but not a positive identification with the asexual community. Her story sheds light on how Chinese asexual women in small cities and rural towns can still defend

their personal freedom and asexual lifestyle despite an inability to develop a communal identity.

Discussion and Conclusion

Research on the multifacetness of asexuality has mainly focused on the spectrum of desire, but has largely neglected the intersectional experiences of asexual identities with other identities, including gender, class, and urban/rural residence. That is to say, the very meaning of asexuality varies when defined against these other identities, which afford power, resources, networks, advantages, and disadvantages. This article uses an intersectional lens to examine how Chinese asexuals of different socioeconomic statuses make sense of their asexual identity and defend their asexual lifestyle by navigating marriage and reproductive norms, as well as other hegemonic representations and relations. It presents three narratives that construct asexual identity through personal experiences and social connections in online and offline communities. We propose that the interplays between resistance and hegemony and inclusion and exclusion are elucidated when asexuality is analyzed through the interactions of social identities.

The first case study is based on the narrative of Gina, a highly educated, upper-class, heteromantic asexual woman. Gina's narrative goes beyond positioning asexuality as nonpathological to assert the genetic superiority of asexuals. This perspective stems from a society that is preoccupied with *eugenic* (or healthy) births, and the quest for the perfect child, especially among middle- or upper-middle-class urbanites. The construction of a *real* asexual—someone who excels in appearance, intelligence, health, and abilities—disqualifies those who fail to meet the standards and labels them as *inferior* and *fake* asexuals. Gina's case portrays a sense of asexual pride achieved through gendered and classed performances of asexuality: the

real asexual woman claims respectability through virginity and lack of intimate experience, and marries for pure love rather than financial or utilitarian reasons. Despite the gender imbalance in the asexual population, the *real* asexual woman feels optimistic about the future. Someone who has physical and cultural capital—that is, a person who is aesthetically pleasing, articulate, and knowledgeable—has an advantage in the marriage market and can expect their heterosexual partner to accommodate their asexual preference. Furthermore, according to Gina, the *real* asexual woman would desire to have children and pass on the genetic advantage to the next generation. The theory of genetic superiority legitimizes asexual identity and the right of asexuals to reproduce. Nevertheless, the resistance toward sexual normativity relies on hegemonic social relations and reinscribes them.

The second case study of identity construction is based on the narrative of Eugene, a university-educated, transgender-identified, aromantic asexual who has relocated from a smaller city to work in Beijing. Eugene enjoys the advantages, resources, and networks associated with a high community SES. The characteristics of a metropolitan city, including a larger population size and greater density and heterogeneity with a vibrant, cosmopolitan, and multicultural environment, have been conducive to Eugene's navigating zir asexual identity. That identity is shaped by the globalized discourse of asexuality and access to asexual communities and events, which facilitate a positive identification with asexuality. Eugene's sense of asexual pride resonates with the notion of gay pride in the LGBT community where ze first explored zir gender identity and sexual orientation. The LGBT community also offers symbolic resources, such as the idea of a rainbow nursing home, for imagining a happy future. As an aromantic asexual who refuses to rely on marriage and family to provide care in zir old age, Eugene hopes to reside with asexual friends after retiring for companionship. However, in a highly competitive city with

soaring property prices, Eugene's individual SES does not offer much advantage. Ze earns a moderate income, works long hours, and continues to struggle to survive in Beijing. The financial problem remains the greatest challenge for realizing zir dream of an elderly home for asexuals.

On the flip side, the third case study shows how disidentification with the asexual community contributes to an asexual identity. Anna, a college-educated, heteromantic asexual woman, is disadvantaged by a low community SES as a resident of a smaller city and also a rural town, both of which offer few related support resources. The intense familial pressure to marry in her mid-20s led her away from the asexual community, which has given her little beyond identity exploration. Preoccupied with finding a marriage partner, Anna has failed to develop friendships with other asexuals. At the same time, the rejection of pro forma marriages, by Gina and other asexual members who advocate for marriage based purely on love, has silenced and marginalized Anna. However, personal agency and asexuality can still be defended despite the imperative of heterosexual marriage in small cities and towns, as well as the pathologization and medicalization of asexuality. Anna uses the burden of marriage and the problems of having children to explain away the obligatory need for heterosexual marriage. This woman-centered perspective stirs understanding in the hearts of married women and evokes resonance among unmarried migrant women who view marriage as imperative for a secure future but also a constraint on their freedom. Anna's story is an example that counters the prevalent trajectory among AVEN members characterized by a progression from self-questioning and assumed pathology to self-clarification and, finally, a communal identity (Carrigan 2011). Anna feels indifferent to asexuality and has not developed a communal identity. Yet she defends her personal freedom and asexual lifestyle through reflective observations and dialogue about

married lives.

This study dehomogenizes notions around asexuality by attending to the intersections of gender, class, and region of residence. The findings show that SES at the individual and community levels can both contribute to a sense of asexual pride. High community SES and residence in large cities are associated with access to social networks and symbolic resources, whereas high individual SES offers economic resources, cultural capital, and prestige. Whereas both enable legitimization of an otherwise unaccepted identity, it is imperative to determine if the creation of asexual pride involves an exclusionary process or production of the *other*. Intersectionality research brings power relations to the forefront, which prevents them from receding into normalcy or neutrality. Attention should also be given to those who are unable or unwilling to feel proud of their asexuality. Rather than attributing this position as the outcome of oppression, an intersectional analysis sheds light on the possibility of other positionings that enable personal agency. This study also destabilizes asexual identity by revealing how social identities shift as a result of the navigated contexts. The salience of asexual identity may decrease while other identities increase in prominence. Future intersectional studies may wish to investigate the changes in the interactions of identities over time.

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