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Working Paper
October 2024

Patriarchy and
heteronormativity in East
Asia: drivers of lesbian
exclusion from queer bars

By Huanyue Li



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Design and layout: Ottavia Pasta

ISSN 1474-3280

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Abstract

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01st September 2023 /
reviewed for DPU working paper
30th July 2024

In East Asian societies, queer bars have emerged as pivotal spaces for the queer community to counter heteronormative spaces and realize identity expression. However, amidst this growth, lesbians find themselves conspicuously marginalized under the dual influences of patriarchy and heteronormativity. This working paper delves deeply into the intricate interplay between patriarchy and heteronormativity, and their impact on the visibility of lesbians within queer bars in East Asian societies. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, this study showcases how heteronormative and patriarchal forces create economic and urban barriers in urban spaces and familial pressures in domestic realms, thereby hindering lesbians from accessing queer spaces. The research also reveals how heteronormativity and patriarchy construct inequitable power relations within queer and lesbian bars, excluding a segment of lesbians. Lastly, the study identifies subtle rebellion and direct challenges as strategies employed by lesbians to gain visibility in heterosexual patriarchal societies. In unearthing these complexities, this research not only challenges Western-centric paradigms but also emphasizes the specific and unique exclusions faced by East Asian lesbian women. Through this exploration, the dissertation aims to offer a substantial contribution to the global discourse on homosexuality, providing a region-specific perspective that broadens the understanding of factors that unequally marginalize lesbians.

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This working paper endeavors to dissect the symbiotic relationship between patriarchy and heteronormativity in East Asian societies and how they collaboratively craft unequal power relations, culminating in the diminished visibility of lesbians within the region's queer bars.

01. Introduction

Over recent decades, the rights and interests of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals have gained significant global attention. As reflected in the city-based movements across numerous nations, activists have fervently advocated for LGBTQ rights (Ghaziani, 2021). Such activism has culminated in the emergence of queer spaces within urban terrains, carving out areas that promote visibility and acceptance of non-normative genders, sexual practices, and identities by fostering diverse forms of action (Browne, 2016). These queer spaces, borne from the reterritorialization of predominantly heterosexual domains, offer visibility to subcultures actively resisting and confronting the stronghold of hegemonic heterosexuality, thereby diminishing the marginalization of queer entities in urban environments (Nash, 2011).

However, the supposed inclusivity of queer spaces comes with its qualifications. They are not inherently accessible to all, underscoring the nuances of inclusion and exclusion within the community itself (Nash, 2011). The intricate dance of politics and societal constructs around bodies and identities reconfigures and amplifies spatial segregations (Oswin, 2008). Pioneers in the fields of feminist and lesbian geographies, such as Browne and Ferreira (2016), have posited that entrenched gender and sexual normativities perpetually marginalize lesbians and queer women. Building on this foundational understanding, Oswin (2008; 2019) introduces an innovative perspective, advocating for a comprehensive understanding of the normative structures governing multiple identities. These intertwining threads of gender, sexuality, class, and racialization collectively influence the marginalization of the LGBTQ community within what Goh (2018, p.1) describes as an “unjust geographies.”



FIGURE 1.1

Queer bar in Hong Kong.
Source: The Pontiac (2024).

While a burgeoning body of literature delves into the exclusivity structures inherent within queer spaces, its scope often remains restricted, predominantly fixated on major metropolitan hubs of the global North or colonized locales marked by distinctive sexualized identities (Phillips, Shuttleton and Watt, 2005). Such a narrow focus, portraying queer communities as monolithic entities, risks oversimplifying the rich tapestry of queer cultures globally. It can inadvertently overshadow or misinterpret the nuanced factors contributing to the exclusion of certain segments within the broader queer cohort (Bell and Binnie, 2004). To holistically fathom the inequalities germinating and persisting in queer domains, it is imperative to acknowledge that even though some patterns of discrimination are omnipresent, localized histories and cultural norms in specific contexts heavily influence these power dynamics (Sik Ying Ho and Jackson, 2021). Consequently, as the discourse on sexual geographies undergoes a global metamorphosis, scholars increasingly champion a more encompassing perspective—one that accounts for the variegated experiences across diverse urban settings, with particular emphasis on understanding the disparities characterizing queer spaces in the global South (Oswin, 2019b).

While much literature has predominantly centered on metropolitan hubs in the global North, the interplay of globalization and localization gives rise to distinctive narratives in East Asian queer spaces, exemplifying their unique position amidst these twin forces (Sik Ying Ho and Jackson, 2021). Turning our attention to the East Asia, specific locales present their own unique struggles regarding queer identities (Chu and Martin, 2007). When scholars explore the inequities within queer spaces in East Asian societies, two striking observations emerge. Firstly, queer bars have risen as crucial spaces for queer group identity expression in places like Shinjuku Ni-chōme in Tokyo (Suganuma, 2011), middle-class queer consumer spaces in Hong Kong (Yue and Leung, 2017), and underground queer spaces in Seoul and Shanghai (Bao, 2011; Jones, 2020). Notably, despite Singapore's criminalization of homosexuality, LGBTQ- focused commercial districts have surfaced, hinting at a disconnect between legal stances and urban development (Yue and Leung, 2017). Secondly, while queer bars in East Asia are rapidly

proliferating, they are not immune to the overarching influence of patriarchal and heteronormative structures (Sechiyama, 2013). Such influences tangibly impact accessibility and visibility within these spaces (Skeggs, 1999; Brown, 2014). Notably, amidst this growth, lesbians - encompassing both cisgender and transgender individuals - find themselves conspicuously invisible and often remain overshadowed. This invisibility is both caused and exacerbated by their exclusions from lesbian-unfriendly queer bars and the stark scarcity of dedicated lesbian bars (Tang, 2011).

This working paper endeavors to dissect the symbiotic relationship between patriarchy and heteronormativity in East Asian societies and how they collaboratively craft unequal power relations, culminating in the diminished visibility of lesbians within the region's queer bars. My research spotlights East Asian countries, including China (encompassing Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan), South Korea, Japan, and Singapore. While Singapore is geographically positioned in Southeast Asia, it resonates with the overarching patriarchal and heteronormative threads binding the other East Asian territories (Sik Ying Ho and Jackson, 2021). Utilizing critical discourse analysis as my analytical compass, I draw upon a confluence of data sources: academic papers, newspaper articles, archival materials, and other publicly available secondary literature. My initial endeavor is an immersion into relevant literature to fathom the duality of queer spaces — as simultaneously inclusive and exclusive realms. And then to analyze how the interplay of patriarchy and heteronormativity shapes these inequitable power relations within such queer spaces. Moreover, the rationale behind situating East Asia as the epicenter of this exploration will be elucidated. This analysis then bifurcates into three chapters, each chapter addresses the following corresponding questions:

- (1) Outside the queer bars: How do patriarchy and heteronormativity construct barriers outside of queer bars that hinder the entrance of lesbians?
- (2) Within the queer bars: How does the interplay of patriarchy and heteronormativity inside queer bars give rise to inequitable power relations, and how do these power relations manifest in queer spaces to exclude lesbians?
- (3) Navigating the Tensions: What strategies do lesbians employ to navigate and counteract these exclusionary forces?

This study challenges the Western-centric paradigms prevalent in queer research. However, its aspiration transcends mere inclusion of East Asia in the research spectrum. It endeavors to accentuate the unique exclusions experienced by East Asian lesbian women. Through this exploration, the research aims not only to unmask the entrenched inequities confronting lesbians in the East Asian milieu but also to infuse nuances into the global discourse on homosexuality, offering supplementary insights into potential exclusionary factors faced by lesbians worldwide.

While queer bars in East Asia are rapidly proliferating, they are not immune to the overarching influence of patriarchal and heteronormative structures.

A critical assessment of the existing literature uncovers noticeable gaps: an undue emphasis on the binary classification of gender and sexuality in queer studies, coupled with a neglect of an intersectional perspective that considers gender, sexuality, class, race, and other factors in understanding power dynamics. There is a pronounced absence of East Asian viewpoints and realities, with the discourse predominantly centering on Western perspectives.

02. Literature review

2.1 Safe but exclusionary: the paradox of queer spaces

The examination of sexualities in relation to space within the discipline of geography gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s. Pioneering scholars in this realm posited that the majority of spaces, whether private or those constituting our daily environment, are invariably shaped by underlying structural forces that are both heterosexual and heteronormative (Oswin, 2008). Such spaces serve to marginalize, regulate, and limit the expressions and needs of non-normative sexualities, with the LGBTQ community being notably impacted (Valentine, 2000). However, by the 1990s, the interplay between feminism and queer theory began to emerge more prominently (Podmore, 2006). Scholars proposed that homosexual communities held the capability to challenge and disrupt the deeply rooted spatial dominance of heterosexuality (Oswin, 2008). Prominent academics in the discipline contend that an individual's sex, gender, and desire do not invariably align in ways that sustain heterosexuality's spatial logic (Valentine, 2000). This perspective implies that the mechanisms underlying the creation of spaces can be both actively negotiated and contested (McDowell and Sundberg, 2001). Furthermore, such engagements can lead to the development of novel methodologies in spatial construction (Massey, 1991). Consequently, this paradigmatic shift has empowered queer communities to anchor their sexualities and identities within specific, visible urban locales, thereby facilitating the creation of queer spaces (Brown, 2014). This association of identity with space is increasingly viewed as a strategic form of resistance against persistent marginalization (Hartless, 2019). The urban milieu emerges as a pivotal locus for contesting citizenship, becoming a site of strategic importance for queer groups to resist heteronormative regulations and assert their own spatiality (Stella, 2012). Urban queer spaces encapsulate a range of areas that underpin both the political and socio-economic lives of the queer community, from densely populated LGBTQ residential neighborhoods

to commercial districts and their intersections (Podmore, 2006). Prominent among these spaces are queer bars and lesbian bars, serving as vital categories of homosexual commercial establishments (Stillwagon and Ghaziani, 2019). These urban queer spaces, carved out by sexual dissidents, particularly gays and lesbians, and forged through nonnormative practices, are envisaged to be safe havens for all identities under the queer canopy (Hartal, 2018). They are perceived as sanctuaries free from gender prejudice, LGBT- phobia, and violence (Nash, 2011), enabling patrons to explore their sexual orientations, undergo self-realization, and cultivate a positive homosexual identity (Valentine and Skelton, 2003). For example, Nash (2006) accentuates, by the early 1980s, LGBTQ activists sculpted Toronto's gay village as an inclusive domain for the community. By laying the groundwork for venues, social collectives, and support networks, they shielded the LGBTQ populace from heterosexually-driven hostilities, simultaneously nurturing an ambiance of belonging. Indeed, as a reterritorialization of heterosexual space, queer spaces provide a potent counter-narrative that challenges and subverts the hegemonic heterosexuality, which underpins the marginalization and exclusion of the LGBTQ community (Oswin, 2008). Drawing from empirical insights, queer groups employ a reinterpretation and repurposing of traditionally heterosexual domains, transforming their intrinsic nature into queer spaces (Valentine, 2000). Probyn (1995) highlights how lesbian desires can transform spaces, noting that even a simple act like two lesbian women kissing in a male-dominated bar challenges and momentarily disrupts entrenched gendered spatial dynamics, offering a brief deviation from male-focused norms. Queer groups not only reinterpret and repurpose traditionally heterosexual domains, but they also carve out entirely new spaces in heterosexual cities, giving birth to distinct queer locales (Oswin, 2008). Collins (2004) details the London's gay community, through a combination of sexual nonconformity, entrepreneurial activities, and urban rejuvenation established the prominent and distinct queer zone of London's Soho Gay Village in the 1980s and early 1990s.

An emerging strand of academic thought contends that queer spaces, despite their apparent inclinations toward safety and inclusivity, can paradoxically exhibit exclusivity and reinforce unequal power dynamics.

However, an emerging strand of academic thought contends that queer spaces, despite their apparent inclinations toward safety and inclusivity, can paradoxically exhibit exclusivity and reinforce unequal power dynamics (Oswin, 2008). Significant to the examination of exclusion within queer public spaces is the dimension of visibility. Visibility and recognizability not only serve as markers of legitimate existence for queer identities in public spaces (Stella, 2012), but also provide a means for queers to attain identity affirmation through spatial occupation (Fobear, 2012). Many scholars have investigated the phenomenon of reduced visibility among different subgroups within the queer community. Podmore (2006) reveals that lesbian communities primarily occupy limited commercial spaces like bars, resulting in a more underground and invisible compared to their gay counterparts. Taylor (2008) foregrounds the implicit hierarchies within queer spaces, highlighting that they frequently marginalize individuals from more economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Delving deeper into the intricate matrix of class and sexuality, Taylor (2008) posits that working-class lesbians invariably confront heightened impediments compared to their middle-class peers. These barriers encompass circumscribed educational prospects, a dearth of social networks, and employment precarity, thereby intensifying their spatial exclusion. Lane (2015) emphasizes that mainstream narratives about queer spaces often center on White identities, overshadowing Black lesbians' experiences. These experiences are uniquely shaped by intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, presenting challenges distinct from those faced by White lesbians. Weiss (2003) delves into power dynamics within the LGBTQ community, suggesting that gay and lesbian identities often serve as a normative standard, while bisexual and transgender identities are marginalized. This marginalization is intensified by underlying biphobia and transphobia, highlighting the pressing imperative for enhanced inclusivity and validation of bisexual and transgender identities.

2.2 Intersections of power: unpacking inequality within queer spaces

To comprehend why certain groups remain marginalized and invisible within spaces, spatial theorists must scrutinize the rules organizing and sustaining such inequitable power structures (Browne, 2007). Within this framework, scholars argue that the constitution of identities which recreate hierarchies (Lim, 2007) plays a pivotal role in forming these exclusionary power relations in queer spaces (Oswin, 2008). Researchers in sexual, queer, and feminist geography propose that both sexuality and gender are key axes of power and politics on multiple scales (Oswin, 2008). Therefore, feminist and queer geographers have sought to dissect how sexuality and gender intersect with power relations and individual agency (Binnie and Valentine, 1999).

When exploring the relationship between sexuality and power, academics note that heteronormativity serve as a potent structural force that operates through meanings attached to sexual identities (Allen and Mendez, 2018). Heteronormativity often establish heterosexuality as the standard for legitimate socio-sexual arrangements (Ingraham, 1994). Such heteronormative privilege also impacts the everyday use of space, including queer spaces, through policies, plans, and laws (Jackson, 2006). For instance, in Singapore, heteronormativity entrenched in policy and law has prevented queer communities from accessing the rapidly evolving queer spaces. Singapore has liberalized its stance on homosexuality to increase Gay Index which serves as a key indicator of broader diversity and inclusion within the city (Florida, 2003) for its creative city strategy¹, leading to a burgeoning of queer commercial spaces (Oswin, 2012). Under such policy support, the scale of queer spaces in Singapore can rival those in cities globally recognized for their LGBTQ friendliness (Phillips, 2014). However, on one hand, heteronormativity is deeply embedded within the creative city project. This is evident as the project requires “foreign talents” to enter legitimate heterosexual marriages to complete their immigration (Oswin, 2012, pp.1625-1628). On the other hand, heteronormative standards still persist in the national legal framework. As of 2022, Singapore has yet to decriminalize male homosexual acts (‘LGBT rights in Singapore’, 2023), thereby significantly constraining homosexual behaviors. In that case, despite the growth of queer spaces, heteronormativity still governs their everyday use in Singapore (Yue and Leung, 2017).

NOTE 01

Building on the 1985 recognition of art and culture’s economic value to counter the recession and the 1990s Creative Services Development Plan to create a culturally rich city attractive to investors and international talent, Singapore launched a creative industries policy in the 2000s. This policy asserted that Singapore’s continued economic success must be based on successfully navigating globalization and fostering a knowledge-based creative economy. Consequently, Singapore committed to joining the global competition for talent and striving to become the best home for foreign talents (Kong, 2012).

Turning to gender as a form of power, patriarchy, or male dominance in society, which influences social relations and power structures (Jeffreys, 2011), remains a significant factor influencing visibility in queer spaces (Brown, 2014). For instance, Adler and Brenner (1992) contested Castells’ (1983) assumption about gay neighborhoods. Castells (1983) posited that lesbians haven’t carved out distinct lesbian neighborhoods because they don’t possess territorial aspirations for liberation struggles in the same way gay men do. Instead, he suggested, lesbians prioritize networks and interpersonal relationships. Contrary to this, Adler and Brenner (1992) argued that when it comes to their relationship with space, the behaviors of both gay men and lesbians are fundamentally rooted in their gendered experiences as men and women. Consequently, gay men’s tendency to capitalize on spaces often privileges the male and masculine, overshadowing the female and feminine.

Although many scholars have critiqued the unequal power structures in queer spaces from the perspectives of heteronormativity and patriarchy, Butler (1999) emphasizes that to truly understand the exclusionary power structures within queer spaces, it is essential to acknowledge the intertwined dynamics of sex, gender, and desire. Similarly, Browne (2007) contends that examining the interplay between sexuality and gender is imperative. She underscores the importance of bridging the discourses of sexual geography and feminist geography, especially in the context of identity and post-structuralist explorations, to jointly challenge both masculinism and heteronormativity. On this basis, the intersection of heterosexuality and patriarchy becomes pivotal when deciphering the power dynamics that shape spaces and

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places (Browne et al., 2017). For instance, feminist scholars assert that heteronormativity encompasses much more than just the sexual relationships between men and women (Rich, 1980). It collaborates with many non-sexual practices rooted in the patriarchal system that upholds male dominance, together creating a gender hierarchy (Jackson, 2019). This combined force further diminishes the visibility of lesbians within these spaces (Rich, 1980).

As noted by various scholars, despite recognizing the complexity of gender and sexuality, early literature in queer geography, particularly in relation to sexual geography, often depicted essentialist understandings of homosexuality, portraying individuals as operating within stable, ahistorical, and immutable biological (male or female), gendered (male and female), and sexual (heterosexual or homosexual) binaries (Nash, 2010). Such binary classifications of gender and sexuality paved the way for the rise of hegemonic masculinity, a collaborative product of heteronormativity and patriarchy (Jackson, 2006). This collaboration structured hierarchies of sexual orientation and gender within the LGBTQ community (Song et al., 2023).

Hegemonic masculinity refers to male gender practices that legitimize patriarchy and heterosexuality, thereby ensuring the dominant position of men and heterosexuals while subordinating women and non-heterosexuals (Connell, 2020). Since relationships with women often serve as evidence of masculinity, the homosexual desire of gay men, which is not based on attraction to women, is seen as a direct challenge to heterosexual male dominance (Kahn, Goddard and Coy, 2013). In retaliation, dominant groups, like heterosexual men, may resort to tactics of violence and fear, punishing gay men seen as betraying traditional notions of manhood (Johnson and Samdahl, 2005). However, some scholars argue that masculinity can only be understood in opposition to femininity, with the former perceived as superior (Connell, 2020). This has led to a growing disdain for feminized stereotypes within the gay male community and the rejection of those gay men who do not adhere to hyper-masculine homosexuality standards (Taywaditep, 2002). Such attitudes extend beyond the gay male community, impacting perceptions within the broader LGBTQ spectrum. For instance, some gay men, unwilling to relinquish their dominant masculine status, may suppress or even deny their (homo)sexual identity, sidelining or excluding lesbian and transgender communities (Valentine, 1993).

Over time, queer geography has grown increasingly critical of rigid dualistic categorizations, acknowledging their role in marginalizing and silencing transgender voices and experiences (Doan, 2007). This trajectory in academic thought mirrors broader societal biases. As Wilchins (2004) aptly notes, during the 1970s and 1980s, Americans may have been warming to the idea of rights for gay people, but they harbored palpable hostility towards any semblance of gender queerness. Recent setbacks in LGBTQ rights in the United States of America underscore the persistence of these deeply ingrained attitudes. For instance, in 2021, thirty-three states introduced over 100 bills that sought to limit the rights of transgender individuals nationwide (Krishnakumar, 2021). Most transgender individuals are acutely conscious of their vulnerability in public spaces due to their visible transgression of conventional gender norms, making them one of society's most unprotected communities (Doan, 2007). Within solidifying assumptions that visible gender slippage or transgression constitute an absolute and reliable indicator of homosexuality, many transgender gays and lesbians, in an attempt to protect themselves from discrimination, make concerted efforts to conform and present themselves with a veneer of "normalcy" in both behavior and gender expression (Francis and Monakali, 2021).

Intersectional differences – including race, class, colonial history, and ableist systems – profoundly shape queer lives and spaces.

Beyond merely accounting for gender and sexuality, scholars entrenched in feminist, queer, and critical geographies stress the indispensability of recognizing the myriad power dynamics at play. They acknowledge that intersectional differences – including race, class, colonial history, and ableist systems – profoundly shape queer lives and spaces (Giesekeing, 2018). Oswin (2008) contests the oversimplification of queer geography as just a dialogue centered on gender identity and sexuality identity politics. Instead, she emphasizes the centrality of themes like race, colonialism, geopolitics, migration, globalization, and nationalism, urging that these issues be addressed as rigorously as traditional focal areas like sexuality and gender.

2.3 Beyond the west: challenging dominant narratives in East Asian contexts

Oswin (2006) points out a conspicuous gap in queer geography research, emphasizing its lack of alignment with broader geographical inquiries into globalization and decolonization. A notable shortfall lies in the examination of non-Western same-sex identities and practices within the broader landscape of global queer studies. Much of the research remains Western-centric, sidelining the diverse trajectories of queer cultural evolution evident in non-Western urban milieus (Leung, 2009). This Western bias not only diminishes the breadth and depth of queer scholarship but also acts as an impediment to the much-needed decolonization of knowledge production (Knopp and Brown, 2003). (Post)colonial theorists argue that the construction of absolute imposition of, and deviation from, norms of the other is central to the realization of colonial domination by imperial power relations (Chevrette, 2022). Yet, it is essential to understand that the phenomenon of gay globalization is multifaceted and dynamic (Leung, 2001). Varied factors, emanating from disparate socio-cultural backgrounds, can either bolster or undermine dominant power structures (Paddison et al., 2002). Therefore, transcending

the Western lens in queer studies is not just an academic necessity but a moral imperative. Examining how different queer interventions, practices and spaces challenge heteronormative discourses or disrupt discontinuities and contradictions within a range of social relationships can not only advance the liberation of queer groups globally, but also contributes to the development and decolonization of queer geography (Knopp and Brown, 2003).

Transcending the Western lens in queer studies is not just an academic necessity but a moral imperative.

East Asia, characterized by its shared cultural underpinnings and profound diversities, showcases a myriad of interpretations surrounding gender and sexuality. Within this vast domain, two common threads emerge: In many Asian societies, there is a prevailing perception of patriarchy, where traditionally, a gender-based hierarchical system is dominant (Seow, n.d.). Coupled with this, there is a pervasive tilt towards heteronormative ideals, where heteronormativity is heralded as the societal benchmark (Sik Ying Ho and Jackson, 2021). However, it is undeniable that the patterns and intensity with which heteronormative norms and patriarchy manifest in East Asia vary significantly (Sik Ying Ho and Jackson, 2021).

Queer spaces in East Asian societies have emerged at the crossroads of globalization and the aforementioned local social constructs of patriarchy and heteronormativity. The dynamics of globalization, when interwoven with local subtleties, have spurred the emergence of fresh identities, especially within the bustling confines of urban centers (Friedmann, 1986). This metamorphosis encapsulates the reshaping of gender and sexual identities (Bell and Binnie, 2004). Consequently, driven by the urge to express their evolving identities, marginalized communities in Asia have actively created spaces for themselves, spanning from the 1990s to the present day (Yue, 2014). Over time, these groups moved from fleeting encounters in public spaces like parks and restrooms to setting up more permanent establishments like gay bars and eateries (Yue and Leung, 2017). While these locales might still stand on society's edges, they have managed to imprint themselves more visibly within East Asia's urban landscapes (Liu, 2019). Drawing from the essence of global queer spaces, these sanctuaries shine brightly against their societal backdrop, offering refuge and liberation amidst typically heterosexual-centric urban settings (Browne and Bakshi, 2011). However, it is paramount to understand that these spaces aren't free from challenges. There exists confrontations and exclusions among queer groups within these spaces (Berry, Martin and Yue, 2003). Specifically, it becomes evident that lesbians in East Asia, when traversing these spaces, confront the dual burdens of heteronormativity and patriarchy. This leads them through complex terrains of both acceptance and marginalization (Sullivan and Jackson, 2013).

Chen (2010), in his seminal work *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*, posits that emancipating ourselves from Western-centric ideologies necessitates initiating diverse dialogues. Such discourse should commence at the grassroots level, particularly among neighboring East Asian countries. Concurrently, queer spaces in different countries of East Asia are replete with inherent intricacies and interconnections (Yue and Leung, 2017). In that case, rooting the understanding and interpretation of queer spaces within an East Asian context provides a revitalized lens. This perspective positions East Asian societies as mutual reference points, not only challenging the Western-centric mindset but also offering fresh insights into queer spaces against the backdrop of diverse yet interconnected contexts among East Asian countries (Chen, 2010).

Queer spaces in East Asian societies have emerged at the crossroads of globalization and the aforementioned local social constructs of patriarchy and heteronormativity.

2.4 Summary

This section systematically discusses the inclusivity and exclusivity of queer spaces. It then delineates the power dynamics that give rise to such exclusivity and critically evaluates the prevailing dominance of Western narratives in current studies. The literature identifies the salient roles of heteronormativity and patriarchy in shaping the unequal power relations within queer spaces. A critical assessment of the existing literature uncovers noticeable gaps: an undue emphasis on the binary classification of gender and sexuality in queer studies, coupled with a neglect of an intersectional perspective that considers gender, sexuality, class, race, and other factors in understanding power dynamics. There is a pronounced absence of East Asian viewpoints and realities, with the discourse predominantly centering on Western perspectives.

In response to these identified gaps, this research endeavors to adopt an intersectional lens and selects East Asian societies as the focal point of study. In doing so, it aims to illuminate how the interplay of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and related dynamics create and perpetuate power imbalances that marginalize lesbian communities within East Asian queer spaces. This exploration seeks to provide a more nuanced and intersectional insight in order to understand the experiences of lesbians in queer spaces.

Grounded in Foucault's conception of discourse, CDA views discourse as a medium where knowledge and societal practices are constructed. These discourses function within a nexus of historically and contextually specific power relations, vital for scrutinizing queer spaces and identities.

03. Methodology

This working paper selects secondary data analysis as the main data collection method, employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary data analysis tool, intending to unravel the discursive practices, deeply rooted in heteronormativity and patriarchy, that serve to marginalize lesbians in queer bars. The ability of CDA to demystify hidden power structures within discourse (Van Dijk, 1997) makes it an apt choice for examining the intricate relationship of societal norms in the shaping of lesbian spaces. Grounded in Foucault's conception of discourse, CDA views discourse as a medium where knowledge and societal practices are constructed (Seale, 2004). These discourses function within a nexus of historically and contextually specific power relations, vital for scrutinizing queer spaces and identities (Johnson and McLean, 2020).

After establishing the research questions, this working paper searches for academic papers, newspaper articles, archival materials, and other publicly available secondary literature related to the research topic, using previously defined notions such as East Asia, queer bars, lesbian bars, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Following that, this working paper employs the three analytical levels as outlined by Fairclough (1993) and Johnson and McLean (2020) to scrutinize the collected data from literature. At the Micro-Level, emphasis was placed on subtle linguistic variations, term selection, and their associated implications within each piece of literature. This fine-grained textual analysis illuminated how language portrayed and framed the lesbian experience within queer spaces. Transitioning to the Meso-Level, the analysis sought to understand the creation, dissemination, and assimilation of these discourses in specific contexts. This aimed to reveal intertextuality and the discourses between discourses, examining their lineage and evolution over time. Lastly, at the Macro-Level, the focus was on understanding the broader societal context in which these discourses manifest within East Asian societies. An in-depth exploration discerned the relationships between specific discourses concerning lesbians in queer bars and societal norms, ideologies, and historical backgrounds.

However, there are certain limitations to consider. For some East Asian countries, like China and South Korea, societal and political constraints have rendered sexual minorities a relatively untouched subject in academic realms (Sik Ying Ho and Jackson, 2021). Yet, the strength of discourse analysis can partially counteract this limitation. As emphasized by Johnson and McLean (2020), silence itself is a form of discourse. Thus, understanding how dominant discourses marginalize or exclude alternative narratives is crucial. Another limitation lies in the linguistic diversity of East Asia; while I am unable to read Japanese and Korean literature, the primary reliance on English literature might mean that the analysis is predominantly influenced by Western discourses.

Critical discourse analysis typically encourages researchers to explicitly recognize and reflect upon their own interests and positions. It urges scholars to interrogate their positionality within the discourse and to understand how this position contributes to a specific interpretation of the issues under scrutiny (Berg, 2009). I was raised in Chengdu, China, a city with a unique contrast. It is situated within a country often characterized by its strict heteronormativity and patriarchy. Yet, Chengdu is also celebrated as one of the most female and LGBTQ-friendly cities in the nation (Nast, 2018). I have continually negotiated my autonomy. This backdrop led me toward becoming a feminist researcher and an active participant in queer movements. Upon moving to London for my studies, my stance as an Asian feminist engaging with Western feminist ideologies has been a challenging journey, navigating the intricacies of gendered and racialized discourses. This international exposure further intensified my efforts to amplify the voices of marginalized communities. My personal passions undoubtedly influence my research topics and analytical procedures. However, I acknowledge that a researcher's values inherently shape their analysis in discourse studies. To mitigate potential biases, I have prioritized perspectives from secondary data over my subjective opinions.

This intricate interplay between family and urban spaces holds the key to understanding the diverse journeys of lesbians in their quest for identity.

04. Unveiling exclusion: the intersection of economic, urban, and domestic factors in the marginalization of lesbians from queer bars

4.1 Economic and urban barriers: exclusion of lesbians from queer spaces

In East Asia, urban transformations are not solely the product of modern infrastructural evolution; they are deeply intertwined with a tapestry of social, historical, and cultural contradictions. The interplay between national modernization and traditional preservation, globalization and localization, colonial and postcolonial influences, development and post-industrialization, and the dynamics of global neoliberalism and urbanism create a layered context (Bharne, 2013). Within this multifaceted landscape, queer bars emerge and

evolve. Their establishment and growth, and the inherent dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are not isolated phenomena. Rather, they are deeply influenced by these broader societal shifts. To truly grasp the nuances of these queer spaces, it is imperative to consider them against this backdrop of intricate urban and cultural transformations.

With the development of global capitalism, the emergence of East Asian societies promoted lesbian and gay populations as both economic forces and marketable audiences within the capitalist framework (Yue and Leung, 2017). The “pink dollar” has become a significant niche market, enabling the flourishing of the LGBTQ publishing industry and the expansion of commercial and professional services targeting specific LGBTQ markets (Altman, 2002, p.5). Commercial queer spaces within cities are perceived as places where LGBTQ individuals can engage in social interactions and establish personal identities through consumption (Rush-Morgan, 2023). However, this form of queer visibility is not affordable for everyone (Tang, 2011). Bell and Binnie (2004) warn us through their criticism of visible consumption within the gay community that the rise of the phenomenon privileges affluent, healthy, masculine, middle-class gay men. The queer consumption spaces exclude individuals whose class or gender does not align with the idealized consumer profile. This critique applies, to some extent, to East Asian societies. This exclusion in queer bars is most pronounced in two forms of commercial queer space representative of East Asian societies: the concentrated queer commercial space in Singapore’s Chinatown (Lim, 2016) and Tokyo’s prominent commercial gay neighborhood, Shinjuku Ni-chōme (Suganuma, 2011). The inception of gay bars in Singapore’s Chinatown and the Ni-chōme area in Japan began with affordable rent in disused spaces. Subsequently, the Japanese government tolerated territorial expansion for the purpose of economic development, and the Singaporean government even provided rent subsidies for properties in prime riverside locations to stimulate nighttime economy (Suganuma, 2011). Although Singapore’s Chinatown and Japan’s Ni-chōme area did not experience the gentrification-driven residential prosperity seen in the West, escalating rents still led to the closure of many queer bars, leaving dissatisfied and financially challenged queer individuals without accessible options (Baudinette, 2019). Another form of queer commercial spaces emerged in East Asian societies, adopting the small enclave model within mainstream consumer areas. For example, while the queer bars in Lan Kwai Fong and SoHo areas of Central Hong Kong lack the cluster effect of Western-style gentrification (Leung, 2009), they remain male-dominated, highly class-targeted, youth-oriented styles (Kong, 2010b). Consequently, this results in implicit or overt exclusion of queer communities that don’t meet the wealth criteria. In these queer bars where consumer capacity serves as an entry barrier, East Asian lesbians, due to stark gender pay disparities (Kim and Shirahase, 2014), often possess fewer leisure dollars to afford access to these queer spaces, rendering them more invisible.

The fusion of patriarchy and capitalism has crafted a complex web of barriers for lesbians. The gendered division of labor, a byproduct of patriarchal structures intertwined with capitalism, impedes lesbians’ economic power, subsequently limiting their access to queer bars.’

For instance, in South Korea, there exists a significant income disparity between women and men. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) revealed in a 2010 report on gender wage inequality that South Korea has the largest income gap between men and women among OECD member countries. Patriarchy play a significant role in perpetuating this gender wage gap in South Korea (Hlasny, 2011). From the perspective of The Gendered Economy, patriarchy and capitalism collaboratively shape a division of labor by merging biological reproduction with social reproduction (Benería, 1979). Men's productive roles and women's reproductive roles within a household contribute fundamentally to gender inequality. In contrast, women have been confined to the domestic sphere, involving unpaid work such as reproduction and domestic chores (Sahama, Wyeth and Pojani, 2021). However, after the 1960s, South Korea embarked on economic liberalization, export-oriented industrialization, and feminized light industry, leading to increased employment opportunities for women (Guicheney, 2015). According to many scholars, the significant rise in women's employment in the manufacturing sector should have acted as a catalyst for narrowing the gender wage gap in South Korea. Nevertheless, gender wage inequality persisted (Seguino, 1997). On one hand, some feminists argue that promoting women's access to formal work, while a global concern, doesn't fully address gender inequality as the new division of labor fails to challenge the underlying system where women are still burdened with domestic responsibilities (Chant and Sweetman, 2012). On the other hand, the powerful patriarchy in South Korea, in collaboration with capitalist expansion, necessitate governmental intervention. This intervention not only limits wage growth for the lowest-paid workers (i.e., women) within the economic system but also requires women to leave their jobs upon marriage through policy mechanisms (Kim, 1994). The combination of these two factors contributes to the issue of gender wage inequality for women in South Korea.

In East Asian societies, the viewpoint that men constitute the primary consumer base of queer spaces may once again exclude lesbian from accessing queer bars.

Indeed, a fresh debate suggests that economic affordability alone cannot fully explain the exclusion of certain individuals from queer bars. For instance, Tucker (2009, p.152) proposes that in Cape Town, some non-white and black Africans are excluded from queer bars because they perceive that these groups cannot "buy into" a certain commodity of what some consider an "exclusive" queer culture. While this exclusion is not explicitly based on race, the preconception that loss of economic and cultural rights is tied to skin color maintains this exclusion. In East Asian societies, the viewpoint that men constitute the primary consumer base of queer spaces may once again exclude lesbian from accessing queer bars (Casey, 2004). In China, the development of a market economy has significantly expanded the participation of women in the labor force, with increasing numbers of women gaining independent economic income and capability. These women actively pursue cosmopolitan femininity through consumption (Rofel, Halberstam and Lowe, 2007). However, women are still categorized by the commercial logic of bars as low-spending demographics (Huang and Liu, 2022). This indicates that despite their elevated levels of consumption today, women still might feel unable to afford entry into public spaces due to gendered perceptions. For example, in Japan's queer

bars, there is a diverse and specialized bar culture. However, within these bars, the requirement to fit a certain type exists, and women who identify as lesbian have very limited types to choose from, leading them to remain silent and invisible (Lek and Obendorf, 2004).

Facing these economically exclusive spaces, lesbians are not solely carriers of dominant social relationships or passive recipients of dominant ideologies, they have actively shaped their own identities and environments. This has led them to create their own lesbian bars (Wove, n.d.). However, constrained by the aforementioned gendered economic disparities, high rents make it nearly impossible for bars exclusively for lesbian women to survive in competitive commercial environments, often causing them to appear in less upscale, low-rent areas (Tang, 2011). Similar to Japan, using this method can save on rent, making it more affordable for a greater number of lesbians. However, it cannot be denied that due to class reasons, there is still a portion of low-income women who are unable to afford the costs of entering lesbian bars (Welker, 2010).

The fear of the lack of safety and the presence of violence in urban public spaces once again hinders lesbians access to lesbian bars.

Yet, the fear of the lack of safety and the presence of violence in urban public spaces once again hinders lesbians access to lesbian bars. On one hand, public spaces are implicitly imagined through heteronormative lenses. Therefore, conspicuous displays of same-sex affection might be seen as out of place, inappropriate, and even provoke intimidation and violence against LGBTQ individuals (Skeggs, 1999). This translates into pressure, compelling lesbian to conform and remain invisible, which might lead them to reject to enter these areas due to the discomfort of a disconnect between their internal and external selves (Rodó-De-Zárate, 2017). On the other hand, even if their strategy to avoid discomfort in public places is to pass as heterosexual, would they feel safe when entirely unrecognized as lesbian? This is also difficult, as patriarchy carves public spaces into male territories, manifested through various institutional forms, leading to gender-based violence against women in public spaces (McDowell and Sundberg, 2001). Lesbian women might avoid entering urban public spaces out of fear of encountering male violence (Beebeejaun, 2017).

4.2 Domestic norms and family pressures: the hidden exclusion of lesbians

The heteronormativity and principles deeply rooted in Confucianism have significantly shaped the social fabric of East Asian societies (Ko, Haboush and Piggott, 2003). These ideologies have permeated domestic and public spheres, establishing systems of governance and social practices (Weiming, 2000). This intricate interplay between family and urban spaces holds the key to understanding the diverse journeys of lesbians in their quest for identity (Huang and Liu, 2022). Family dynamics, as a foundational social institution, are a product of Confucian influence, exerting profound impacts on gender relations and sexual behaviors in East Asia (Yi and Phillips, 2015).

First and foremost, the influence of Confucian patriarchy has led to the entrapment of women in conservative sexual ideologies, particularly evident in mainland China, Japan, and South Korea (Dong-Jin, 2001). These ideologies impose a dualistic standard, inhibiting lesbian's sexual agency and desire (Shim, 2001). The patriarchal framework teaches women that sexuality should exist solely within the bounds of marital relationships and domestic settings (Woo, Brotto and Gorzalka, 2011). These deeply ingrained notions lead to a situation where, when some individuals stigmatize queer neighborhoods like Ni-chōme as symbols of public desire and debauchery, apprehension is generated among lesbians, deterring them from entering such spaces (Suganuma, 2011).

In societies where the family forms the cornerstone of social structure, such as South Korea, mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, lesbians often harbor a greater fear of their families discovering their sexual orientation than they do of societal biases or governmental discrimination (Yi and Phillips, 2015). This apprehension restrains them from expressing their identity in public spaces, as it heightens the risk of their family learning about their orientation (Sullivan and Jackson, 2013). Undoubtedly, sexuality is embedded within discourse (Milani, 2014), manifested through tangible material landscapes that signify the expressions of those who occupy the space (Niedt, 2021). Direct visual cues on the facade of queer bars, such as mainstream rainbow symbolism, represent their identity explicitly. Fearing this direct expression, lesbians consequently shy away from queer bars.

Secondly, according to the collective logic of Confucian filial piety, the most ungrateful act is to not have offspring, thus prompting the societal demand for lesbians to fulfill the social duty of heterosexual marriage and procreation (Engebretsen, 2013). Once familial obligations are met, this intimacy among lesbians can be more adaptable (Sang, 2003). However, as lesbian identities oppose the norms of heterosexual families, this compels them to engage in what is termed "contract marriages" (Cho, 2009, p.402). In South Korea, these are known as "kyeyak kyollhon" (Cho, 2009, p.402), and in China, they are referred to as "jiajiehun" (Song et al., 2023). In-depth research by Cho

**The influence
of Confucian
patriarchy has led
to the entrapment
of women in
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sexual ideologies.**

The pervasive patriarchal foundation in marital relationships acts as a coercive force and over a period of time, could subordinate the role of lesbians who engaged in “contract marriages” to domestic spaces using gender and familial norms.

(2009) on contract marriages among male and female homosexuals in Seoul, South Korea, reveals that while these marriages might alleviate some marital pressures, they simultaneously demand different commitments and sacrifices from gay and lesbian, exacerbating lesbian’s gender subordination within the patriarchal framework. Cho elaborated that the pervasive patriarchal foundation in marital relationships acts as a coercive force and over a period of time, could subordinate the role of lesbians who engaged in “contract marriages” to domestic spaces using gender and familial norms. Such a form of union often renders the intimate and social relationships among same-sex couples invisible. In that case, lesbians no longer frequent queer bars to fulfill their desire for a lesbian identity. Similar observations are made in Hong Kong (Engebretsen, 2013).

Notably, this requirement to enter heterosexual marriages varies across East Asian societies. In China, sexual identity and behavior are significantly shaped by one’s social class. Those hailing from affluent backgrounds often enjoy greater liberty in exploring and articulating their sexuality. Conversely, individuals from economically disadvantaged sectors, especially from rural regions, face intense pressure to marry and procreate (Kong, 2010a). Unlike mainland China and South Korea, contract marriages are relatively rare in Hong Kong and Taiwan; the difference partly stems from the longer presence of queer communities and activism in Hong Kong and Taiwan, affording them greater agency in advocating for individual rights (Tang, 2011). Taiwan stands as Asia’s first region to legalize same-sex marriage, with legislation granting same-sex couples the right to marry under the J.Y. Interpretation No. 748 bill, also allowing step-parent adoption of a partner’s biological children (Act for Implementation of J.Y. Interpretation No. 748 - Article Content - Laws & Regulations Database of The Republic of China (Taiwan), n.d.). However, Friedman and Chen (2023) argue that while this law successfully disrupts assumed heterosexual marriage norms, it reproduces discrimination against non- normative families. For instance, J.Y. Interpretation No. 748 bill narrow legal framework inadvertently excludes trans individuals, reinforcing binary gender perspectives. Moreover, the 748 bill stipulates that same-sex couples can only adopt children with whom one of the partners has a blood relation, reinforcing the notion that a normative family consists of two heterosexual, married parents and their biological children.

4.3 Summary

In conclusion, In East Asia, lesbians face multi-dimensional barriers that hinder their free access to queer bars and leave domestic space. On the one hand, the fusion of patriarchy and capitalism has crafted a complex web of barriers for lesbians. The gendered division of labor, a byproduct of patriarchal structures intertwined with capitalism, impedes lesbians' economic power, subsequently limiting their access to queer bars. Simultaneously, lesbian bars, navigating their own economic challenges, set up class-based barriers, further excluding certain segments of the lesbian community. Additionally, urban spaces, shaped by heteronormative and patriarchal designs, pose safety threats to lesbians. This combination of economic disparity and unsafe urban environments further prevents lesbians from accessing and flourishing within queer spaces. On the other, the deeply rooted Confucian patriarchy shapes societal ideologies and family dynamics that inhibit their sexual agency and enforce domestic roles in contract marriage, thereby restricting their self-expression.

FIGURE 4.1

An empty road in Tokyo, Japan

Source: Andre Benz/Unsplash (2017)



**The LGBTQ
community isn't a
unified entity, and
power dynamics
can persist within.**

05. Unraveling power dynamics: lesbian encounters in queer and lesbian spaces

5.1 Power dynamics and exclusion in queer bars

As lesbians navigate beyond external barriers such as economic pressures, unsafety in cities and familial norms, can they truly find inclusivity within a seemingly equitable queer bar? Regrettably, the answer remains negative. This is because power imbalances within queer spaces also contribute to the exclusion of lesbians. While not the sole factor, a glaring illustration of this imbalance lies in the unequal power dynamics between gay men, lesbian women, and transgender individuals (Knopp, 1998). Additionally, internal hierarchies among lesbian women further complicate matters (Leung, 2002).

D'emilio (2006, p.471) points out that in capitalist societies, "gay men have traditionally been more visible than lesbians...Streets, parks, and bars, especially at night, were 'male space.'" Despite queer bars purporting to cater to the diverse needs of the queer community, they often maintain rules that cater to gay men, indirectly or directly excluding lesbians (Casey, 2004). This pattern is evident not only in the West but also in East Asian queer bars. One of the

most direct challenges to lesbian visibility within queer bars is the restriction of entry to gay men only. Jones (2020) conducted research on sex-segregated queer bars in South Korea and found that venues in Jongno often prohibit or limit entry for women, foreigners, and transgender individuals. Even if lesbian women were accompanied by cisgender gay men, they still faced harassment and requests to leave. Beyond explicit barriers to entry, there are also subtle yet pervasive boundaries that hinder lesbians from accessing queer bars. Queer bars are often constructed as spaces dominated by masculinity (Campbell, 2000), allowing gay men to easily establish gendered segregation within them (Bird and Sokolofski, 2005). For instance, Hartless (2018) discovered that in a gay bar in the southeastern United States, gay men excluded lesbian women by selecting music and dances catered solely to male preferences. A similar situation occurs in South Korea, where the preferences of gay men start to represent the entire sexual minority community, which results in the further marginalization of female sexual minorities in everyday space (Ohreum, n.d.). For transgender lesbians, the lack of toilets designated for transgender individuals in queer bars is a significant concern (Colliver and Duffus, 2022). When navigating toilets that are bifurcated based on biological distinctions between male and female, transgender lesbians continually encounter the challenges posed by gender binaries and heightened scrutiny due to their transgender identities (Cavanagh, 2010).

Furthermore, while queer bars are often depicted as places where gay men and lesbian women can escape heteronormative discourse, the reality is that the LGBTQ community isn't a unified entity, and power dynamics can persist within (Easterbrook et al., 2014). Just as highlighted earlier in the literature review of hegemonic masculinity, gay men might also participate in perpetuating oppressive dynamics, particularly towards lesbians. These gay individuals might bolster their masculine identity by demeaning women and undermining their worth, leveraging the unique position they occupy—being both oppressed due to their sexuality and privileged as men (Johnson and Samdahl, 2005). For instance, the deep-seated misogyny present in Korean society (Cho, 2022) also manifests itself within queer bars (Jones, 2020). Kim and Choi (1997, p.72) explain this phenomenon as Korean men adopting a

Power imbalances within queer spaces also contribute to the exclusion of lesbians. While not the sole factor, a glaring illustration of this imbalance lies in the unequal power dynamics between gay men, lesbian women, and transgender individuals.

contemptuous attitude toward women “as part of the practice of building and reaffirming masculinity”. This results in gay men, proponents of misogyny, reiterating dominant Heteronormativity to establish queer bars as masculine spaces, thereby excluding lesbians (Johnson and Samdahl, 2005). For instance, Jones (2020) discovered from respondents that cisgender gay men expressed anger about a significant influx of lesbians onto their space in the South Korea They would make rude comments even when passing by lesbians, which prompted the latter to avoid being on the spaces to avoid potential hostility.

Gay individuals even collaborate with straight women to reinforce their dominance within queer bars.

Gay individuals even collaborate with straight women to reinforce their dominance within queer bars (Navvab, 2013). Although queer bars have often been regarded as safe havens from patriarchy, an increasing number of heterosexual participants are infiltrating these spaces, influencing interactions within the queer community (Hartless, 2019). On one hand, driven by consumerism, many urban gay bars attempt to maintain economic viability by shaping an image of cosmopolitan inclusivity to attract straight visitors (Mattson, 2015). Governments also support this shift to attract the creative class and promote diverse urban economies (Mattson, 2015). Moreover, many LGBTQ individuals adopt the identity model of post-gay, openly engaging in public spaces shared with heterosexuals (Ghaziani, 2011). These combined forces have made it possible for straight women to enter queer bars. However, Skeggs (1999) critiques that the visibility of heterosexual women in queer spaces brings negative consequences for lesbian visibility.

Primarily, straight women often enter queer bars by forming friendships with gay men who then lead them into these spaces (Moon, 1995). In East Asian societies, the reasons for straight women establishing these friendships are closely linked to their desire for Japan’s Boy Love (BL) culture (Wang, Tan and Wei, 2019). BL culture, often disseminated through “shojo manga” (girls’ comics) in East Asian countries, presents sexual content and explores romantic and pornographic conventions (Martin, 2012). Female BL fans’ affinity for BL culture stems from the pervasive heteropatriarchy entrenched in Confucianism, which particularly suppresses female sexuality and expression (Zhou, 2017). For example, Shin (2013) reveals that Korean women pursue BL to reject confining their sexual lives to the reproductive function of marriage, as prescribed by patriarchal mainstream culture. BL culture allows them to become the masters of their gaze, satisfying their sexual curiosity and desires without moral judgment (Kwon, 2021). However, they often project utopian sexual fantasies onto same-sex male relationships, overlooking the true nature of same-sex intimacy (Chang, 2017). Moreover, these fantasies tend to reproduce conventional gender norms; one character is accentuated with male traits and becomes dominant, while the other, who exhibits more feminine qualities, assumes a submissive role (Yang and Xu, 2017). Therefore, while their support for same-sex love challenges heterosexual structures, their conflation of same-sex and gay relationships perpetuates traditional gender expressions and complicates lesbian self-identification (Moon, 1995; McLelland, n.d.).

However, some scholars argue that even when straight women do not connect with gay men, their sexual expression and excessive femininity create a sense of exclusion for lesbian women within queer spaces (Casey, 2004). On one hand, some straight women enter queer bars to escape the constant male gaze in heterosexual spaces, but heterosexual men may follow these women into queer spaces (Navvab, 2013). Inability to distinguish between straight and lesbian women poses potential threats of sexual violence for lesbian individuals in what should be safe spaces (Hartless, 2018). On the other hand, within a queer bar, heterosexual women, influenced by gender stereotypes, believe that appearance dictates their overall value as women, emphasizing their femininity (Ellemers, 2018). This fixation on appearance challenges the idea of indifference to appearance that many lesbian feminists advocate for (Skeggs, 1999).

Even when straight women do not connect with gay men, their sexual expression and excessive femininity create a sense of exclusion for lesbian women within queer spaces.

5.2 Navigating identity and exclusion: lesbian experiences in lesbian bars

In the face of these challenges, where can lesbian women find their place? Here, the lesbian bars that female individuals have laboriously established offer a safe space for them to escape the hostility they may encounter from men and straight women in queer bars (Pritchard, Morgan and Sedgley, 2002). However, Wieringa (2012) warns that besides the dominance hierarchy perpetuated by mainstream patriarchy, specific forms of patriarchy within society can also contribute to hierarchical structures among lesbians by influencing their understanding and expression of sexuality and gender among themselves (Wang, 2021).

Within mainland China, there exist binary lesbian gender identities known as T-P gender categories (Chao, 2000), similar to the butch-femme dichotomy in the Western world (Gibson and Meem, 2013). T represents a masculine gender identification, akin to the English term “tomboy,” while P symbolizes a feminine gender identification derived from the Chinese character “Po,” meaning women. In this T-P identity framework, individuals who align with stereotypically feminine characteristics (“Pure Ps”) or exhibit pronounced masculinity (“Pure Ts”) are often deemed impure lesbians, neither accepted nor welcomed by the lesbian community (Engebretsen, 2013). Due to their overly femininity, “Pure Ps” are believed to be unable to resist the patriarchal society’s emphasis on familial relations. This leads them to enter the contract marriages mentioned above, resulting in their exclusion. (Chao, 2002). The exclusion of “Pure Ps” also to some extent confirms feminist scholar Frye (1983) discussion on the male-dominant/female-subordinate paradigm, where women, when embodying traditional femininity, subject themselves to a subordinate position. In Chinese-Taiwanese lesbian communities, the exclusion of “Pure Ts” stems from the belief that their masculinity imitates the patriarchal heterosexuality’s masculinity, disregarding the modern lesbian femininity represented by white,

Besides the dominance hierarchy perpetuated by mainstream patriarchy, specific forms of patriarchy within society can also contribute to hierarchical structures among lesbians by influencing their understanding and expression of sexuality and gender among themselves.

middle-class, internationally recognized lesbian figures from Euro-American societies (Hu, 2019). This is influenced to a certain degree by Western-centric and globally disseminated ideas that perceive LGBTQ struggles in East Asia as lagging behind (Jones, 2020). Additionally, some lesbians, who enter lesbian bars to share similar sexualities, reject entering if they believe they do not possess attractiveness to other lesbians (Thomson, 2007).

However, with the rise of consumerism, gender-neutral (zhongxing) aesthetics such as the categories of “sissy T (niang T)” and “macho P (ye P)” have gained popularity within the Chinese lesbian community (Wang, 2021). These images adeptly embody masculinity in a non-essentialist way (Wang, 2021). “Sissy Ts” refer to T individuals with effeminate qualities, while “Macho Ps” refer to P individuals with strong, independent personalities (Wang, 2021).. This gender-neutral aesthetic preference has also gained traction in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea (Kam, 2014). Kam (2014) argues that the rise of this gender-neutral aesthetic signifies that as lesbians gain more power to negotiate their non-normative identity, they can transcend the binary standards of masculinity and femininity set by gender norms. Nevertheless, some scholars do not perceive the acceptance of masculinity by lesbians as challenging patriarchal heterosexuality’s gender norms. In China, “gender-neutral” aesthetics do not imply the acceptance of any form of masculinity; rather, they emulate the softness, delicacy, and aesthetic male style depicted by Japanese and Korean idols (Hu, 2019), which is a version of patriarchal masculinity (Gibson and Meem, 2013). Furthermore, this construction is subject to changes in male fashion and is merely a simplified imitation of heterosexual masculinity (Hu, 2019). However, Wang (2021) criticizes the acceptance of the gender-neutral aesthetic trend within lesbians, emphasizing that it prioritizes masculinity over femininity. This highlights the need to redefine femininity, breaking free from traditional hierarchical norms between masculinity and femininity imposed by patriarchy and heteronormativity.

5.3 Summary

Within queer bars, lesbians encounter power imbalances and exclusions. In both Western and East Asian contexts, lesbian women have faced direct and indirect barriers in accessing queer bars, including being denied entry, facing harassment, or being exposed to environments predominantly tailored to gay male preferences. Transgender lesbians face added challenges such as a lack of transgender-designated restrooms. Despite the assumption of queer spaces as inclusive, power dynamics often mirror broader societal norms, with gay men sometimes reproducing oppressive dynamics towards women. The presence of straight women in queer spaces, whether through active collaboration with gay men or merely due to their presence there, invariably affects the visibility of lesbians by perpetuating gender norms and reducing the distinct identity of lesbian relationships. Lesbian bars provide a refuge from the challenges faced in queer spaces. Yet, within these spaces, intricate identity and exclusion dynamics exist. In mainland China, the T-P identity framework categorizes lesbians, leading to exclusion of those who do not conform to the aesthetic standards entrenched within this masculinity and femininity binary classification. Modern shifts, such as the rise of consumerism, have introduced gender-neutral aesthetics like “sissy T” and “macho P”. While these categories have offered a more inclusive representation of lesbian identity, they are also critiqued for simply reproducing patriarchal masculinity. The overarching tension between traditional masculinity and femininity norms persists, underscoring the need for a broader redefinition of these concepts in both queer and lesbian spaces.

In Confucian-dominated heteronormative patriarchal societies, as long as same-sex individuals do not cross the boundaries set by invisible social norms, they are granted tolerance for a normal life. Consequently, many same-sex individuals seek private solutions instead of political ones.

06. Negotiating identity and space: strategies of visibility among lesbians in heterosexual patriarchal societies

6.1 Subtle rebellion and direct challenge

In Confucian-dominated heteronormative patriarchal societies, as long as same-sex individuals do not cross the boundaries set by invisible social norms, they are granted tolerance for a normal life. Consequently, many same-sex individuals seek private solutions instead of political ones (Yi and Phillips, 2015). But to genuinely challenge the status quo, more direct forms of resistance are deemed essential. Matejskova (2007) posits that queer bars are composed of a series of temporal and spatial elements, enabling lesbians to exhibit identity variations by interpreting space differently. This framework provides support for lesbians in East Asian societies to navigate the challenges set by patriarchy and expectations of free use of queer bars and lesbian

bars while maintaining balance. When faced with discrimination and violence against lesbians, lesbian bar owners negotiate space boundaries to create secure strategies within the patriarchal and heteronormative urban context. In Korea, lesbian bars are discreetly situated, often in basements or upper floors, away from main pedestrian streets, and sport understated decor to avoid conflict and exposure (Jones, 2020). Temporal adjustments are another tactic, such as organizing private lesbian nights, allowing them to evade discrimination from gay patrons and threats from straight women (Matejskova, 2007). For instance, Tokyo's Goldfinger bar in Ni-chome reserves Saturdays exclusively for women, effectively curtailing the presence of gay men and straight women, thus providing a safe space for lesbians to express their identity (Matejskova, 2007).

To attain true freedom within oppression, same-sex individuals must gain sovereign control over power and discourse related to their own identities. Lesbians launch alliances as a form of normative resistance, advocating for broader societal changes and the reconfiguration of power dynamics.



FIGURE 6.1

Pink Dot 2023's theme is "Celebrating All Families"

Source: Pink Dot SG (2023)

NOTE 02

In 1998, former Indonesian President B.J. Habibie disparagingly referred to Singapore as a “little red dot” on the map. In response, Singaporeans united and embraced this label with pride, reappropriating it as a symbol of the nation’s prosperity and success (The Reason Why Singapore Is Called the Little Red Dot – ExplorerSG, n.d.). The name “Pink Dot” connects to this “little red dot,” with pink representing a blend of red and white—the colors of Singapore’s national flag. “Pink Dot” thus symbolizes an open, inclusive society within our “red dot.” (‘About Pink Dot SG | Pink Dot SG’, n.d.).

However, Sullivan and Jackson (2013) argue that these negotiations can be seen as compelled resistance. To attain true freedom within oppression, same-sex individuals must gain sovereign control over power and discourse related to their own identities. Lesbians launch alliances as a form of normative resistance (Ramdas, 2021), advocating for broader societal changes and the reconfiguration of power dynamics (Pfeffer, 2014). With this call to arms, lesbians work with all LGBTQ communities to fight for the right to be queer. In Singapore, the “Pink Dot” event, held annually in June, exemplifies this strategy (Ramdas, 2021). Symbolizing LGBTQ individuals with “pink”, whereas the term “dot” refers to Singapore’s often-used nickname on the map as “little red dot”². Pink Dot does not overtly identify as an LGBTQ event. Instead, it promotes themes of love, family, and kinship consistent with societal norms while creating space for diverse forms of love and family structures, regardless of sexual orientation. Though critiqued for potentially sidestepping deeper issues, Pink Dot creates a platform that challenges heterosexual family constructs and de-eroticizes sexual citizenship, aligning with the suppression of erotic discourse in Confucian-influenced societies. Pink Dot’s strength lies in its ability to communicate through nationally and socially recognized language, balancing advocacy for change and respect for local sensitivities. It underscores the potential of love discourse to influence patriarchal planning and norms concerning family.

In the face of oppression, lesbians also engage in more disruptive and revolutionary methods to directly deconstruct power dynamics within patriarchy. The lesbian rights movement in Korea, for example, has developed various projects in solidarity with the feminist movement, refusing to remain silent, demanding that social norms shaped by patriarchy and heteronormativity be directly challenged, and critiquing reality by relating their discourse to different events and social contexts (Park-Kim, Lee-Kim and Kwon-Lee, 2007). In South Korea, the women’s rights movement, including the “4B (bihon, bichul-san, biyeonae, bisekseu) movement” and “Escape the Corset” movements, seeks to challenge male dominance and traditional feminine norms (Afp, 2019). The “4B movement” emerged against the backdrop of South Korea’s neoliberal restructuring and a surge in various forms of misogynistic discourse among young males (Heinrich, Chiang and Chi, 2020). Members of the “4B movement” reject marriage not solely for maximizing their economic benefits and avoiding the pitfalls of gender roles enforced by patriarchal systems, which mandate their engagement in domestic chores (Lee and Jeong, 2021). Their rejection serves as a direct challenge to South Korean society at large, including heterosexual males and the patriarchal state, which exploit women’s bodies, valuing them merely for their reproductive functions (Jeong, 2020). This is exemplified by policies, as previously discussed, requiring women to leave their jobs post-pregnancy. The “4B movement’s” call for women to refuse reproduction also contests the notion of heteronormativity as a hallmark of “reproductive futures,” which queer theory deems a constraint on queer identities (Jeong, 2020). However, some scholars have raised concerns about the sustainability of the 4B movement’s future. Noh and Kim (2015, p.97) suggest that even if women reduce the time they dedicate to unpaid domestic labor, the “feminisation of poverty” remains a difficult issue to address due to gender discrimination in the labor market. This might cause South Korean women to revert back to conventional familial roles due to poverty. This is particularly concerning given that South Korean society embeds national welfare within family norms (Lee and Jeong, 2021).

The “Escape the Corset” movement challenges the Korean beauty norms, which, by instilling standards of beauty and docility, promote female bodies that are subservient to males (Shin and Lee, 2022). The movement advocates for women to defy these beauty standards, reclaiming control over their own bodies. By urging women to reject strict beauty routines, it empowers them to redefine their value standards and confront entrenched societal norms (Lee and Jeong, 2021). Compared to the previously critiqued emergence of the gender-neutral aesthetic in Mainland China, which don’t truly redefining femininity, the “Escape the Corset” movement in South Korea offers a distinct approach. This female activist, by cutting their hair short and going bare-faced, are not merely displaying a fashion statement or taste. Instead, they are expressing their identity (ABC News, 2019). This not only detaches masculine characteristics from the male body but also reshapes the conventional understanding of feminine temperament.

6.2 Summary

In Confucian-dominated societies, same-sex identities find tolerance as long as they don’t challenge established norms. Queer and lesbian bars in these societies offer spaces of limited freedom, characterized by their discreet locations and special events, like Tokyo’s Goldfinger bar’s women-only nights. While these strategies can be seen as a form of resilience, some activists view it as a constrained resistance. To genuinely challenge the status quo, more direct forms of resistance are deemed essential. The Pink Dot event in Singapore is a subtle yet impactful form of this, using nationally and socially recognized language to advocate for LGBTQ acceptance. In South Korea, the lesbian rights movement aligns with broader feminist initiatives. The “4B movement” and “Escape the Corset” challenge patriarchy and heteronormativity directly.

This working paper critically examines the interplay of patriarchy and heteronormativity in East Asian contexts and how these forces work in tandem to exclude lesbians from queer bars. The inquiry considers exclusive influences from the outside of the bars and delves into the unequal or exclusive internal dynamics within these spaces. Additionally, this study delves into the tactics employed by lesbians to negotiate, navigate, and amplify their visibility amidst such challenges.

07. Conclusion

In the face of the rapid proliferation of queer bars across East Asian cities, which are ostensibly designed to be inclusive, it is paradoxical to observe inherent exclusions within them. This working paper critically examines the interplay of patriarchy and heteronormativity in East Asian contexts and how these forces work in tandem to exclude lesbians from queer bars. The inquiry considers exclusive influences from the outside of the bars and delves into the unequal or exclusive internal dynamics within these spaces. Additionally, this study delves into the tactics employed by lesbians to negotiate, navigate, and amplify their visibility amidst such challenges.

From an external perspective, barriers for lesbians accessing queer bars manifest both economically and spatially. The collaboration of patriarchy and capitalist structures often leaves many lesbians financially strained, making it challenging for them to frequent queer bars. Furthermore, even when lesbians attain higher incomes, they are not recognized as the primary patrons of queer bars, and thus suitable products and services are not catered to them. Additionally, even when affordable lesbian bars emerge, they still exclude individuals from the lower income and social strata within the lesbian community. Due to the imperative to reduce rental costs, many affordable lesbian bars often find themselves situated in less affluent areas of the city. The urban design, predominantly influenced by patriarchy and heteronormativity, makes journeys to these lesbian bars fraught with potential risks of violence based on non-normative orientations and gender-based violence, further deterring lesbians from accessing. When one examines the invisibility of lesbians in queer bars by linking domestic spaces with urban environments, it becomes evident that domestic norms and familial pressures within households stifle the desires of lesbians, compelling them towards heterosexual contract marriage and, subsequently, preventing their presence in queer bars.

Barriers preventing lesbians from accessing queer bars and lesbian bars exist not just externally, but also within these spaces themselves. Within queer bars, patriarchy and heteronormativity cultivate power dynamics that reflect broader societal norms, leading to the exclusion of lesbians. It is observed that lesbian identities often become overshadowed by the dominant presence of gay men. Gay men shape the design of these spaces to cater to their needs, sidelining and excluding lesbians and transgender lesbians. Influenced by hegemonic masculinity, some gay men perpetuate misogyny to maintain a sense of male privilege over lesbians. This marginalization is further exacerbated when straight women, paradoxically seen as allies to the queer cause, occupy these spaces. While bars specifically catering to lesbians might seem like sanctuaries from such dynamics, they too exhibit exclusionary tendencies. A quintessential example is the T-P gender categorization prevalent in mainland China, which establishes aesthetic preferences within the lesbian community. These preferences are deeply rooted in the binary classifications of masculinity and femininity. Such classifications exacerbate entrenched gender hierarchies, emphasizing stratified prejudices and hierarchies even within spaces deemed safe for the lesbian community. This working paper acknowledges the agency of lesbians in resisting such exclusions. Whether it is through strategies that negotiate time and space to ensure safety and freedom without breaking established norms, or through more direct forms of resistance, such as Singapore's Pink Dot event and South Korea's "4B movement" and "Escape the Corset" movements, these efforts propel lesbians' advocacy for broader access to urban spaces.

This working paper broadens the discourse on queer spaces by underscoring the relevance of East Asia, thus contesting the overarching Western-centric paradigms. Through an intersectional lens, the study comprehensively examines how elements of patriarchy and heteronormativity in East Asian contexts contribute to the marginalization and exclusion of lesbians. Furthermore, it reveals the entrenched inequalities faced by lesbians in East Asian environments, offering supplementary insights into potential exclusionary factors confronted by lesbians globally.

However, this working paper acknowledges certain limitations, particularly in its capacity to comprehensively address the intricate intersections of class, race, and other sociocultural determinants that may shape these dynamics. For instance, this research did not amass sufficient resources to examine race as a pivotal factor in the exclusionary experiences of lesbians. Future studies could benefit from widening their geographical and demographic scope to encompass a broader array of East Asian nations and communities. This would furnish a more holistic understanding. Examining the intricate weave of lesbian identities in relation to socio-economic status, race, and cultural nuances promises to reveal deeper layers of their experiences. Concurrently, it is noteworthy that this working paper primarily relies on secondary data. As highlighted in the methodology section, there is a conspicuous paucity of literature from certain countries. Future studies can advance the research by collecting firsthand data through methodologies such as ethnography, which includes participant observation and interviews. By gathering firsthand accounts of the experiences of lesbian individuals frequenting queer spaces across diverse Asian cultural contexts, we can uncover deeper insights into the complexities of their navigation within these spaces.

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