Layered Exception:

LGBT Life and Survival in Pandemic-lockdown China

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how Chinese LGBT individuals experienced intensified marginalisation during the Covid-19 pandemic, arguing that queer life under lockdown was shaped by what we term "layered exception" – a condition produced by the intersection of state lockdown governance and heteronormative domestic discipline. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 55 queer individuals and HIV/AIDS NGO workers, alongside online observations from various LGBT forums, the study identifies three key findings. First, under China's stringent lockdown policies, LGBT individuals were subjected to a new regime of control – "home-as-the-rule" – in which the heteronormative family, rather than the state, became the primary site of surveillance, coercion, and moral discipline. Second, the prolonged lockdown disrupted everyday "technologies of the self," suspending flexible identity expression, cross-border mobility and intimate autonomy. Digital intimacy practices such as textual love and flirtatious banter emerged as alternative forms of connection, amid heated online tensions between "lying flat" advocates normalising everyday risk and "zero-Covid" supporters endorsing state-imposed restraint. Third, the medical precarity faced by HIV-positive men who have sex with men (MSM) reveals an additional layer of exception: these individuals were not only excluded from familial and state recognition, but were also rendered invisible within China's public health infrastructure, placing them at risk of being effectively "left to die." Taken together, these findings demonstrate how the lockdown deepened queer precarity in China.

KEYWORDS: exception, governmentality, queer, ethnography, Covid-19, HIV-positive MSM.

Introduction

This article begins with the bitter stories shared by our research participants during the Covid-19 outbreak in China in early 2020, which coincided with the Spring Festival – the country's most significant annual celebration. For many Chinese, such as migrant workers, this holiday offers a rare opportunity to reunite with their families. However, for individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT),[1] the festive season can be emotionally challenging, particularly when strict lockdown measures forced them into extended proximity with family members who reject their sexual orientation or gender identity. One participant, Liang (male, 37), who worked in Shanghai, found himself confined with his family in a small city in Anhui Province. He described his experience as being a "bird without wings" (*chachi nanfei* 插翅難飛): "Due to the lockdown, despite having wings, I couldn't fly away from this homophobic city." His metaphor captured the acute sense of entrapment many LGBT individuals faced: stuck not only physically but emotionally, unable to escape familial expectations to conform.

Liang's story is far from isolated. In response to the Covid-19 outbreak, China implemented an aggressive zero-Covid policy, aiming to eliminate all domestic transmission through mass testing, centralised quarantine, digital surveillance, and strict lockdowns (Yang

1. We acknowledge the significant disparities between sexual desires, practices, identities, and local slang terms, and recognise that translating sex-related terms between English and Mandarin can result in inaccuracies and leave room for open interpretation (Tsang and Ho 2007). In this article, the abbreviation LGBT refers to our primary research subjects, who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. The terms "queer" and "queerness" are used to denote a theoretical perspective that highlights the importance of examining the lived experiences of LGBT individuals.

2022). Entire cities were placed under full lockdown, sometimes for weeks or months, with residents confined to their homes and reliant on government-organised food deliveries. Only in late 2022 was there a shift towards more targeted and less severe restrictions. Certainly, across the globe, few lives remained untouched. Existing literature highlights how the Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted marginalised populations, deepening long-standing inequalities. For instance, research on people with disabilities – including those with Locked-in syndrome (Masana and Vidal 2025), visual impairments (McCormack 2022; Macbeth and Powis 2025), and mobility challenges (Clayton et al. 2024; Basili et al. 2025) – reveals systemic barriers in healthcare access, increased social isolation, and digital exclusion (Clayton et al. 2024; Singh, Sehrish, and Keese 2025). These challenges were further compounded for those facing intersectional marginalisation, such as disabled women (Aydemir-Döke, Meghan, and Spencer 2024) and low-income youth with disabilities (Pincock et al. 2024), where fragmented social protections exacerbated vulnerabilities (Cobley 2024; Pincock et al. 2024). Nevertheless, China's pandemic response revealed a series of paradoxes. While strict containment measures exacerbated spatial marginalisation for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities (Yang and Lin 2025), they also catalysed adaptive forms of resilience, including the use of grassroots digital networks (Dai and Hu 2022) and community-based mutual aid efforts (Cobley 2024). Paradoxically, institutional employees – such as civil servants, healthcare workers, and educators – who are typically regarded as privileged "system insiders" or "working in the system" (*tizhinei* 體制內), faced even stricter mobility restrictions during the pandemic, as their work units (*danwei* 單位) imposed intensified surveillance and closely monitored their personal movements.[2]

Scant literature has examined the experiences of LGBT individuals during the pandemic – an oversight this article addresses. Drawing on personal narratives, we highlight how many LGBT individuals, often living closeted or semi-closeted lives, experienced heightened anxiety and emotional vulnerability under lockdown. Heteronormative pressures around marriage and family (Liu 2019; Luo, Tseng, and Ma 2022) and the loss of private, affirming spaces compounded these challenges. State surveillance measures, such as daily health code check-ins, stripped away the anonymity crucial to queer survival, forcing some to conceal or abandon their identities. We conceptualise these overlapping pressures as forms of layered exception. Nowhere were these layered exceptions more visible than on the microblogging platform Sina Weibo, where LGBT individuals turned to semi-anonymous online spaces to express the frustration that neither formal institutions nor their families were willing to acknowledge. In a widely circulated post from November 2022, a closeted lesbian user wrote under the lesbian community account Lily Complaints Forum (*Baihe tucao jun* 百合吐槽菌):

> I want to post something – just wondering if anyone else is in the same boat: same-sex + long-distance + pandemic + working in the system … How are we even supposed to meet up? 😭 My girlfriend's scared that if I travel, my movements will be tracked and we'll be outed. It's been two years and she still won't let me visit her.

This Weibo post resonated widely, drawing hundreds of responses from across China – including Yunnan, Guangdong, Chongqing, Sichuan, Hebei, and Xinjiang – with many users recounting strikingly similar experiences. One respondent from Xinjiang, living just 200 kilometres away from her partner, wrote: "We've been locked down separately for three months. It's impossible to see each other. We can only video chat." Another user, a teacher in Guangxi, shared her intention to travel covertly to the provincial capital to visit her partner, despite the risk of violating institutional regulations and potentially losing her job. Another contributor from Yunnan offered cautious advice: "If you're both working in the system, health codes are really strict. Maybe just send a small cake and do a video call. Don't get yourselves into trouble!"

These narratives – raw, vulnerable, and emotionally unfiltered – reveal a reality far more intimate and precarious than that portrayed in official state accounts of the pandemic. While official narratives emphasised collective resilience and national unity, LGBT individuals in these online threads described systemic neglect, enforced invisibility, and a persistent fear of exposure. For LGBT individuals, travel restrictions were not merely bureaucratic constraints but deeply personal disruptions – limiting physical mobility, emotional intimacy, and the privacy essential to queer survival. Drawing on Agamben's theory of the state of exception (Schmitt 1985; Agamben 1998, 2004, 2020), this article conceptualises the lockdown as producing conditions of layered exception, wherein LGBT individuals were simultaneously marginalised by heteronormative social norms and expanding surveillance infrastructures. While existing scholarship has theorised the pandemic-lockdown as a legal and biopolitical rupture[3] (Agamben 2020; Peters 2020; Zinn 2020), such accounts often overlook the everyday, embodied experiences of already-vulnerable populations. Addressing this gap, the article draws on 55 in-depth interviews with LGBT individuals and critical discourse analysis of digital platforms that became vital arenas for connection and self-expression during lockdown. These narratives reveal the compounding effects of crisis governance on queer life in China, offering insight into how exceptionality was lived, negotiated, and endured.

Literature review

This article asks how China's Covid-19 lockdown regime, as a state of exception, revealed and intensified the shifting cultural and political pressures placed on LGBT individuals – who were already positioned as exceptional subjects prior to the pandemic. While exception theory addresses sovereign power in the public sphere (Schmitt 1985; Agamben 1998, 2004, 2020), and queer theory attends to everyday marginalisation through normative structures (Race 2019), both converge under late modernity. In this context, citizenship is no longer solely defined through legal or political rights

2. Ryan McMorrow, Nian Liu, Sun Yu, and Gloria Li, "China Demands Schoolteachers Hand in their Passports," *Financial Review*, 7 October 2024, https://www.afr.com/world/asia/china-demands-schoolteachers-hand-in-their-passports-20241007-p5kggo (accessed on 26 May 2025).
3. Giorgio Agamben, "The State of Exception Provoked by an Unmotivated Emergency," *Positions Politics*, 26 February 2020, https://positionspolitics.org/giorgio-agamben-the-state-of-exception-provoked-by-an-unmotivated-emergency/ (accessed on 3 June 2025).

in the public domain but is increasingly enacted through private and familial responsibilities – such as care, reproduction, and filial piety – thereby extending the logics of exception into the intimate and domestic realms (Meiu 2020). In China, this shift is intensified by patriarchal moral frameworks centred on the family, as well as social norms that prioritise marriage and reproduction (Luo 2020; Luo, Tseng, and Ma 2022). This theoretical lens informs our analysis of how queer lives are governed and constrained during times of crisis.

Exception and pandemic

The concept of the exception can be traced back to German political theorist Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1985), the locus classicus of contemporary discussions of sovereignty. The first volume opens with the proclamation that "sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (ibid.: 5). That is, if a person or an institution in a given polity can suspend the law and normalise the suspending situation, then the person or the institution is the sovereign. This sovereign decision is said to be enacted out of the necessity and urgency to save the state; therefore, the exception is "characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state" (ibid.). Under such circumstances, "what characterizes the exception is principally unlimited authority, which means the suspension of the entire existing order" (ibid.: 12).

Another key scholar to introduce the concept of exception is Giorgio Agamben (2004). In response to Schmitt's political philosophy and Foucault's work on biopolitics (2008), Agamben examined the increase in power used by the government in states of exception that invests the government with the power of authority over others, and where citizens' constitutional rights can be diminished, superseded, or rejected in the process of claiming this extension of power. Focusing on the political nature of biological life in situations such as natural disasters, wars, and large-scale outbreaks of infectious disease, Agamben (1998, 2004) and others conceptualise the "exception-as-the-rule" to refer to the use of a state of exception as a new normal act of governance, a political situation in which there is a complete collapse of the defining dialectic between norm and exception, or between law and anomie. In this biopolitical enterprise of disciplinary control, sovereign power can render and act directly upon "bare life" without mediation of objective forms (such as law); the citizen has become a naked, anomic, and biological being (ibid.; Huysmans 2008).

Since then, the concept of exception has become a central pillar of the Western political paradigm, though it has increasingly been criticised for privileging a sovereign centre and overlooking the subtleties and dispersed operations of power (Rabinow and Rose 2006; Huysmans 2008; Hjorth 2014). In response to these critiques, some scholars argue that analysis must move beyond the absolute notion of exception tied to sovereignty and instead focus on the micro-practices of citizens and bureaucrats that embed the logic of exception into the routines of everyday life (Legg 2011; Burles 2016).

Specifically, scholars have examined how the concept of exception took on a new reality during the Covid-19 pandemic, as governments quarantined cities, enforced lockdowns and social distancing measures, ruled by decree, and expanded their exceptional powers (Delanty 2020; Battistelli 2024), effectively transforming the "state of exception" into a "new normal" (Zinn 2020: 1). In this context, the outbreak of an epidemic becomes an ideal pretext for legitimising and indefinitely extending exceptional measures. Recent scholarship has shown how, under the pandemic state of exception, governments acquired extraordinary powers to curtail civic freedoms in the name of public safety – freedoms that only the state was positioned to regulate and restore (Peters and Besley 2020; Battistelli 2024; Bui 2024). However, by framing the pandemic state of exception primarily as a top-down apparatus that reduces individuals to their biological or corporeal existence, these studies invite a further question: what might a perspective from below – an empirical examination of the everyday, sexual, and embodied experiences of those who were already exceptions, such as Chinese LGBT individuals – reveal about the lived realities of exception?

Queer exception in China

We now turn to an examination of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) evolving techniques of governance over sexuality and gender, focusing on the so-called Three Nos policy – no approval, no disapproval, and no promotion – that has long shaped the governance of homosexuality. Since the 1980s, the CCP has implemented economic reforms that transformed China from a socially normative, revolution-impacted socialist state into a sexually vibrant, market-oriented society (Rofel 2007; Ho et al. 2018). Indicative of this shift, homosexuality was decriminalised in 1997 and officially removed from the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* (*Zhongguo jingshen jibing zhang'ai yu zhenduan biaozhun* 中國精神疾病障礙與診斷標準) in 2001 (Liu and Zhu 2019). China's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001 further expanded transnational cultural flows, fostering a "desiring" regime in which premarital sex, same-sex relationships, dating foreign partners, and non-monogamous intimacies became increasingly visible (Rofel 2007), alongside the emergence of queer economies, discourses, intimacies, and NGOs – particularly within the expanding digital economy (Wang S. 2023; Wang and Bao 2023; Yang, Liu, and Ge 2025).

However, despite these seemingly progressive trends, queer life in China remains precarious under intensifying state censorship and conservative sociopolitical currents. It is worth mentioning that, before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, China, under the current administration and amid intensified efforts to stimulate the birth rate, witnessed a notable rise in "systematic homophobia" (Song 2021), and a decline in LGBT activism (Liao 2019). Ho et al. (2018) observe that while the 1980s reform had fostered some freedoms around gender and sexuality, renewed restrictions increasingly targeted non-normative individuals, practices, and academic research. The 2021 "Internet Clean-up Campaign,"[4] launched by the Cyberspace Administration, targeted online violations and platform irregularities, with a focus on protecting youth and regulating digital culture. This included censorship of LGBT content and a crackdown

4. Cyberspace Administration of China 中國國家互聯網信息辦公室, "國家互聯網信息辦公室部署推進'清朗互聯網用戶賬號運營亂象專項整治行動'" (*Guojia hulianwang xinxi bangongshi bushu tuijin "qinglang hulianwang yonghu zhanghao yunying luanxiang zhuanxiang zhengzhi xingdong,"* The Cyberspace Administration of China launches the "Internet Clean-up Campaign to regulate online user account operations"), *China Internet Information Centre* (中國網信網), 19 October 2021, https://www.cac.gov.cn/2021-10/19/c_1636237146528693.htm (accessed on 6 June 2025).

on the Boys' Love (BL or *danmei* 耽美) genre, further reignited homophobic sentiment (Hu, Ge, and Wang 2024). As Sun shows, the government's increasingly stringent internet censorship, alongside campaigns such as the crackdown on BL media and the systematic erasure of LGBT content from major platforms such as Weibo, has severely restricted public queer expression. These measures, justified through discourses emphasising "healthy" gender norms and concerns about the nation's birthrate, have forced LGBT individuals to self-censor, retreat into private and encrypted spaces, and shift activism toward depoliticised forms of family discourse.[5]

This ambiguous Three Nos policy – neither criminalising nor legitimising queer existence, and fluctuating between periods of tightened and relaxed censorship – effectively renders LGBT identities socially tolerated yet politically unrecognised. As a result, many LGBT individuals in China have long normalised conditions of exception in their everyday lives, navigating identity through informal networks, fragmented legal protections, and carefully managed forms of visibility. These survival strategies include gay men and lesbian women entering cooperative marriages (*xinghun* 形婚) to fulfil familial expectations (Wang S. Y. 2019; Liu and Tan 2020); gay men and their wives (*tongqi* 同妻) entering heterosexual marriages under social pressure (Tsang 2021; Yang, Song, and Xie 2024); exposure to precarious and often unreliable online relationships (Tao 2022); and pursuing parenthood through surrogacy in legal grey zones where single and queer individuals lack formal reproductive rights (Zheng 2022; Tao 2023, 2024). Other forms of intimacy, such as the recognition of pets as family members, have also emerged as alternative domestic arrangements (Tan, Liu, and Gao 2021). A final dimension of normalisation can be seen in the activism of rainbow parents – heterosexual parents of LGBT children – who, as Wei and Yan (2021) show, strategically invoke familial love to challenge stigma and recast queer inclusion as aligned with traditional Chinese values of harmony and happiness. Taken together, these studies reveal how LGBT individuals and their allies have developed diverse strategies to normalise exceptional lives within a system that continues to marginalise them. This, in turn, highlights the resilience of China's heteronormative order, marked by neo-familism, which absorbs disruption without fundamentally altering its structural foundations (ibid.).

That said, prior to the extraordinary disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic, Chinese LGBT individuals were already living within enduring conditions of exception – produced by ambiguous governance, discriminatory policy frameworks, and the routine reproduction of heteronormativity. The pandemic did not initiate this state of exception but dramatically deepened it, intensifying the tension between enforced invisibility and the pursuit of recognition. In this heightened landscape of layered exception, the stakes of queer life – and the boundaries between norm and exception – became increasingly fraught.

Research method

This study draws upon a three-part qualitative data set. The first component is based on in-depth interviews conducted between January and November 2020, during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. We interviewed 31 Chinese individuals – 15 gay men and 16 lesbians – whose emotional lives and queer social networks were significantly disrupted by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. Notably, we also encountered approximately ten LGBT individuals who reported that their emotional lives and queer networks had not been seriously affected, and therefore were not included in our interviews. These participants were either single or had already been living with their partners prior to the pandemic while working remotely from home.

Most participants were white-collar professionals or NGO practitioners based in major metropolises such as Hong Kong, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou. The sample was recruited through convenience sampling. Interviews were conducted via VooV Meeting, reflecting the ways digital technologies were leveraged to reach out, maintain contact, and provide mutual support during the pandemic.

To supplement the limitations of convenience sampling – such as potential sampling bias, underrepresentation of less digitally connected populations, and the tendency to recruit individuals with preexisting social ties – we incorporated a second set of qualitative data derived from observations of LGBT online spaces. During the pandemic, online platforms became even more critical as queer safe spaces. Data collection involved systematic keyword searches on Weibo and Xiaohongshu (known in English as RedNote), two of the most important Chinese-language social media platforms. Keywords included:

- "疫情" (*yiqing*, pandemic) and "le" (a colloquial abbreviation for *lesbian*) or;
- "疫情" and "txl" (an acronym derived from the pinyin initials of *tongxinglian* 同性戀, homosexual) or;
- "疫情" and "男同" (*nantong*, gay men) or;
- "疫情" and "艾滋" (*aizi*, AIDS).

On Weibo, we also collected posts from major lesbian forums, including the Lily Complaints Forum and the Orange Princess Collective (*Juli jishe* 橘里姬社), prominent anonymous spaces for sharing lesbian narratives. In addition, we examined several publicly self-identified gay user accounts on Weibo. To ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality, we do not disclose any usernames.

The third part of our data set investigates the longer-term impact of the pandemic on LGBT individuals, focusing on the period approximately two years after the Chinese government lifted its zero-Covid policy in December 2022 (Wilson and Flahault 2023). While local lockdowns continued sporadically in early 2023, the termination of mass testing, quarantine mandates, and mobility restrictions at the national level marked a decisive policy shift (ibid.). That said, between March and April 2025, we conducted a new round of interviews to explore how participants' lives had evolved post-pandemic. Unlike the earlier phase, where interviewees were primarily recruited through the researchers' personal networks, this stage employed an open call for participants. Through this process, we successfully recruited 24 participants, comprising 15 gay men

5. Vivian Sun, "Where to Go? Queer-targeted Chinese Censorship and New Strategies," *Human Rights Research Centre*, 23 May 2024, https://www.humanrightsresearch.org/post/where-to-go-queer-targeted-chinese-censorship-and-new-strategies (accessed on 26 May 2025).

and nine lesbian or bisexual women. We believe that the three components of our data – the pandemic-period interviews, online observations, and post-pandemic interviews – mutually complement each other, providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the experiences of LGBT individuals. The interviews and group discussions addressed sensitive aspects of participants' personal lives.

Across two rounds of interviews, among all participants, only two lesbian-identified individuals were fully out to their families, though even they reported limited parental acceptance. For the remaining participants, their sexual or gender identities were not disclosed to their parents, though varying degrees of "situational coming out" occurred in specific contexts such as friendship circles or workplaces. Participants in the first round, averaging 32 years of age, typically lived independently or with partners before the pandemic. However, due to the overlap between the initial outbreak and the Chinese Spring Festival, many were compelled to stay with their natal families for periods ranging from one to three months. Six of these participants, after losing jobs in 2022, spent the majority of 2022 living with their parents. In the second round of interviews, the average participant age was 25. None of them were out to their families. Half were university students who experienced intermittent campus lockdowns that cumulatively lasted between six and eight months – periods during which students were confined to campus but allowed to move within its grounds. All these students had returned home for the winter break when the outbreak began and thus spent the earliest phase of lockdown with their parents. Seven participants worked in state-affiliated professions (such as teachers, healthcare workers, and civil servants). Although they did not live with family, their employment required strict compliance with Covid control protocols such as daily health check-ins, three doses of domestic vaccines, and a rigid restriction of movement between home and workplace (*liangdian yixian* 兩點一線, "two-point-one-line"). The rest were corporate employees who resided alone. Three participants lived overseas during the early phases of the pandemic, returning to China in 2021 or 2022. To protect their privacy and minimise potential risks, no identifiable personal information is included. All participants are referred to using pseudonyms, accompanied by key demographic details such as gender, place of residence, and age.

"Home-as-the-rule": Heteronormative families as sites of control

Before presenting the research findings, it is important to note this article does not treat China's "zero-Covid" policy as a unified national strategy. Rather, it acknowledges the considerable variation in how lockdowns and mobility restrictions were implemented across different regions, time periods, and occupational sectors (Li, Zhang, and Han 2022; Gu et al. 2025). Our analysis focuses on participants' recollections from January to October 2020, a period marked by the most severe and widespread restrictions, particularly in the aftermath of the Wuhan lockdown (Yang 2022). However, we do not present this phase as a singular or uniform experience. While some individuals faced total home confinement for several weeks, such stringent lockdowns were often localised and short-lived. The "two-point" mobility rule was stringently enforced for state-affiliated employees such as doctors, police, and teachers. For university students, the rule manifested differently: China's dormitory system often confined them entirely within campus boundaries for extended periods. For others, the rule operated more as a psychological or ideological norm than a strict mandate. This shared sense of fear was especially evident in our online ethnographic observations. Even though participants discussing their situations online came from different regions and thus experienced different forms of lockdown, their collective anxiety was remarkably consistent. Nevertheless, the requirement to maintain a green health code – through daily check-ins, frequent testing, and strict exposure controls – effectively limited personal mobility and contributed to a pervasive sense of anxiety. Our aim is not to homogenise the lockdown experience, but to highlight how the most coercive phase of zero-Covid governance intensified the precarity of queer life in China.

Against this backdrop, 21 participants reported intense emotional strain and a pervasive sense of hopelessness during periods of pandemic-related restrictions, with six formally diagnosed with depression or anxiety. These accounts illustrate what we conceptualise as a new form of "exception-as-the-rule": home-as-the-rule, a condition in which the domestic space became both a site of enforced containment and intensified normative pressure. The period between January and October 2020, particularly in the wake of the Wuhan lockdown, marked the most severe and widespread restrictions. While complete lockdowns where people were confined strictly to their homes were relatively short-lived and often applied only in specific outbreak zones, other mobility controls persisted over longer stretches.

For 52 out of 55 participants in this study, these layered and shifting restrictions had compounding effects. The first lockdown, coinciding with the Spring Festival in early 2020, turned what were intended as brief family visits into extended periods of confinement. Those who had not disclosed their sexual orientation to their families found themselves trapped in unsympathetic or even hostile environments, with little chance of privacy or exit. Zhou (female, 24), who had lived openly in Hong Kong and Bangkok while working for international NGOs, was stranded in Guangzhou after border closures. Cut off from her LGBT networks and unable to leave her family's home, she eventually relocated to a hotel room. "I never realised I needed certainty this much" (Interview, 8 May 2020) she reflected, referring not only to the rupture in her transnational mobility but also to the erosion of personal autonomy under emergency governance.

The lockdown also heightened familial pressures surrounding marriage and reproduction. Qin (female, 33) recounted:

> The Spring Festival is always imprisonment time for me, but this year, I served a longer sentence! Over the course of three months, there wasn't one single day my parents missed giving me the marriage-as-necessity-for-women lecture. (Interview, 22 May 2020)

Qin's experience highlights how home-as-the-rule operated through the ideological reinforcement of heteronormative life trajectories, imposing expectations of heterosexual marriage and reproduction similar to that of state-sanctioned norms. Moreover, lockdown-induced economic instability and the resulting social paralysis worked hand-in-hand to reinforce conservative

heteronormative values, making queer lives even more constrained. Across our participant group, it was common for lockdown-related job losses to compel LGBT individuals to remain confined within their family homes far longer than anticipated. Hou (male, 29), for instance, lost his job in Shanghai and was forced to return to his hometown in Henan Province. There, the collapse of his financial independence not only delayed his plans to disclose his same-sex relationship to his family but also derailed his intention to openly cohabit with his boyfriend. Hou's experience epitomises the disastrous entanglement of economic vulnerability and familial heteronormative pressure. A more extreme case came from our online observations where a post recounted the catastrophic unravelling of a lesbian couple's shared life. The couple, aged 23 and 28 respectively, had lived together for three years, pooling both their emotional and financial resources. However, the lockdown abruptly disrupted their fragile stability. Confined at home for extended periods and unable to find employment in their living area, their income sharply declined. One day, the poster's partner, overcome by emotional and economic despair, expressed a desperate desire to "make money." When asked about possible solutions, she responded with chilling pragmatism: "The only way I can think of to make money now is to accept a bride price (*caili* 彩禮)." The poster admitted that, given her partner's socioeconomic background, she would likely attract a substantial bride price if she agreed to a heterosexual marriage. Yet this recognition brought no solace. Instead, it deepened her anguish. The poster confessed that she could not offer her partner the financial security or societal legitimacy that marriage promised, realising that her love was powerless against the crushing weight of economic necessity and heteronormative expectation. This case illustrates how the pandemic's economic precarity and entrenched patriarchy converged to make already marginalised queer relationships nearly unsustainable.

Additionally, the lockdown posed distinct challenges for LGBT individuals engaged in an extramarital relationship with someone in a heterosexual marriage – a not uncommon arrangement in China. Although it was difficult to recruit participants willing to discuss extramarital relationships during our interviews, narratives of such struggles were frequently found in online spaces. A post published on Xiaohongshu on 1 October 2023 poignantly described the struggles of a lesbian woman separated from her lover during the pandemic, who, under family pressure, had entered a heterosexual marriage. In the post, the woman recalled the lockdown period, during which her partner was confined within her heterosexual "home":

> I miss you so much. You said you were stuck with your family, with your husband. I understand, I really do. But every day feels like I'm losing you a little more. We can't text as freely as before. You are afraid he might check your phone. I don't blame you, but the silence eats at me. I feel like I am disappearing from your life, and there's nothing I can do about it.

Prior to the pandemic, the two women had maintained an irregular yet emotionally intimate relationship, meeting discreetly in nearby cities under the pretext of work trips or shopping excursions. However, the outbreak of Covid-19 and the ensuing mobility restrictions significantly disrupted their ability to maintain contact. Her partner, who had entered a heterosexual marriage under family pressure, was confined with her husband during the lockdown, making communication difficult and meetings impossible. While official policies did not mandate returning to the marital household, many people did end up remaining with or returning to their legal families due to practical constraints or familial expectations. In this case, it was the partner's own decision to stay with her husband, framed by familial obligations and the logistics of pandemic control. Although anecdotal, such accounts shed light on how public health measures, domestic expectations, and heteronormative pressures could converge to sever queer relationships, especially those lacking formal recognition or social visibility.

Our interviews also captured accounts of resilience among LGBT individuals whose relationships persisted throughout the broader period of pandemic restrictions. While not under constant lockdown, participants experienced prolonged and recurring episodes of restricted mobility and surveillance. Several posts shared after the pandemic reflected on moments of love and solidarity sustained under such precarious conditions. For instance, a Xiaohongshu post from March 2023 described how a woman's girlfriend, despite finishing work late at night, continued visiting her during periods of restricted movement:

> Every day spent at home during quarantine made me even more grateful for my girlfriend. Even though she only got off work at 10 p.m. and could arrive around 11:30, and even though she knew the risk of infection was low but not zero, she still insisted on coming. She would put on heavy protective clothing at my doorstep, come in to accompany me for an hour, walk my dog, wash fruit for me, and help clean the house. How could someone have such a wonderful girlfriend? Thank you for loving me.

Even such brief expressions of queer care unfolded within heightened risk. During periods of intensified surveillance and community-level monitoring, these acts of intimacy were often conducted covertly. Moving between residential compounds or breaching quarantine rules – however temporarily – carried the threat of fines, public reprimand, or familial scrutiny. In this context, the everyday enactment of queer intimacy became inseparable from negotiation with fear and control.

Innovative queer intimacy under zero-Covid

As the pandemic persisted and evolved into a prolonged state of exception, it became evident that its effects were far more profound than initially anticipated. Our findings reveal that practices of self-governance – such as maintaining discreet romantic relationships outside the family unit, pursuing cross-border partnerships, and engaging in non-cohabiting or long-distance queer intimacies – were significantly disrupted by the pandemic and its accompanying restrictions. These forms of relational autonomy were shaped by expanded transnational mobility and cultural exchange over the last three decades, which enabled Chinese LGBT communities to explore more diverse and affirming modes of intimacy and belonging. The abrupt breakdown of these practices posed a direct threat to the everyday foundations of queer subjectivity. To navigate this intensified mode of exceptional governance, many individuals were compelled

to adapt, renegotiate, or in some cases, significantly constrain their ways of living. Our interviews indicate that these shifts took on multiple and nuanced forms.

Primarily, under the pervasive governmental slogan "no going out unless necessary" (*fei biyao bu waichu* 非必要不外出)[6] and its increasingly strict variations, state authorities, particularly between 2021 and 2022, continuously reinforced directives such as "no returning to your hometown unless necessary"[7] and "no gathering unless necessary,"[8] disseminated through banners, loudspeaker announcements, and community notices. In response, a darkly humorous variation emerged within LGBT online communities: "no sex unless necessary" (*fei biyao bu zuo'ai* 非必要不做愛). This slogan parodied the official pandemic control language, highlighting the absurd extension of governmental authority into the most intimate spheres of private life. While initially intended as satire, mocking the state's ubiquitous prohibitions on movement and sociality, the slogan gradually gained broader acceptance within LGBT online spaces. Over time, the normalisation of "no sex unless necessary" within LGBT communities reflected how practices such as sexual restraint, risk avoidance, and self-discipline – often associated with mainstream ideals of responsible behaviour – were reinterpreted as forms of civic virtue during the pandemic.

For example, on Weibo, online spaces frequented by gay men witnessed fierce debates between two emerging camps: the "lying flat camp" (*tangping dang* 躺平黨) and the "zero-Covid camp" (*qingling dang* 清零黨). The "lying flat camp" advocated accepting the inevitability of infection and resuming ordinary life, drawing on the broader "lying flat" movement in China, which rejected state-imposed discipline and social pressure. In contrast, the "zero-Covid camp" supported the government's pandemic policies, viewing strict self-regulation, infection avoidance, and personal restraint as civic duties. This tension became particularly visible in online comment threads. In one popular post published on Weibo in late 2022, a user sought advice on whether it was safe to engage in sexual activity after contracting Covid-19. The comment section quickly divided into sarcastic, mocking, and accusatory responses, illustrating the polarised attitudes within the community. Some users, aligning with the zero-Covid mentality, ridiculed the idea of prioritising sex over health, asking, "If you're scared of Covid, why are you still thinking about oral sex?" and advising, "You won't die if you abstain for a few days." Others, closer to the lying flat position, mocked excessive caution, encouraging immediate gratification with comments such as, "Usually after eight days you're no longer contagious, just hold on a bit longer and then you can do it," and, "Life is short, enjoy it while you can!"

During this period, many posts were deleted because the confrontations became too heated and politically sensitive. By 2025, only fragments of these online debates remained, leaving behind partial traces of the intense moral and political conflicts that once divided the LGBT communities. The direct harm caused by this divide was vividly illustrated in the experience of one of our interviewees, Chen Wei (31 years old). In the spring of 2022, when Beijing was once again under semi-lockdown, Chen Wei and his partner, who had been in a relationship for nearly a year, found themselves separated by the city's strict district boundaries. Having grown increasingly impatient with the government's perpetual controls, Chen Wei came to view the pandemic restrictions as excessive intrusions into private life. As he jokingly described to us, he considered himself part of the "lying flat camp." One evening, he texted his partner: "Life is short. Shouldn't we live? Shouldn't we love?"

However, his partner viewed the situation very differently. For him, physical intimacy had shifted from a basic emotional need to a dispensable luxury. Chen Wei lamented that his partner appeared to have been brainwashed by official discourse. When Chen Wei suggested sneaking over for a late-night visit, his partner refused, responding coldly: "If you truly loved me, you wouldn't put me in danger." To Chen Wei, this response was deeply hurtful and, ultimately, an unacceptable sign that fear was controlling his partner's life. When we reconnected with Chen Wei in 2025, he informed us that the relationship had ended. The inability to reconcile their fundamentally different interpretations of love, risk, and responsibility under the pandemic's extended exceptionality had irreparably fractured their bond.

Additionally, the closure of international borders eliminated the transnational mobility that had long been vital to the survival and flourishing of the LGBT community. Existing scholarship has emphasised that both cultural and physical mobility play a critical role in the lives of LGBT communities, offering access to more accepting environments, sustaining non-normative identities, and facilitating broader networks of social and sexual belonging (Jackson 2000, 2009; Martin 2012). For many Chinese LGBT individuals, the loss of international mobility meant the collapse of essential lifelines to queer networks abroad. Like many other of our participants, Wen (female, 28) reported how her cross-border intimate relationships had been devastated by the pandemic. Wen had spent most of her life in Guangzhou, known as a bustling business and education centre. Prior to the pandemic, Wen enjoyed a reasonably satisfying life in an open but committed relationship with a woman based in Hong Kong, but as she put it, "It's all been dashed by the lockdown":

6. "國務院聯防聯控機制公佈進一步優化疫情防控的二十條措施" (*Guowuyuan lianfang liankong jizhi gongbu jinyibu youhua yiqing fangkong de ershi tiao cuoshi*, The joint prevention and control mechanism of the State Council announces twenty further measures to optimise Covid-19 prevention and control), *Xinhua News Agency* (新華社), 11 November 2022, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-11/11/content_5726144.htm (accessed on 6 June 2025).
7. General Office of the CPC Central Committee 中共中央辦公廳 and the General Office of the State Council 國務院辦公廳, "關於做好人民群眾就地過年服務保障工作的通知" (*Guanyu zuohao renmin qunzhong jiudi guonian fuwu baozhang gongzuo de tongzhi*, Notice on Ensuring Localised Lunar New Year Arrangements), 25 January 2021, https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content_5585227.htm (accessed on 6 June 2025).
8. For instance, "2020廣州有哪些景點恢復開放" (2020 *Guangzhou you naxie jingdian huifu kaifang*, Which tourist attractions in Guangzhou reopened in 2020), *Xinxin Travel News* (欣欣旅遊網), 6 March 2020, https://news.cncn.com/289348.html (accessed on 6 June 2025); Guangzhou Command Center for Covid-19 Control and Prevention 廣州市新型冠狀病毒肺炎疫情防控指揮部, "關於進一步加強疫情防控工作的通告(第13號)" (*Guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang yiqing fangkong gongzuo de tonggao* (*di* 13 *hao*), Notice on Further Strengthening Epidemic Prevention and Control (No. 13)), 5 May 2021, https://www.gz.gov.cn/zwgk/zfxxgkml/szfxxgkml/jcxxgk/tzgg/content/post_7280579.html (accessed on 6 June 2022); Xi'an Command Center for Covid-19 Control and Prevention 西安市疫情防控指揮部, "關於進一步加強疫情防控工作的通告(市指告字(2021)第4號)" (*Guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang yiqing fangkong gongzuo de tonggao* (*shi zhigaozi* (2021) *di* 4 *hao*), Notice on Further Strengthening Epidemic Prevention and Control (No. 4)), 22 December 2021, https://www.xa.gov.cn/ywdt/rdzt/ztzl/fkxxgzbzdx/xwfbh/61c6d034f8fd1c7a3c8b456e.html (accessed on 6 June 2022).

> I met my ex-girlfriend in Hong Kong through work contacts. The company I work for is in close cooperation with companies in Hong Kong. We really decided to start a relationship because Hong Kong is so close to Guangzhou and only requires a three-hour commute. I used to go to Hong Kong three or four times a month to go shopping, eat, watch movies, and do something [sexual] with her.

In late March 2020, Hong Kong imposed an entry ban on residents of Hubei and later extended it to all of Mainland China, maintaining this restriction – with few exceptions – until February 2023.[9] As a result, individuals like Wen, who had business or intimate ties across the border, were unable to travel for nearly three years. Viewed through the lens of exception theory, this prolonged closure illustrates how emergency measures can become normalised, with temporary suspensions of mobility evolving into enduring restrictions that redefine the legal order itself[10] (Agamben 2020).

Beyond the suspension of cross-border relationships, our interviews revealed a broader downgrading of sexual life among LGBT individuals, particularly evident in the decline of intercity gay encounters. Once a normalised aspect of queer life in regions such as the Yangtze River Delta and Greater Bay Area – where high-speed rail increased the connectivity with nearby cities – such mobility was sharply curtailed during the pandemic. Even when physical mobility remained technically possible, short-distance travel became psychologically burdensome, shaped less by explicit bans and more by an internalised "defensive mentality" (*fangbei xin* 防備心) (interview with Xiaoji, aged 22, 13 April 2025). Jing Cao (28 years old, male, living in Guangzhou) illustrated how pervasive fear and heightened vigilance could lead to self-restriction:

> Before the lockdown, living in Guangzhou, it was normal for us to arrange weekend meetups with "friends" or partners in nearby cities like Hong Kong, Macao, Shenzhen, or Zhuhai. But during the pandemic, even moving from one district of Guangzhou to another made me hesitate.

This shift illustrates how the pandemic not only suspended mobility but also installed a new affective infrastructure of fear, wherein mobility itself became suspect. The state's pandemic governance did not merely impose temporary restrictions; it redefined the very conditions under which social and intimate relations could occur. In an effort to preserve a sense of freedom and intimacy during the lockdown, queer communities experienced an unprecedented surge in practices such as textual love (*wen'ai* 文愛) and flirtatious bantering (*da zuipao* 打嘴炮). Textual love refers to a range of cybersexual practices, including erotic role-playing and sexually suggestive dialogues conducted via text, images, and audio messages, designed to replicate elements of sexual experience in the absence of physical contact. Sheep (26 years old, male) described the vitalisation of textual love during the lockdown:

> There were all kinds of online *wen'ai* groups during the lockdown, some semi-public on Weibo, others in private WeChat groups. *Wen'ai* could be one-on-one or one-to-many. In the one-to-many format, someone would post a photo – maybe a face shot, maybe a picture of their genitals – and others would jump in to praise or comment. It was very lively.

Jing Cao shared a more sophisticated form of textual love where participants engaged in scripted role-playing based on popular online romance novels:

> Thanks to the development of anime, comics, games, and novels (ACGN)[11] culture (*erciyuan* 二次元), there are so many choices for *wen'ai* now. We can pick a novel and act out the characters. But almost everyone agrees – nothing can really replace physical contact.

Online spaces became vital arenas for expressing frustration and maintaining connection, where even the most intimate grievances were reframed through irony, exaggeration, and playful commentary. On Weibo, one popular post blended dramatic self-pity with subtle humour to narrate the toll of pandemic confinement on physical intimacy:

> When will this pandemic end? 😭 Every time we're locked in at home, my husband just uses my body to vent. 😭 What started out feeling pleasurable has now become numb. 😭 Lying on the bed, I'm like a little pig awaiting my fate. 😭 Does anyone understand my pain? 😭

In the lively thread that followed, another user sighed dramatically, "I wish someone would just do the same to me...," while others quickly piled on with comments such as "Me too!" and a mischievous remark, "So, do you need to keep douching constantly?" These online performances of desire, longing, and dry humour reveal how the LGBT community creatively resisted the isolating effects of pandemic life. Rather than retreat into silence or despair, users engaged in textual love and bantering to maintain a sense of solidarity, erotic life, and emotional connection.

Medical precarity and the layered exception of HIV-positive MSM

Those most severely impacted by the lockdown were people living with HIV, particularly gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM). As noted earlier, even in non-crisis times, Chinese LGBT individuals are governed through a logic of exception, exemplified by the Three Nos policy. While the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC) officially treats people living with HIV similarly regardless of sexual orientation, its institutional approach overlooks the challenges faced by gay and bisexual men who have not disclosed their sexual orientation to their families. Under the National Free Antiretroviral Treatment Programme (*Guojia mianfei kangbingdu zhiliao xiangmu* 國家免費抗病毒治療項目) introduced in 2002 (Zhang et al. 2009), each person living with HIV must receive treatment from a single "designated hospital" assigned according to regional territorial management principles. Most individuals register with facilities near their workplaces rather than in their hometowns.

9. Arendse Huld, "China Travel Restrictions 2021/2022: An Explainer (Updated)," *China Briefing*, 16 December 2022, https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-travel-restrictions-2021-2022-an-explainer-updated/ (accessed on 6 June 2025).
10. Giorgio Agamben, "The State of Exception (…)," op. cit.
11. About the development of ACGN culture, see Liu, Chen, and Lin 2024.

As such, these individuals occupy a precarious position, what Agamben (1998) refers to as "bare life" – excluded as exceptions from formal governance structures, yet incorporated in ways that render them subject to state control without protection. Looking through the theoretical lens of Agamben's exception, we contend that HIV-positive gay men in China during the Covid-19 pandemic occupied a condition of triple exception – a layered suspension of rights and protections that rendered their lives both ungoverned and overexposed.

The first layer of exception emerged during the initial wave of lockdowns in early 2020, when rigid territorial management policies disrupted routine healthcare access for people living with HIV. As movement between jurisdictions was severely restricted, many individuals found themselves stranded far from their "designated hospitals" and were thus unable to retrieve their life-sustaining antiretroviral medications. During fieldwork, we interviewed two staff members from a Guangzhou-based HIV prevention NGO. One of them, Fang, reported that in January 2020 alone, more than 100 people contacted their NGO for help. The total number of people affected nationwide remains unknown, largely due to the absence of comprehensive surveillance data on people living with HIV/AIDS, particularly among MSM. Without such data, it becomes extremely difficult for service providers and NGOs to identify, reach out to, and deliver life-sustaining medication to those in need during emergency lockdowns. Public attention to this crisis was only mobilised after the release of a widely circulated article titled "Crisis of medicine shortage: People living with HIV after Covid-19 lockdown"[12] followed by headlines such as "The embarrassment of people living with HIV after the closure of Wuhan: They are unwilling to ask for help even when out of medicine."[13] These reports prompted the CCDC to issue urgent directives for medication delivery, but logistical breakdowns left patients in highly restricted areas like Wuhan underserved.

The second layer of exception stems from the closeted sexual identity of many of these individuals. Due to persistent homophobia and familial pressures, many HIV-positive gay men conceal their sexual orientation, even from close kin. The situation became especially challenging for HIV-positive MSM who returned home during the Spring Festival and whose families were unaware of their sexual orientation and HIV status. These individuals were caught between the impossibility of accessing medication from hospitals outside their registered area and the fear of disclosing their HIV status and sexual orientation to their families or local authorities. As a result, they faced the terrifying reality of running out of life-saving treatment. Chen (male, 33, based in Guangzhou), who live with HIV, described his situation: "Every New Year, I go back to my hometown (Hunan Province) and bring enough medicine to last me for about a month. But this year is really different. I've been trapped in my hometown for nearly three months because of the lockdown. I count down every day. My medicine is about to run out" (interview, 10 March 2020).

The third and most acute layer of exception arises not only from spatial restrictions or identity concealment but from the systemic failure of the state to protect those who do not fit into administratively legible categories. The state's reliance on territorial management in HIV treatment assumes two conditions: physical mobility and identity transparency. Yet, for internally displaced and closeted individuals, neither is guaranteed. In this context, the very infrastructure designed to manage life instead contributes to its neglect. Lacking both the ability to move and the freedom to disclose, these men found themselves suspended in an ungovernable space – alive, but excluded from care. They were, in effect, "left to die": biologically present but socially and politically erased, reduced to what Agamben terms bare life. As Fang (male, 28) put it: "Because it's too difficult, the CCP just gave up." His statement reflects a broader condition in which the state abdicates responsibility for populations it cannot or will not categorise – those who are at once invisible and hyper-vulnerable.

Conclusion

Overall, this article contributes to both exception theory and queer studies by showing how the Covid-19 pandemic intensified the conditions of exception under which many Chinese LGBT individuals already lived. Building on Schmitt and Agamben's formulations of sovereign power and bare life, we examined how Chinese LGBT individuals were governed not only through top-down emergency measures but through a layered system of exception involving state policy, familial discipline, and legal invisibility. While much of the literature on exception emphasises sovereign decision-making and the suspension of law, our analysis foregrounds how the logic of exception is embedded in everyday life for queer individuals in illiberal contexts, well beyond moments of crisis.

By introducing the concept of layered exception, we advance a perspective from below that reveals how pandemic governance intersected with preexisting queer marginalisation. Our findings show how LGBT individuals navigated immobility, the threat of disclosure, and the collapse of healthcare access – challenges that converged into a double or even triple exception. Yet individuals also drew on coping strategies honed during non-crisis times, including digital intimacy, strategic concealment, and micro-acts of survival, illustrating how queerness is lived through negotiation with enduring forms of structural exceptionality. As such, this study deepens Agamben's theory by showing not only how exceptions are declared but how they are lived – unevenly and intimately – by those positioned between legal exclusion and social obligation. It also extends queer studies by revealing how Chinese LGBT life is shaped not only by repression but by the normalisation of exception through neo-familism and moral governance. Rather than being defined solely by crisis, queer life in China emerges as a site of constrained resilience – at once exposed, adaptive, and enduringly exceptional.

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12. Xie Qiaoling 謝巧玲, "疫情之下: HIV" (*Yiqing zhi xia*: HIV, Under the Pandemic: HIV), *China Development Brief* (中國發展簡報), 26 February 2020, https://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.cn/news-23855.html (accessed on 10 March 2020).
13. Liu Xu 劉旭 and Yu Yan 喻琰, "封城後艾滋感染者的尷尬: 即使斷藥也不願向身邊人求助" (*Fengcheng hou aizi ganranzhe de ganga: Ji shi duanyao ye bu yuan xiang shenbian ren qiuzhu*, The embarrassment of people living with HIV after the closure of Wuhan: They are unwilling to ask for help even when out of medicine), *The Paper* (澎湃新聞), 5 March 2020, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_6319853 (accessed on 10 March 2020).

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