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Queer presence/absence on the periphery: Insights from Hainan

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James Cummings
University of York, UK

Abstract

It is widely recognised that queer research has historically favoured major metropolitan centres. This has led to now well-established literatures on queer lives in smaller cities, towns and rural areas in Western contexts. However, there remains a lack of research on such peripheral settings elsewhere in the world. In response, this article explores the lives, identities, spaces and practices of gay men in Hainan, an island province of the People's Republic of China (PRC). As an economically less developed region and one with limited queer community infrastructures, Hainan can be considered a sexual periphery within the PRC vis-à-vis those cities that have been the focus of most existing research – Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, which have relatively developed and long-established commercial and activist queer scenes. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, I show how gay lives in Hainan are lived through an array of tensions, between visibility/invisibility, knowability/unknowability, connection/isolation and more, that I collectively describe as queer presence/absence. These tensions contrast with conclusions draw from research in the PRC's major urban centres, which have foregrounded the emergence of relatively stable and visible gay identities. Understanding queer presence/absence in Hainan, as an example of queer lives in peripheralised settings, expands not only the empirical and geographic horizons of queer research but also contributes to conceptual debates on the ontological status of sexual identity and being.

Keywords

Absence, centre, China, gay, presence, periphery, queerspace

Corresponding author:
James Cummings, Department of Sociology, University of York, York YO10 5GD, UK.
Email: james.cummings@york.ac.uk

Introduction

Discussions of centre and periphery within queer studies have tended to situate themselves within Western European, North American and Anglophone (hereafter, Western) contexts. 'Centre' has often referred to those cities popularly imagined as vanguards of sexual modernity and liberation: New York, San Francisco, Paris, London and Sydney, amongst others. 'Periphery' has tended refer to suburbs, smaller cities, towns and rural settings within those same Western contexts (Altman, 2005; Brown, 2008, 2019; Gray, 2009; Gray et al., 2016; Stone, 2018). Much less attention has been paid to queer experiences in suburbs, smaller cities, towns and rural settings elsewhere in the world. Queer research in non-Western settings has often been based in major cities and national capitals. However, the specificity of these densely populated, relatively wealthy and globally connected settings has often gone unacknowledged. Instead, analyses have largely been positioned at national scales. For example, research conducted in Beijing has been framed as research into queer lives in 'China' (Ho, 2010; Rofel, 2007), research conducted in Bangkok becomes research on 'Thai' sexualities (Jackson, 2013) and research in Tokyo becomes research about gay culture in 'Japan' (McLelland, 2002). Such national framings risk scaling up urban queer experiences as nationally representative, homogenising non-Western queer sexualities and eschewing the possibility of subnational differences in lived experiences and understanding of sexuality. Given the rapid but geographically and socially uneven development of queer identities, community infrastructures and political practices outside of the West in recent decades (Aggleton et al., 2012; Altman, 1996; Berry et al., 2003), there is a need for research into non-Western queer lives outside of major urban centres.

Responding to this need, this article explores the lives, identities, spaces and practices of gay men in Hainan, an island province of the People's Republic of China (PRC). As an island and the PRC southernmost territory, Hainan has long been considered a peripheral backwater (Feng, 2022). Hainan remains an economically less developed region, especially in comparison to the PRC's other southern and coastal provinces, and has a population of just nine million, comparable to a medium-size city on the PRC mainland. With limited queer community infrastructures, Hainan can be considered a queer periphery within the PRC vis-à-vis those settings within which most existing queer research has been conducted – Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, which have relatively developed and long-established commercial and activist queer scenes (Bao, 2018). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Hainan, I argue that there is much to be gained through the analysis of queer lives on the periphery. Through a series of ethnographic thick descriptions, I show how gay lives in Hainan are lived through an array of tensions, including visibility/invisibility, knowledge/unknowability, pleasure/fear, permanence/ephemerality and others. I collectively describe these as conditions of queer presence/absence. This queer presence/absence contrasts with conclusions drawn from much research in the PRC's major urban centres, which have foregrounded the emergence relatively stable and visible gay and lesbian identities (Bao, 2018; Ho, 2010; Liu, 2015; Rofel, 2007), while echoing insight gained from queer research in other contexts of marginality (Gong and Liu, 2022; Ji et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2023, 2024).

Beyond an expansion of empirical knowledge on the global diversity of queer cultures and correlated forms of heteronormativity, I argue that there is value in exploring queer presence/absence in Hainan for its potential contributions to conceptual debates within global queer theory. The interrelations of visibility/invisibility, knowability/unknowability and presence/absence have long been important lines of enquiry in queer theory and research (Taylor and Addison, 2013). Work on East Asian contexts has already made significant contributions to these debates by exploring dynamics through which queer subjects come into being, become present and visible in ways that simultaneously engender absence, invisibility and ontological insecurities (Koh, 2013; Luo, 2016; Martin, 2000). Notably, in the context of Taiwan, Liu and Ding (2005) have influentially theorised 'the interface of tolerance and reticence (as dominant aesthetic-ethical value[s]) with the maintaining of 'proper' sexual relations and the keeping of deviant sex(ualities) in the realm of ghosts' (32–33, parentheses in original). Taking this forward, Liu (2023) has argued that familial heteronormativity in the PRC can confine queerness to the field of 'sensation' (in contrast to representation), as something half-perceived but unspoken, an implicit potential without explicit realisation. These concepts of queer phantasm and sensation resonate strongly with what I call queer presence/absence in this article as forms of ontological liminality. This highlights the importance of East Asian, and more widely non-Western, queer studies in advancing conceptual knowledge on the meanings, forms and possibilities of queerness. My theorisation of queer presence/absence in Hainan contributes to this agenda from a peripheral, non-major metropolitan perspective.

The periphery in global sexuality studies

It is widely recognised that research on queer lives has tended to focus on major metropolitan centres (Stone, 2018). This academic tendency has mirrored popular perceptions of 'the big city' as a natural home for queer people. Jack Halberstam (2005) used the term 'metronormativity' to describe this alignment of the metropolitan and the queer, citing the propensity of popular media to represent narratives of queer self-discovery as entwined with rural-to-urban migrations. Such narratives produce an image of 'the big city' as a queer utopia free from intersectional inequalities (Puar, 2007) while ignoring queer communities that exist in smaller cities, towns and rural settings. This also positions dominant urban queer experiences as a standard for the 'liberated' queer social formation; 'out and proud' identities become the assumed default form that queer subjects take when freed from the supposed constraints of family, religion and social surveillance associated with rural and small-town life (Muller Myrdahl, 2013).

Attention to queer experiences outside of major Western cities has broadened understandings of queer lives and the forms they may take in diverse settings. Calling into question the equation of rurality with sexual repression, researchers have explored thriving rural queer communities (Baker, 2016; Bell and Valentine, 1995), queer anti-urbanism (Herring, 2011) and the ways in which rural isolation can, in fact, present opportunities for queer sexual experience (Boag, 2003; Hobbs, 2016). With the advance of internet and mobile communication technologies, new opportunities

for queer digital connection and intimacy in rural settings have also been a focus of enquiry (Gray, 2009; Hardy, 2021). Attention has also been paid to the regulation of queer lives in rural and small-town settings. However, these have been seen not solely as repressive forces but also as productive of particular forms of sexual subjectivity characterised by indeterminacy, invisibility and the parallel living of straight and queer lives (Gray, 2009; Schweighofer, 2016). Such constructivist research rejects the notion of an essential queer subject awaiting expression if given a conducive (urban) environment and, instead, argues that all sexual subjectivities are constructed within the constraints and affordances of their environments. As such, from the vantage point of the periphery, it becomes possible to denaturalise dominant 'out and proud' modes of urban queerness and recognise these as imposing homonormative demands for sexuality to be figured as an essential, central and public dimension of self (Phillips et al., 2005; Thomsen, 2021).

While queer research has moved beyond metropolitan centres in Western contexts, this shift has been less pronounced in research elsewhere. Contemporary queer studies is a global field and there exist rich national and regional fields of sexualities research exploring the cultural and political specificities of queer lives in non-Western settings (Aggleton et al., 2012; Boellstorff, 2007; Brown et al., 2010; Garcia Rodriguez, 2024). Such work has sought to understand the negotiation of non-heterosexual identities amidst processes of rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and economic change as well as the postcolonial reshaping of national identities and transnational economic and political relations (Henry, 2020; Jackson, 2011; McLelland, 2005). In particular, research has explored the globalisation of Western models of sexuality and their interactions with national and local cultures, politics and power dynamics (Altman, 1996; Boellstorff, 2006; Oswin, 2006; Povinelli and Chauncey, 1999; Rofel, 2007). Much attention has also been paid to the emergence of sexual rights discourses, organised activism and cultural production as arenas in which tensions between global, national and local sexual modalities play out (Altman and Symons, 2016; Engebretsen and Schroeder, 2015; Ghosh, 2015). With these concerns in mind, it is not surprising that the vast majority of queer research undertaken in non-Western settings has favoured major metropolitan contexts where queer cultures most clearly bare the marks of economic and political change, are most clearly shaped by the globalisation of Western sexual models and are most tangible, visible and accessible through activist organisations and community venues.

In the case of queer research in the PRC, the majority of attention has been directed towards the biggest, most affluent, and most globally connected cities – Beijing (Engebretsen, 2013; Ho, 2010; Rofel, 2007; Schroeder, 2012), Shanghai (Bao, 2011; Bassi, 2012; Kam, 2012), Guangzhou (Bao, 2018) and Shenzhen (Luo et al., 2023, 2024). In early and influential work, Rofel (1999: 451, emphasis in original) recorded that:

> "cosmopolitan cities have witnessed a veritable explosion of people who call themselves gay. Semipublic spaces marked *gay* have proliferated. Beijing has at least five gay bars; weekly salon discussions; a national hotline; books, magazines, and videos from abroad; conferences; and informal gatherings in people's homes."

In the years since Rofel's early observations, subsequent research has similarly explored the negotiation of queer identities and the development of community infrastructures in the PRC's major urban centres. These have been seen as shaped by Western discourses of sexuality-as-identity intertwined with China's post-socialist processes of individualisation, rising consumerism, changing urban landscapes and leisure scenes, the rise of the internet and new opportunities for information sharing, community building and cultural production, all unfolding alongside continued, though fluctuating, state regulation of media, education and activism (Bao, 2018; Ho, 2010; Kong, 2010; Song, 2021). The dominant image of contemporary Chinese queer identities that emerges from such work is characterised by a relatively firm sense of sexual identity, political consciousness and cosmopolitan sensibility struggling under state, familial and mainstream heteronormativity.

Some researchers have, indeed, questioned 'the urban' as a singular category and, instead, situated their findings within the specificities of their field sites. Engebretsen (2015: 5), for example, has emphasised the specificity of queer women's lives in Beijing in the period 2004 to 2006 as "a particular period of relative political permissiveness and relaxed official censorship and control in Beijing." Bao (2018: 37) has situated his analysis of gay and lesbian cosmopolitan imaginaries specifically in relation to Shanghai's status "as the 'gay capital' of China." Others have paid attention to the specific changing political-economies, urban landscapes and leisure cultures in cities like Chengdu (Wei, 2007), Shenyang (Fu, 2015), Shanghai (Bassi, 2012) and Xi'an (Miller, 2023). By acknowledging specificity, these studies avoid the metronormative trap of scaling-up urban queer experiences as nationally representative and leave open the possibility of geographic-sexual difference. Moreover, recent attention to the experiences of queer rural-urban migrants has also shown how intersectional inequalities create disparate urban queer lives. Rural-urban migration and a resultant loosening of family control have been seen to create opportunities for sexual exploration and empowerment (Liu, 2019). At the same time, queer migrants are often labelled 'low quality' by elite urban queers and excluded from dominant forms of urban queer modernity (Gong and Liu, 2022 ; Luo et al., 2023, 2024). Some queer migrants seek upward social mobility through hard work (Luo et al., 2022) or cross-class intimacies, including engagement in sex work (Kong, 2012, 2017); others reject social norms of striving for a better life and, instead, 'lie flat,' subversively accepting marginality and precarity (Gong and Liu, 2022). Closest to my own aims in this article, Ji et al. (2021) conducted a comparative analysis of lesbian responses to parental demands for heterosexual marriage in three settings: Shanghai, a medium-sized city in Western China and a remote highland town. Finding that women in Shanghai possessed greater imaginative and material resources for resisting marriage, they conclude, 'not only should we expect variation in such a large country, but also need to take account of the differences in the pace of modernization and degrees of exposure to diverse new ideas and values across China, as well as differences and inequalities in the life choices open to Chinese citizens' (ibid.: 545). These literatures demonstrate that 'centre' and 'periphery' are not only geographic demarcations but are also matters of socio-economic inequality and differential access to knowledge. The same is true of Hainan as a sexual periphery, as elaborated in the following section. In this article, I

contribute to an emerging understanding the geographic and social diversity of Chinese queer experiences, offering ethnographic insights into queer spaces, identities and lives in Hainan as a peripheral region of the PRC. Beyond this, however, I argue that insights from Hainan bring into view new conceptual areas for exploration, not only in PRC-focused research but in global sexuality studies, by foregrounding the interplay of presence and absence (and a range of other pairings) as a rubric through which to understand queer lives in a range of social and geographic settings.

Setting

Hainan can be understood as a peripheral setting within the PRC not only in terms of its geographic location and symbolic and material separation from the mainland but also in terms of socio-economic disadvantage vis-à-vis other coastal provinces and, especially, in comparison to those sites that have been the focus of most queer research in the PRC. Hainan's historical status as an isolated backwater on the fringe of the nation (Feng, 2022) prevailed until the 1980s when a series of preferential economic policies were implemented to stimulate growth and, in 1988, Hainan became a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Through the early 1990s, Hainan experienced rapid urbanisation and economic growth, driven by property speculation and in-migration from the PRC mainland (Gu and Wall 2007). However, Hainan never garnered the international investment, industrialisation and wealth accumulation seen in other SEZs. In 1995, the island's property bubble burst and economic growth stagnated in comparison to other Chinese coastal regions, earing Hainan a reputation as the PRC's failed SEZ (Brødsgaard 2008). Recent development initiatives have seen improvements to transport infrastructure, a renewed emphasis on Hainan's tourist economy and plans to turn the island into a tax-free trade zone. However, Hainan continues to lag behind other coastal provinces across a range of economic and social indicators. In 2016 (when data for this research was collected), Hainan accounted for just 0.5% of national GDP; average household disposable income was 28,454 RMB (4268 USD) in urban areas and 11,842 RMB (1779 USD) in rural areas. These figures were below national averages of 33,616 RMB (5042 USD) and 12,363 RMB (1854 USD) in urban and rural areas, respectively, and much lower than in the leading cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, which had a combined average household disposable income of 50,885 RMB (7633 USD) (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2017). Hainan's largest city and provincial capital, Haikou, is located on the north side of the island and has a population of three million. Sanya, in the south, is the tourist centre and second largest city, with a population of two million. The island's other 16 counties are each headed by county seats that range in size from small cities to small towns and, beyond these, are made up of smaller towns and rural villages.

Hainan's geographic and socio-economic marginality has shaped the development and current conditions of queer cultures and community infrastructures in the region. Since the mid-2000s, several gay bars have opened and closed in Haikou and Sanya, each taking advantage of the mid-nineties downturn in Hainan's property sector and finding low-rent city centre locations in former hotels or office blocks. These ventures proved

unsustainable, with none surviving for more than 3 years. In 2016, there was one gay bar in Haikou and one in Sanya; on quiet nights, bar staff often outnumbered patrons, though weekends attracted crowds of 50-100 people. These cities also have cruising sites in public parks. In 2008, centres for disease control in Haikou and Sanya received funding for AIDS prevention work, leading to the establishment of social organisations focused on men who have sex with men. These organisations held regular social events and, in 2012, inspired a group of students in Haikou to establish the Hainan LGBT League as a more general community and activist organisation. The League held several events in Haikou before disbanding in 2014 due to a lack of committed organisers. In 2016, a Haikou branch of the national organisation Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG; later renamed True Self) was established and has gone on to hold occasional social gatherings. As such, organised activism, and the discourses of community, identity and visibility proliferated therein, are recent and still emerging developments in Hainan. Outside of Haikou and Sanya, there are no fixed or recognisable queer meeting places or social organisations. Instead, gay men meet in cafes and parks shared with the wider (assumed) heterosexual public. In Jiaji, the town with which I am most familiar, a teashop, a convenience store and a particular monument in the local park have become known by some gay men as queer meeting places. It is likely that similar spaces exist in other towns in Hainan.

Methods

This article draws on my doctoral research, which involved 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Hainan (2014–2016), including 6 months living in Sanya, 12 months in Haikou and regular extended visits to Jiaji. The broad aim of this research was to explore how gay men in Hainan understood themselves and how they organised and reflected on their lives, both in the everyday and across life courses. Participatory fieldwork included working in a gay bar in Sanya for 6 months, volunteering with PFLAG in Haikou and daily socialisation with local queer friends. Participatory-observational data was generated through an iterative process: rough fieldnotes were recorded in the moment and subsequently expanded into thick descriptions (Denzin, 1989), then further elaborated in light of insights gained through semi-structured interviews with 31 men across a range of city, town and village sites in Hainan. Interviewees we recruited through personal connections established during the above-noted participatory activities, further snowballing and online recruitment through the gay social and dating app Blued. Both the participatory-observational and interview data were analysed using phenomenologically informed thematic analysis (Sundler et al., 2019) which sought to identify the key social, spatial and temporal frameworks through which gay men in Hainan made sense of their lives. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees and from key informants who contributed significantly to my participatory-observational data. All names in this article are pseudonyms and certain details of the places described have been altered to prevent their exposure. Ethical approval was granted by Newcastle University's Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Thick descriptions of social life are a powerful way of capturing complexity, nuance and specificity; they open up lived experience to sociological interpretation while retaining a connection to the material conditions of everyday lives. In sexualities research, this approach insists "that gender and sexual identities, and the meanings that circulate around them, are more than merely discursive formulations, they are daily realities and practices that have real consequences" (Rooke, 2010: 27–28). At the same time, in expanding from thin descriptions of action, the researcher can draw on their own and others' wider knowledge to produce deeply contextualised thick descriptions. Here, thickness inheres not only in capturing details of the interactional setting but also in making interpretive connections to wider historical, social, political and economic contexts that have shaped the interaction (Denzin, 1989). In this sense, producing thick descriptions is already an analytical process. As with any form of social data, thick descriptions are not objective accounts of reality; they are written from the perspective of the researcher, although shaped by discussion with participants, and bear marks of the researcher's positionality, in my case, as a white, Western, cisgender, gay man in my late twenties (at the time of data collection), fluent in Mandarin as a second language but speaking only basic Hainanese. Theses intersecting identities, at times, gave me privileged access to my interlocutors' everyday lives. For example, as white and 'foreign', I was an object of curiosity with whom many local gay men we keen to talk and socialise. In other ways, they were barriers to understanding, such as my inability to understand and participate in Hainanese conversations.

Below, I present three thick descriptions of queer spaces and social practices in Hainan and show how each of these embodies a range of tensions that I collectively term queer presence/absence. These three vignettes are chosen from the vast participatory-observational record I produced over the course of my field work in Hainan as they succinctly and powerfully convey key dimensions of queer presence/absence. While my aim is to elucidate queer presence/absence as a pervasive motif of queer life, these vignettes also show how queer lives are shaped by Hainan's diverse geographic and social contexts. The first vignette takes place in and around a gay bar in Sanya; the very existence of a gay bar as well as themes of population density and a sense of something hidden amidst the rush of city life highlight the specifically urban qualities of queer presence/absence in this instance. In contrast, the second vignette recounts visiting a convenience store in Jiaji where a particular group of gay men regularly meet to play mahjong alongside heterosexual patrons. The parallel state of queer and heterosexual worlds in this setting and the careful work that goes into maintaining their separation are characteristic of this small-town site, as are the fears of family surveillance that pervade this setting. In the final vignette, we visit a milk tea shop in Haikou that became known amongst my close friends as a sort of queer space given the surprising proximity at which we often encountered other gay men there. These men were not encountered as present embodied subjects but as present/absent virtual subjects whose existence was revealed by Blued's geo-locative function. This vignette, therefore, emphasises digital dimensions of queer presence/absence in Hainan. As such, over the following pages, I show queer/presence absence to be a general but varying experience across a range of settings in Hainan. My aim is not to

reveal a singular truth about queer lives in Hainan or other peripheral settings but to explore and expand the conceptual frameworks through which we might appreciate multiple modes of queer experience and produce more nuanced accounts of queer lives across diverse geographic and social contexts.

Finding a gay bar in Sanya

*At around 11 p.m., one evening in September 2014, I stood with my friend Liwei on a pavement running along the bank of a river in Sanya. It had just stopped raining, and the air was heavy with the smell of mud from the river behind us and food from the snack shops that occupied the ground floor of an otherwise seemingly derelict building in front of us. I had met Liwei on a previous visit to Sanya. This time, I had come to see him on the promise that he would take me to the city's gay bar. This was his first time visiting the bar, too. Having found a vague online description of its general location, we paced a 50-*m *stretch of pavement for* 15 min, *seeing no sign of a bar. Liwei became anxious. His parents lived nearby and came to this area occasionally for food. They did not know that Liwei was gay, and he had no intention of telling them. If they were to see him here, he would have to invent an explanation for what we were doing.*

Eventually, Liwei spotted something. "Do you see that?" he said excitedly, pointing in the direction of the snack shops. I followed his gaze towards an illuminated, bright blue circle cut through with something like a lightening blot. It meant nothing to me, but for Liwei, it was a sign. As we got closer, writing above and below the luminescent circle became legible: "Tianchi Performance Bar. Blued." Liwei explained that the circle and lightning bolt were the logo of Blued, the PRC's most popular gay social and dating app. Meaningless to anyone without this insider knowledge, for those in-the-know, this symbol announced the presence of a gay bar.

We headed into the darkness of an unlit passage beside the sign and followed it until we reached a marble staircase, a remnant of the building's original intended function as a hotel, now, an uncanny touch of luxury juxtaposed with the broken wood and rubble covering the floor. Up the staircase, through a large glass door, and we were standing in the bar. A world away from those eating snacks and drinking tea outside. Around fifty people, mostly men, stood around tables playing dice games and drinking while joking, play fighting and leaning on one another. Music blared and a drag show played out in the background, all safe in the knowledge that the windows had been blacked-out and sound-proofed.

Tianchi was one of two gay bars open in Hainan during the period of my fieldwork. The other, Yese in Haikou, was similarly located in a disused hotel and was imperceptible from ground level, with no signage indicating the bar's presence. The availability of these spaces for low-profit, highly unstable enterprises such as gay bars is a result of boom-and-bust cycles in Hainan's real estate sector. Built amidst periods of anticipated growth in both tourism and property prices, these buildings became available as low-rent spaces when such growth failed to materialise. These material conditions have created pockets of queer possibility in the centre of Hainan's cities. Not only are these spaces affordable to rent but they have the added benefit of being hidden from general public view. Hainan's

gay bars, as interviewee Sheng Yuan put it, "are all in some strange hidden places, around a corner, along a corridor, up some stairs (*guaiwan mojiao*)." This inconspicuousness reduces the intensity of police surveillance while also making it easier for patrons to come and go without fear on being seen visiting a gay bar.

At the same time, however, inconspicuousness can become a barrier for queer people seeking to visit these spaces. Knowledge of their existence or location requires knowing someone who has visited already, as interviewee Xiaomai explained, "In the past, I didn't know [that there were gay spaces in Sanya], it wasn't until a friend took me to the park that I knew there was the park, and it was only when a friend took me to the club that I knew there was the club." Otherwise, in the case of Tianchi, finding the bar required the ability to recognise Blued's logo and interpret this as a sign of the bar's location. Luckily, that evening in Sanya, Liwei was able to do so, and Tianchi became part of our queer life in the city. For others, this is not always the case. Several of the men I interviewed and others I met online had attempted and failed to find gay bars in Sanya and Haikou, as Dami said of Yese in Haikou: "I once tried to go with a group of friends, we walked around for half an hour but couldn't find it and then gave up and went somewhere else." Others were totally unaware that there were gay bars in Hainan or had only heard rumours of their existence.

Gay bars in Hainan are vital sites for the development of queer social networks and for the performance of embodied queer identities together with other queer people. At the same time, they are all but invisible from the outside, hidden from the heterosexual world and, indeed, from many queer people, too. These spaces lie in city centres, on busy streets, amidst the hustle and bustle of everyday life, and yet they not part of the immediately visible life of the city; they are tears in the heterosexual fabric of everyday life that open the possibility of sexual difference while simultaneously limiting that possibility to specific networks of connected individuals or to the vague ontologies of rumour. These spaces, and the lives and identities that animate them, are therefore characterised by juxtapositions of visibility/invisibility, centrality/marginality and reality/rumour; I collectively describe such juxtapositions as queer presence/absence. In this instance, queer presence/absence highlights the fact that Hainan's gay bars are, at once, important sites of identification, sociality and presence while also being spaces of concealment, invisibility and absence. Queer presence/absence draws attention to the simultaneity of these dynamics and foregrounds how these seemingly juxtaposed pairs are, in fact, entwined and mutually sustaining. For example, it is through inconspicuousness that Tianchi can exist as a space in which queer identities can be conspicuously performed; it is through the existence of marginal spaces left behind by uneven urban development that queer people can claim space in city centres; and it is through the ostensible non-existence of such spaces from the perspective a heterosexual mainstream that queer people have a space in which their existence is acknowledged. At the same time, as noted, there are also many queer people for whom the existence of these spaces does not register. Such queer presence/absence is not only a useful framework for understanding gay bars in Hainan but, as I elaborate over the following sections, it can help make sense of queer lives, identities and practices in the region more widely.

Playing mahjong in Jiaji

January 2015. I stood in a park in Jiaji, a town on Hainan's east coast, waiting for Ah Tao, a local man who I came to know via *Blued on a previous visit to Jiaji and who was about to take me to see the places where gay men hang out. It was around 7 p.m. and the pink light of dusk was fading into the darkness of night. The park was busy with middle-aged women dancing in formation and men playing ping-pong, while younger women sat languidly on benches keeping watch over children playing nearby. A voice called out from behind me. "Let's go. I'll take you to see the place where gays go to play mahjong." I turned around to find Ah Tao hurrying towards me.*

We headed out of the park, through the empty stalls of a market and turned into an alleyway wide enough only to traverse on foot, bicycle or moped. "When we get there, don't say any gay stuff," Ah Tao warned me as we approached a small convenience store. The shop floor had been cleared to make room for three mahjong tables. Around one table, sat four women, around another, four men, and around the last, three women and one man. Ah Tao skirted round the tables and stopped to rest his elbows on one of the men's shoulders. "Not your lucky night!" he laughed, as he looked down at the man's mahjong pieces. "You've not been down here for a while," said one of the women, without raising her eyes. "I've been busy," Ah Tao answered. The woman continued, "Busy doing what? You've no wife, no children." "Nobody wants him," chimed one of the men, with a smile. "How about you introduce someone to me?" Ah Tao retorted as he skirted back around the tables.

Standing by my side, he nudged me with his elbow and whispered in my ear, "All the men here are gay." "Do the others know?" I asked. "No, they…" Before Ah Tao could finish, one of the women interrupted, "Why don't you have your foreign friend introduce a Western girl to you?" This seemed to be less a genuine question and more an intrusion into our whispering. Sensing her suspicion, Ah Tao said his goodbyes and we left the store. As we walked away, Ah Tao continued, "They don't know; the owner of the shop doesn't know either, maybe he suspects something; when those gays get together, they're pretty obvious, but he's not going to say anything, it's good for his business."

In contrast to the cities of Haikou and Sanya, there are no consistently queer coded spaces in Jiaji, such as gay bars and cruising sites. Instead, several spots in Jiaji's town centre have come to be known as 'gay meeting places' (*gay de judian*) amongst some local gay men: a certain tea house, a particular monument in the park and the convenience store described above. There is nothing special about these sites that has led them to become queer spaces. Yet, for Ah Tao and his gay friends, these were not just 'our meeting places;' they had wider sexual, collective and identitarian significance as 'gay meeting places' and were important sites of socialisation and belonging. However, the extent to which they were recognised as gay meeting places beyond the specific group of men who frequented them is questionable.

The men I interviewed in Jiaji who were not part of Ah Tao's social circle had no knowledge of these or any other local sites of queer significance. To some extent, these spaces share this feature with gay bars in Haikou and Sanya, as spaces that are not easily identifiable and where access often depends on knowing someone already

familiar with these spaces. However, these dynamics of queer presence/absence are intensified in Jiaji in that these gay meeting places have no ontological status outside of the shared knowledge and practices of a specific social network. If Ah Tao and his friends stopped socialising in these spaces, they would cease to exist as queer spaces. Of course, there may well be other queer spaces in Jiaji that exist for other queer social network of which Ah Tao, his friends and I were simply unaware. Suggesting similar dynamics in other towns, when asked about local meeting places in his hometown of Wuzhishan in Hainan's central highlands, interviewee Ah Gang replied, "Here in Wuzhishan, wherever we are, that's our meeting place," emphasising the existence of queer spaces that depend upon the activities of specific individuals and small groups on men.

In contrast, other men from towns in Hainan who did not participate in and were not aware of local groups of gay men and their meeting places felt strongly that no such places existed in their town. For example, I had the following exchange with Gaoquan from Huangliu, a town on Hainan's southwest coast:

James: What's it like in Huangliu? Have you come into contact with the gay scene there?

Gaoquan: No.

James: Not at all?

Gaoquan: No.

James: Why do you think it is that you didn't come into the scene there?

Gaoquan: There isn't this kind of thing there.

James: Really? When you say "this kind of thing" you mean…?

Gaoquan: There are no homosexuals, well not really, just, you don't know if they are or not.

James: Ok, so what do you think the lives of homosexuals are like there?

Gaoquan: There aren't any.

As such, the balance of queer presence/absence in Hainan's towns leans more toward the latter, as the absence of queer spaces and community is disrupted only for finite groups, while for others, it may appear that "there are no homosexuals." This is further intensified by the fact that gay meeting places in towns are shared with a wider (assumed) heterosexual public. There are no material boundaries that separate heterosexual and queer worlds, here, which would enable more visible performances of queerness, as in the case of Hainan's gay bars. In the description of Jiaji, we can see how this separation is maintained through cautious regulation of knowledge, speech, movement and touch, evident in Ah Tao's warning: "when we get there, don't say any gay stuff." Ironically, these are queer spaces in which 'gay stuff' is prohibited; they are spaces of queer presence that demand queer absence. As such, the existence of these queer spaces, even for those men who perceive them

as such, remains partial; it is a secret said in whispers, carefully maintained and contained through knowing looks, meaningful elbows rested on shoulders and coded comments.

These practices enable queer presence in public spaces otherwise saturated with surveillant heteronormativity and they do so precisely to the extent that they simultaneously uphold queer absence from the perspective of a co-present heterosexual public. There is a playful joy and intense intimacy that comes with being able to recognise and participate in this queer presence. At the same time, such ephemeral barriers between queer and heterosexual worlds are at constant risk of collapse, meaning that these queer spaces are also cut through with fears of exposure. For example, interviewee Mingzai was a member of Ah Tao's friendship group in Jiaji, he worked as a motorbike taxi driver and socialised with gay men in Jiaji park; he said:

> Here in Jiaji, my hometown, I know a lot of people. In the park, there are a lot of people who know me, including people I've given rides to [as a taxi driver], they all know me. An uncle of mine picks up customers there too, they all know me. So, I'm afraid. What would they think if they saw us? What would they say to my family? I'm afraid of things like this. So, I don't dare do anything too over while I'm here in Jiaji

Moreover, even when ephemeral barriers between queer and heterosexual worlds remain intact, they are not watertight. Heteronormative comments like "you've no wife, no children" reach into queer space as reminders of the wider social pressures to conform to a heterosexual life beyond the present time and place of the teahouse, the park or the convenience store. In these ways, queer spaces and practices in Jiaji and other towns highlight further paired tensions within queer presence/absence: those of existence/non-existence, specific social circle/abstract queer community, pleasure/fear, momentary escape/perennial regulation, and queer possibility/heteronormative demands.

Drinking gay milk tea in Haikou

One evening in March 2016, my partner Jerry, our friend Xiaomai and I were perusing a night market in Haikou's busy Jiefangxi area, where the crumbling facades of the old town intermingle with aging tower blocks, strung together with electrical wires as densely knotted as the traffic-clogged streets below. Market stall owners shouted their sales pitches over honking horns and whole place vibrated with human activity. It was 11 p.m. on a Saturday night. At this point, we would normally have made our way to Haikou's gay bar, a few streets away. This evening, however, we decided to head home, but not before going to drink gay milk tea. We jumped on our mopeds and made the short journey to a hole-in-the-wall tea shop. When we arrived, we ordered our tea and drank it sitting on plastic stools set out on the roadside. With our phones connected to the teashop's Wi-Fi, we opened Blued and habitually glanced between the scene around us and the grids of headless torsos, cartoon figures and the occasional face illuminated in the palms of our hands. This had become a regular activity whenever we were in this part of the city.

A few months earlier, Xiaomai and I had visited this tea shop, opened Blued and found that one of the men who worked there was on the app. The man was handsome, so Xiaomai sent him a message. He never replied, but Xiaomai was determined, and the milk tea was good, so, a few days later, we returned, opened Blued, and once again found the handsome teashop employee just 3 m *away. That time, however, there were two other Blued users within* 5 m*' distance, perhaps also connected to the teashop's Wi-Fi. Neither profile had a photo, so we scanned the ten-or-so customers, wondering which two it might be. Eventually, we settled on two men sat cross-legged with their phones in their hands. Perhaps they were friends of the teashop employee, or perhaps they, too, had seen him on Blued, found him handsome, and had come back to relocate him; perhaps these were not at all the two Blued users just* 5 m *away. None of this could be known for sure.*

From then on, we visited this teashop regularly. More often than not, we would find other Blued users at surprising proximity and would enjoy the subversive pleasure of trying to find them amongst the customers. Eventually, we began to call this practice 'drinking gay milk tea.'

Drinking gay milk tea in Haikou shares many features of queer presence/absence with the gay meeting places in Jiaji described earlier. It was unclear whether this particular teashop was recognised as a site of sexual significance by gay men beyond Jerry, Xiaomai and I; the regular presence of other Blued users at close proximity suggested that this could have been the case, but this remained only an imagined possibility. It was also a space shared with a general, (assumed) heterosexual public. Queer performances, therefore, remained covert – communicated through glances, through sitting with one's phone in hand, browsing nearby Blued users, imagining that those co-present, phones also in hand, were doing the same, sending online messages and casting glances in the hope of confirmation. However, these dynamics of queer presence/absence when drinking gay milk tea in Haikou differ from those of Jiaji's gay meeting places in the extent to which gay milk tea existed as a queer space and practice only in the layering of offline and online forms of perception.

The importance of internet and mobile media for the development of queer identities and communities in the PRC has been widely recognised (Chan, 2021; Cummings 2020a, 2020b; Shaw and Zhang, 2018). Locative technologies, such as Blued, enable the perception of other users in public spaces. This ability to see that queer people exist everywhere and are co-present, often at close proximity, is a powerful challenge to the heterosexual ordering of public space. This has the potential to move the production of queer space beyond the knowledge and practices of certain social networks and beyond the enclosed and hidden spaces of gay bars and cruising sites. Locative media opens up the possibility for queer people to be recognised as constituents of a general public who may be present anytime, anywhere. Such digitally mediated dynamics of queer visibility and presence are especially important in peripheral regions, smaller cities, towns and rural settings without other publicly visible signs of queerness (see Cummings, 2020b, for further discussion). Simultaneously, seeing one's distance from other Blued users enables perception of the population density of queer people. This was evident when interviewee Muyan discussed his use of Blued in his hometown of Danzhou, northwest Hainan, before he left to attend university on the Chinese mainland:

> In Danzhou, back then, there weren't many people. The closest person to me would have been about 0.5 km away. When I was at university, the closest person would have been 0.01 km, *haha*! […] I think there are more [gay men] on the mainland than on Hainan.

Where surprising numbers of Blued users are visible at close proximity, this can become a definitional and experiential feature of those spaces, and those spaces may then become sites of significance in the lives of queer people. This was the case not only at the teashop described above but elsewhere in Haikou, including particular shopping malls and the area surrounding Haikou's gay bar which, thanks to Blued, were known amongst local gay men as areas heavily populated by other gay men.

While mobile, locative media can be spaces of queer visibility and presence, they also entail queer absences when perceived, online presence does not materialise in tangible, embodied, offline presence. Within a context of pervasive fears of being outed and blackmailed, few Blued users in Hainan include photos of themselves on their profiles (Cummings, 2020a). This results in forms of phantom presence that could be a source of discomfort. As interviewee Ah Run put it while discussing his decision to add a photo of himself to his Blued profile and the refusal of others to do so:

> A lot of people are really afraid of using their own photo. [Where I work] in Sanya, a lot of us are gay, there must be over twenty, a lot of gays. But they are almost all very afraid of using their own photos. […] I find it really depressing now because they can see me, but I can't see their existence. They could be the person sitting right next to you. I do feel really uncomfortable.

Paradoxically, the same digitally mediated dynamics by which queer presence becomes perceptible also render it a phantom presence, perceived but unrealised. As in the description of drinking gay milk tea, there can be pleasure in perceiving queer presence and imagining its embodiment in nearby others; there is a sense of comfort and legitimised existence that comes with sensing that queer people are present everywhere. However, these ontologies of perception, imagination and sensation are also reminders of the limitations on living a queer life publicly; through Blued, gay men become imagined constituents of a general public but they rarely materialise as such. It was this juxtaposition of perceived queer presence with an inability to "see their existence" that left Ah Run feeling deeply uncomfortable. These issues show how digital media are another dimension of queer presence/absence in Hainan, revealing further tensions of online/offline, perception/actualisation, possibility/limitation, imagination/materialisation, existence/elision and comfort/discomfort that characterise queer lives and identities in the region.

Conclusions: mobilising queer presence/absence for global sexualities research

Sexual peripheries are important sites for empirical and conceptual inquiry, as Phillips et al. (2005: 1; in-citation from Douglas, 1966) have argued:

> for it is in such spaces that hegemonic sexualities may be least stable. At some material and metaphorical distance from both the regulation and the liberation of the centre, in-between spaces on the margins of sexual geography are simultaneously spaces of sexual 'power and danger.'

While there has been much research into queer lives on Western sexual peripheries, including smaller cities, towns and rural areas, this article has responded to the need for such research elsewhere in the world. Queer research in the PRC has largely focused on leading cities and has described a dominant form of Chinese queer identity characterised by "individuality, difference, sophistication, liberation, and modernity […] a derivative of 'global queer identity': urban, middle-class, knowledgeable, civilized, cosmopolitan, and consumerist" (Kong, 2012: 291) that emerged with the PRC's transition to a market economy. However, these characteristics do not resonate strongly with queer lives, identities and spaces in Hainan. Rather than the qualities and aesthetics of a queer identity, life or space, gay men in Hainan have more ontological concerns and their everyday spaces are characterised by simultaneities of visibility/invisibility, tangibility/ephemerality, reality/imagination, existence/non-existence, collective/individual, pleasure/fear, momentariness/duration, possibility/limitation, offline/online, actualisation/perception and certainty/uncertainty. I have collectively described such juxtapositions as queer presence/absence. Echoing Phillips et al. (2005), queer presence/absence shows the instability of hegemonic sexualities in Hainan. With this instability comes freedom from homonormative demands to reduce queerness to a stable identity. However, there is also danger that, in the absence of stable identities and community spaces, queer presence/absence reifies heterosexual identities and life courses as the only ontologically secure modes of being and living. As such, many of my younger interviewees felt that their queerness, itself, was temporary and they planned to pursue heterosexual marriage and parenthood in later life; many of my older interviewees were already married with children. These insights resonate with the findings of research into other forms of marginalised queer experience in the PRC, such as queer rural-urban migrations (Gong and Liu, 2022 ; Luo et al., 2023, 2024) and scarce studies of queer lives in non-metropolitan settings (Ji et al., 2021). This emphasises the need for further research into multiple and intersecting forms of queer marginality in the PRC, including sexual, geographic, socio-economic and cultural/ethnic.

By showing how the forms of queerness that dominate in sexual centres may be of little concern to queer people on the periphery, these insights from Hainan can be mobilised towards a global sexualities studies that is attentive not only to a greater diversity of geographic settings, including non-Western sexual peripheries, but also to a wider and more nuanced range of conceptual questions. Much research on contemporary non-Western queerness has sought to discern the extents to which non-Western queer identities represent conformity to, resistance to, or hybridisation of Western models of sexuality (Altman, 1996; Boellstorff, 2006; Oswin, 2006; Povinelli and Chauncey, 1999; Rofel, 2007). The dynamics of queer presence/absence in Hainan could, indeed, be fed into to these debates via the recognition that sexuality as a mode of 'being' (a dimension queer presence) is a historically Western discourse (Foucault, 1978). However, such a framing

turns attention away from understanding the everyday lives of queer people in Hainan in favour of a broader geo-political enquiry into sexual globalisation. Instead, I argue that understanding the lives, identities, spaces and practices gay men in Hainan, and likely other sexual peripheries, on their own terms requires ontological enquiry into the frameworks, possibilities and limits of queer existence in particular settings. Such an approach aligns with the work of those who have pursued queer research in non-Western settings not only as an expansion of empirical knowledge but as a source of new concepts, vocabularies and lines of enquiry that expand the horizons of queer research broadly (Liu, 2023; Liu and Ding, 2005). Queer presence/absence is an example of the nuanced conceptual vocabularies that can emerge from such enquiry.

Without wanting to determine the ways in which this heuristic could be taken up elsewhere, queer presence/absence might serve as an ontological premise that denaturalises presence and, instead, orients analysis towards various ways in which queer subjects, lives and spaces exist within, or even as, tensions between presence and absence (and an array of other tense pairing). This, in turn, enables an understanding of heteronormativity as acting not upon already present queer subjects but as shaping the extents to which queer subjects become present at all, when, where and for whom. At the same time, queer presence/absence can illuminate how queer agency and resistance are not dependent upon an already present queer subject but may inhere in the negotiation and balancing of presence and absence, as queer subjects work to maintain their own protective absence from certain social fields. Such negotiation can be joyous, playful and brazen; it can also be cautious, fearful and resented; it may also be all at once as another instance of the tensions within queer presence/absence. Such reflections further demonstrate the importance of enquiry into queer lives on the periphery, not for the sake of expanding empirical knowledge but for the possibility of developing powerful lines of conceptual enquiry.

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ORCID iD

James Cummings https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2823-6416

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James Cummings is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of York. His research interests are in gender and sexuality, especially from phenomenological and anthropological perspectives. He researches the lives and identities of queer people in the People's Republic of China, with a focus on Hainan province, and in the United Kingdom.