

EPILOGUE: Fake Eggs and Espionage

My first experience living in China was from 2012 to 2013, when I spent a year in Beijing with my then-girlfriend, also a white, American woman, and a copy editor for an English-language government newspaper. Each night we shared stories from our workdays, often laughing at the bizarre headlines that crossed her desk. What I remember most from that year was the widespread discourse of *fakeness*. Fake eggs. Fake alcohol. Fake zoo animals. Fake handbags. Everything seemed to be disguised as something else (Lin, 2011). The atmosphere of imitation produced a culture of suspicion. I began to question the authenticity of everything, the food at the market, the trees on a hike (see Figure 84), even museum artifacts. I once read about rumors circulating that Chairman Mao's mummified body on display in Tiananmen Square was a wax replica made by Madame Tussauds (Li, 1994). In such an environment, trust has to be earned through repeated interactions, through *guanxi*, the slow accumulation of relational trust that underpins all meaningful exchanges in China. Although I had heard of *guanxi* before arriving, it was through navigating the landscape of fakeness that the concept truly came to life for me.

When I returned to China for fieldwork a decade later, the atmosphere of suspicion had intensified. The country had just reopened after COVID-19. Surveillance was omnipresent. At every checkpoint, multiple officers questioned me about my purpose for entering: my location, my affiliations with my own country. What would begin as a routine procedure soon felt like an interrogation of my morality. Cameras were everywhere. The bureaucracy had expanded in ways that drastically restricted movement. I felt like I was constantly being monitored. Being an American in China in 2023 was no longer safe. It was a source of tension. In six months of travel across six major cities, I did not encounter a single American who was visiting China either on business or holiday.



Figure 84. Illustration of cellphone towers disguised as trees. From a hike in Dali. Original artwork by author.

This was a stark contrast from my first stay, when roughly half of the foreigners I met were from the United States. By 2023, Sino-American relations had deteriorated. The U.S. issued travel advisories warning citizens about wrongful detentions and uneven legal enforcement. Stories of Americans being detained at exit points on suspicion of espionage circulated widely. Echoing reciprocal suspicions of Chinese international students in America. The larger geopolitical climate framed my identity and my body, as inherently suspect.

When I first arrived in 2013, I was twenty-eight years old and, by Chinese social standards, acceptably “single.” Though in a same-sex relationship, I lived under the protection of a work visa

and the legitimacy of my partner's government affiliation. I appeared trustworthy. Young and compliant.

Returning a decade later, at thirty-eight, I was perceived differently. People often ask about my husband or children, assuming I might be divorced. When I explained that I was neither married nor a mother, reactions ranged from disbelief to pity. Others questioned my career path. How could I be a student at my age? Why was I not yet a professor? My singleness, age, and profession did not align and were a constant source of speculation. Eventually, to deflect attention from at least two of those abnormalities, I began wearing a fake wedding ring (see Figure 11) and lying about my marital status. When I was honest, I felt trust recede. My unmarried status marked me as a deviant, someone out of line with moral expectations. The *guanxi* I was able to develop with people seemed to hinge on my marital status. What it meant to be twenty-eight and single was very different from what it meant to be thirty-eight and single. I had become, in their eyes, a *shengnu*. A leftover woman.

Compared to 2013, my second stay was defined by digital surveillance rather than paper bureaucracy. Facial recognition checkpoints. Fingerprint scanners. And omnipresent cameras replaced human clerks with red stamps. In Wuhan, my home base, security was particularly intense. Access to some neighborhoods required digital authorization. Certain areas were closed to outsiders altogether. Wuhan, both a tech hub and the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak, epitomized this tightening control.

Even my friendships reflected the shift. Chinese friends who once guided me through bureaucratic mazes were now reluctant to accompany me to government offices. Some avoided being seen with me in public. One friend warned me never to mention any American apps, even casually, around strangers after a young man questioned us in a restaurant. He feared the topic might suggest VPN-use and trigger suspicion and target me even more than I likely already was. My friends feared that being associated with me might be dangerous for them. The suspicion and anxiety about how I and, by extension, my friends were being perceived pervaded daily life was palpable.

The scrutiny did not only come from officials in uniforms. At a marriage market in Wuhan, a man repeatedly accused me of being Russian. "*Eluosi!*," he would yell this at me every time he saw me, warning others not to talk to me. At one point, he even started following me around, filming me with his phone. Russian women, often stereotyped in China as sex workers, occupied an unfortunate, marginalized symbol in the Chinese social imagination (See Chapter 4). My perceived Russianness transformed me into a sexualized foreign "threat." Later, a friend explained that many Chinese imagine American women as small, blonde, and feminine, while "*Eluosi*" are thought to be taller, stronger, and promiscuous. Despite my insistence that I was an American, even showing him my passport, my 5'9" stature and more androgynous ways of dressing likely convinced this man that I was a danger to him and those around us.

Whether seen as a spy, a prostitute, or just a single woman over thirty, I embodied forms of social threat. In these contexts, my unmarried status, illicit profession, and foreign identity intersect to mark me as undoubtedly untrustworthy. I failed to belong to a moral family, a moral profession, or a "good" ally of the nation. While 2013 China made me suspicious of people's sincerity and material objects, 2023 China made me suspicious of people themselves. By late 2023, this

pervasive suspicion had seeped into my own psyche. I grew hyper aware of camouflaged cameras. Disguised cell towers. And strangers secretly photographing me. I began to lose sleep, and my hair started to fall out due to stress. Even among those I had *guangxi* with, the relationships were stretched. When police started to visit the homes of friends to ask about me, they panicked. Our friendships had been deteriorating as they began to fear association with me. I began to travel more as a way to offer distance. When I finally spoke with the U.S. Embassy, they advised me to leave the country immediately, warning that my student status in the social sciences might make me a target for detention. I ended my fieldwork early. Returned home with only six months of data but a profound understanding of how surveillance shapes moral life.

In hindsight, my experience mirrors that of the singletons I studied. They, too live under constant moral observation. While singleness after thirty is not illegal, it is socially punished through gossip, exclusion, and parental anxiety. Media discourse, family pressure, and even ancestral duty form a network of surveillance that keeps the unmarried in check. Zheng and Sun (2014) describe this as an “imagined gaze,” which the authors describe as a lingering form of social monitoring leftover from the Mao-era work-unit culture (p. 139). Though the state no longer directly meddles in intimate life, citizens internalize the gaze, disciplining themselves to appear “good.”

Foucault’s (1995 [1975]) metaphor of the “panopticon” perfectly captures how individuals deal with this anxiety. Both state surveillance and moral surveillance produce disciplining subjects who internalize external scrutiny as moral judgment, behaving as if they are always visible. Chinese parents, anxious about their children’s singleness, seek to restore their own moral legitimacy through their progeny’s marriages. I, too, self-monitored to appear “good” in my fabrication of a married identity for strangers while presenting my true non-married identity to state authorities, adapting to my environment depending on who I believed was watching. Like my interlocutors, I learned to perform normalcy to avoid suspicion. In the end, I had become like the fake eggs I once distrusted, convincing on the outside, uncertain within. The boundaries between authenticity and deception blurred so completely that even I began to question my own moral value.

My field experience thus offers an embodied understanding of how moral surveillance and the pressures to marry operate in contemporary China. Both my interlocutors and I were subject to the same logic that saw those who deviated from normative expectations, whether in terms of nationality, sexuality, or marital status, as potential threats to social and national order. For single men, that threat is framed as demographic and moral; for me, as a foreign, unmarried woman, it was also moral, but additionally political and sexual, shaping the “type” of women I was interpolated to be. In both cases, surveillance produced conformity through fear, and suspicion served as a means of control. Yet neither the single men of this study nor I could fully embody the ideal of normalcy, rendering our presence in China fraught, uneasy, and in different ways, tragic.