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FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT: The Love Boat

**Airs 8.30 pm Monday December 18th on ABC
TV and iview**

While Australia says ‘yes’, the country with more gay people than most says an implacable ‘no’. But in China, a determined group of young men and women just won’t take no for an answer, as Matthew Carney reports.

Shanghai has seen thousands of cruise ships come and go, but perhaps never one like this.

About 800 special invitees are piling aboard the ship to witness the marriages of nine LGBT couples in a brazen statement against China’s law and traditional family values.

It's a milestone in Chinese history – Duan, one of the cruise organisers

Duan's plan is to stage the weddings once the cruise ship gets into international waters, beyond the reach of authorities.

ABC China correspondent Matthew Carney is on board to see if Duan can pull it off. Lately officials have been shutting down gay rights gatherings all over China. But Duan is determined to make it happen.

It makes us feel super excited. We feel we're part of a big family – Duan

The big family that Duan wants to strike a blow for is China's estimated 70 million gays and lesbians. Same sex couples can't get insurance, health care or pensions or own a home or adopt a child. Not only laws and officialdom stand in their way. Deep-rooted culture is equally unbending. Many Chinese see homosexuality as a sickness curable by treatments like electro-shock therapy.

Chinese tradition is to pass on our genes to the next generation. People will speak badly of us – father of Jesse, who was born a girl but now identifies as a man.

Jesse's mum and dad are aboard the ship but they have no idea what's ahead of them. They thought they were having a family holiday. Jesse hopes the cruise will help them understand him.

They're afraid of losing face, but their acceptance means a lot to me - Jesse
Parental pressure is so great that as many as 20 million LGBT couples are in sham marriages. Duan and long-time partner Li both married women to appease their parents.

It was like being in jail. That kind of life was really torture for me – Duan

Lesbians Xianxian and Tiantian each married a gay man. Now they've signed on for the cruise so they can marry each other.

Xianxian is the most beautiful bride – Tiantian

But there's a hitch. Even though shipboard marriages have no legal standing in China, authorities are edgy about this "immoral" cruise and the defiance it represents. They move to stop the ship sailing, threatening to blow up months of planning by Duan and his friends.

The Love Boat, reported by Matthew Carney, airs on Foreign Correspondent 8.30 pm Monday December 18 on ABC TV (repeated 1 pm Tuesday and 11.30 pm Wednesday on ABC TV; 8 pm Saturday and 1 am Sunday on ABC News). Also on iview.

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