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Have they really come out: gay men and their parents in Taiwan

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In Chinese culture, filial piety for a son is closely linked to his capacity to produce an heir to ensure continuity of the paternal line. For Taiwanese gay men, coming out as gay may be interpreted as a refusal to produce a male heir and thus constitutes a major conflict within their family. This study explores how gay men in Taiwan come out to their parents within this cultural context. Thirty-two men in total were interviewed. Findings demonstrate that the decision to come out was often motivated by the son's perception of his parents' attitude towards homosexuality. Respondents worked hard to prepare for coming out and to minimize the risk and the impacts of the process, their report shows that some parents go through their own process of coming out and/or hiding in the closet after their gay son's coming out. Although many parents still see homosexuality as illness, some adopt alternative discourses to reinterpret the meaning of being gay as a spiritual path to eternal enlightenment or friendship. These findings imply sites of resistance to the privileged discourse of filial piety in constituting the experiences of coming out for Taiwanese gay men and their parents.

Keywords: cultural practices; gay men; parents; stigma; self-identification; Taiwan

Introduction

The term *Tong-Shin-Liang* (homosexuality) first appeared in Chinese academic literature around 1930's. However, this Westernernized biomedical term is inadequate to capture the diversity of everyday language used by ordinary people (Tsang and Ho 2007). Instead, local terminology such as *Bo-Li-Chuan* (the glass circle), *Tu-Ze* (rabbit) or *Ren-Yao* (man monster) is more commonly used terms to refer to gay men in Taiwan. In the late 1950s, the English word gay was introduced into Taiwan through US tourists and soldiers and began to replace the word *Bo-Li-Chuan*. In 1992, another Chinese word *Tong-Zhi* (comrades) was adopted and offered a more inclusive subjectivity for the burgeoning gay movement. According to Wu's (1997) discursive analysis of homosexuality in Taiwan, there have been three main periods of representation of gay men in the media: (1) the morbid crime period when homosexuality was portrayed as a disease of sexual perversion; (2) the HIV and AIDS period when the sexual behavior of gay men became the focus of news; and (3) the human rights period when gay activism provided new discourses in the newspapers. This shifting terminology reflects the historical construction and the contested nature of gay identity (Ho 1997; Kong 2002).

The lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987 created a democratization process that aided the formalization of the gay movement (Wang 1999). The first legally registered gay organization, the Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association, was

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established in 1998 and organized the first gay pride parade in Taipei in 2003. Despite this initial progress, homosexuality was still highly stigmatized (Wang 1999).

According to Taiwanese custom, unmarried adults are not yet grown-up; as a result, single men into their 40s may still live with their parents. Such residential arrangements inevitably increase the risk of accidental coming out for Taiwanese gay men. Furthermore, according to the traditional definition of filial piety, Chinese[1] sons are supposed to bring a male heir to their families and many gay men will fail in that expectation. How do gay men negotiate their identities within such a set of cultural frameworks? As coming out can be seen as a ceremonial act of defining oneself for gay people, we will focus on the experiences of coming out to examine this issue.

Comparing the conditions of coming out between Chinese and Westerners, Chou (1997) points out that the greatest obstacle a Chinese homosexual faces lies not with religion or the workplace, but with the family (see also Liao 1997; Tseng 1999); parents being some of the most difficult of those to come out to. However, relationships between same-sex-attracted men and their parents have been under-researched. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the process of coming out in the context of Chinese culture with a particular focus on gay men's perspectives of their relations with their parents. It focused on how men make decisions about coming out, the strategies they employed to do so and the discourses that parents adopted in their interpretations of events after a son's coming out.

Literature review

For gay men, coming out is a constant daily struggle. Among various groups, such as friends, colleagues or family members, coming out to parents is the most important, yet most difficult challenge faced (e.g. Ben-Ari 1995; Cain 1991; Cramer and Roach 1988; Miller and Boon 2000). Among the studies of gay men's coming out to their parents, Ben-Ari (1995) and Bohan (1996) constitute two important academic resources. The first focuses on the functions of coming out, the second focuses on the concerns for parents regarding their child's coming out.

Ben-Ari (1995) identifies two main areas of concern for parents. First, there are child-oriented concerns for his possible loneliness, not having children, being hurt by discrimination, the possibility of contracting sexually-transmitted diseases, being harassed and arrested and losing his religious beliefs. Second, there are parent-oriented concerns for not having further descendants, having a sense of failure as a parent, becoming distant from the child/extended family/community and the conflict of loving a child who transgresses one's own moral or religious beliefs.

The process of coming out is deeply shaped by the specifics of local culture. In the North American context, coming out has been viewed as essential and beneficial to self-identity and the collective struggle of gay men. For instance, Bohan (1996) indicated that coming out has multiple functions. It is therapeutic, reinforces self-esteem and alleviates isolation. It is relationship-building, since keeping secrets from others makes it difficult to establish interpersonal connections. It is problem-solving, in order to avoid the social pressure of not being married. It is preventive, since by coming out as a sign of honesty, one's employer could not have one fired. Finally, it is political, by attempting to change society's view toward homosexuality and establishing oneself as a role model.

Such a discourse of coming out reflects Western individualistic conceptions of selfhood but fails to recognize the importance of relational selfhood, which is important in Chinese culture. Furthermore, by making coming out a universal or 'normal' stage of identity development, such a perspective fails to recognize the diversity of gay men embedded in different cultures and social relations. For example, the leading gay activist group in Taiwan, the Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association (2007, 28), reminds its audience that 'hiding in a closet can also be a good way of being gay'. This emphasis on maintaining harmony in relations is crucial in this formulation of how to come out to parents.

Coming out is a complicated process. Some people choose to come out, while others may be outed not by their own choice, such as in a slip of the tongue or in having one's gay reading material discovered. Yet, there are reasons not to come out, including: (1) irrelevance: feeling that being gay matters little; (2) having nothing to gain but more to lose by coming out (i.e. the risk of suffering prejudice); (3) submission to religious beliefs; and (4) politics: to come out may harm the gay community (Bohan 1996). Coming out is not an easy act and the decision is influenced by various factors, such as individual character, social support and cohort effects (as in Ben-Ari 1995).

The struggle for gay identity is also shaped by local polity and culture. In Chinese culture the ethics of filial piety is central in framing the experiences of both gay men and their parents. Political philosophers (e.g. Fung 1949; Hamilton 1990; Tran 1987) have consistently pointed out that filial piety is the organizing principle of imperial Chinese society. It demands that sons submit their personal will to the authority of fathers, husbands and emperors. The *Book of Filial Piety* clearly states that the foremost misbehaviour against filial piety is not bearing a male heir to the family. There will be guilt and anxiety for both gay sons and their parents, because if a son fails to marry, parents have failed to have a son who will produce a male heir.

Filial piety is, however, constantly negotiated, especially in the coming out process. Under the influence of post-structuralism (e.g. Donzelot 1979; Smith 1993), Taiwanese scholars have begun to see filial piety as an ideology that reinforces social relations of gender, class and race. Hu (1995), for example, rejects images of the three-generational-family in which elderly parents are taken care of by adult children because it naturalizes women's role as caregiver. She proposes instead greater recognition of the three-generation-neighbourhood in which adult children live close by elderly parents to diminish filial piety's regulatory function. Although a few researchers have examined the importance of family responsibility in considerations of coming out (Shan 2004; Zhou 2006), the ideological effects of filial piety on the construction of Chinese gay identity and their efforts to resist are mostly ignored.

Research methods

Data in the present study was collected by means of in-depth interviews. Participants were recruited from gay campus groups, postings on gay websites and via the social networks of the researchers and the participants. Participants were introduced to the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality. Since homosexuality is stigmatized in Taiwan, gay men tend to use nicknames as a form of self-identification in gay circles. These nicknames were used throughout the interview as a way of protecting confidentiality, since the researchers were unaware of men's real names. Verbal consent to participate was received from participants at the beginning of the interview.

Thirty-two men were interviewed for this study. The age range was between 16 and 42 years, with an average of 29 years. At the time of interview, four men were under 20, six between 21 and 25, thirteen were between 26 and 30, five were between 31 and 35, three between 36 and 40 and one was 42 years old. Twenty-four interviewees had completed college education, five had a junior college degree and three had high school education.

Interviews were held in a place of the interviewees' choosing and included coffee shops and the researchers' offices. Interview questions included family background, educational experiences, sexual identity development and participation in gay community activities. Most questions focused on relationships with parents, parental expectations and the experience of coming out to parents. Interviews lasted from one to five hours[2] with an average of two hours and were recorded with the consent of the interviewees. Some interviewees expressed their thanks for having had the opportunity to share their experiences of being gay with someone they could trust.

All interviews were conducted, transcribed verbatim and analyzed in Chinese. Transcripts were read and re-read to 'achieve the greatest possible familiarity with the phenomenon' (Kockelmans 1975, 85). Thematic analysis was adopted for data analysis (Ezzy 2002). Data were interpreted by constantly comparing incident with incident, incidents with key concepts and similar incidents across different interviewees and situating these phenomena in social, cultural and religious contexts. Subsequently, findings were organized by themes.

Before reports on findings, some limitations should be mentioned. Findings and analysis are based on the observation and interpretation from the gay son's perspective. Ideally, we might have interviewed both son and parent(s). However, given shame (Kong 2002), it was anticipated that most parents would refuse to be indentified as parents of a gay son and to participate in an interview. Second, participants were limited to urban university students and did not include gay men who were older, rural or less educated. Interviews with older gay men in Taiwan would further enrich our understanding of the coming out process.

Findings

The constant struggle for coming out

In a society where heterosexuality is dominant, most of our interviewees adopted a negative stance with regards to coming out to their parents. The decision not to come out was often motivated by the son's perceived clues to his parents' negative attitude towards homosexuality. Interviewees' comments included: 'When watching news stories about gay men, my parents expressed a negative attitude, concurring with the abnormality of homosexuality', (Henry, age 24); 'My parents are very conservative, that's why I chose not to come out' (Tony, age 30). Other participants reported that since coming out is not absolutely necessary and the consequences are hard to predict, it is better to avoid the risk. Parent-oriented considerations included fear of hurting parents' feelings (as they might blame themselves and worry), fear of parents' disappointment and frustration (shattering their expectations of having the family line continued) and not wishing to bring stigma onto the parents.

To remain closeted or come out is not a one-time decision in the life course of gay men but, rather, a constant and recurrent decision that needs to be made across encounters in their everyday lives. It is relatively easy for gay men to hide their sexual

identity at an early age, as long as reading material and behaviours are kept secret, but at puberty and at the average age[3] of marriage, not having a girlfriend or not being married raises suspicions and the pressures to marry. Thus, gay men and their parents engage in a never-ending battle, with coming out itself being a never-ending process. While putting the issue aside is a common attitude among gay men, denial does not prevent one from being judged according to socially expected norms. Social norms regarding heterosexual relationships put those who do not want to come out in a situation of constant scrutiny by surrounding individuals and force gay men to work hard at hiding. On the other hand, since coming out is not solely determined by one's own intention, gay men have to be well prepared for being accidentally or involuntarily outed. Four kinds of strategies were used by gay men to prevent being outed and to prepare or reduce the risk of this happening.

'Hiding in' at home

With social progress in the gay rights movement, there are now more channels for gay men to meet other gay men (such as online, magazines, clubs, gay commercial venues) and to share experiences on homosexuality and seek acceptance and support. As Tony (age 30) reported, although 'you can't share things with your parents, you can still find friends to talk to, who understand your problems and things you want to share with them.' On the other hand, participants reported there is the need to segregate family life and gay life more effectively, in order to maintain impenetrable boundaries and prevent information from leaking out or spreading. For example, Dondi (age 21) was careful to 'not come out to an acquaintance, because you can't know if he may "out you" some day.' Because most interviewees were highly educated, course reading or research material served as the best excuse for the appearance of gay books on their shelves. Jeffery (age 27) stated: 'being an elementary school teacher means I should know a little about everything and at least look into everything. This gives me the excuse to talk about homosexuality.' However, poorly hidden books or videos, or telephone calls from friends can accidentally expose a gay son.

Running away from home is the last choice for many gay men under the circumstance of irresolvable conflict: 'I must be out in life ... but how can I make both worlds meet and reach a sort of compromise? The only way is to walk away ...' (Jian 2000, age not provided.). Leaving home is a choice driven by wanting to avoid exposure at home or to escape the pressure from relatives and friends to marry. Some gay men begin planning leaving home as soon as they become aware of their same-sex-attractions identity. In Taiwan, with family ideology being so pervasive, conflicts tend to ensue if one leaves home without justifiable causes. Leaving home for college education is one of the most readily accepted excuses because education is highly valued. One can easily apply to study far away from home and let distance hide the secrets. Some gay men also choose to grow emotionally distant from their families, being unable to share their innermost secrets with family members. Some participants reported deliberately keeping themselves too busy to go home (Tony, Sting); or reducing the frequency of home visits to get their family slowly used to their not returning home. As Jeffery explained: 'I refuse to go home on purpose. I used to go home once a semester, now I go home only when it's necessary.'

Self-preparation for risk management of coming out

Apart from increasing spatial and mental distance from their parents, interviewees tried to build their psychological strength, making friends and finding social support as well as achieve financial independence, in preparing themselves to manage being outed or coming out. Interestingly, in confronting the social stigma of homosexuality, some gay men adopted two contrasting strategies, as follows. Some deliberately performed badly to encourage their parents to give less love to them and expect less of them. It is assumed that should their gay identity become exposed, their parents would not feel as disappointed.

For example, as the eldest son, Kid (age 20) grew up with family members having high aspirations for him. Knowing that they could never accept his gay identity, Kid gradually and deliberately went astray to dampen their hopes: 'My strategy was to make them feel that I am not really that important and to have lower expectations of me. Basically, I tried to let them know that I am not that great anyway.' In contrast, other gay men worked hard to excel in all areas to compensate for the stigma of being gay. As A-Hao (2000, age not provided) said in the following in a letter to his mother: 'I have tried very hard to be a good kid in order not to let my mother be disappointed. I tried to achieve at school, in student clubs, with friends relations and with family relations. I tried hard to be better than my brother in every aspect to compensate for being gay.' Either strategy, however, reinforces the notion that being gay is a deficiency.

Testing and educating parents

Learning from the lesson of their own identity development and knowing that parents cannot be expected to accept them immediately, participants reported that they were careful to give parents time to gradually absorb gay-friendly information. During his college years, Edward said that '[I] intentionally watched TV programmes with my mother and used feminist theory to analyze TV news so as to systematically instill my mother with ideas of feminism.' Tim also constantly tried to find opportunities to discuss gender issues with his parents and challenge their limits. Other interviewees created opportunities to watch gay-related news or films (such as *The Wedding Banquet*)[4] to test their parents' potential for accepting homosexuality or to promote opportunities for discussion of gay-related issues.

Incremental approach to coming out

Chan (1989) found that Asian-American gay men sequentially came out to their friends, to siblings, then to parents. Some interviewees in this study also followed a similar sequence. Lance (37) was one example. Although he had followed traditional expectations and had a girlfriend in college, he was forced to face up to his gay identity when he served in the army. However, he could not find any good gay role models in Taiwan. He decided to go the USA to search for his future. There, he then participated in gay activities and lived with an American boyfriend. He had a positive identity of himself and hoped that his family (with six brothers and two sisters) could share in his new life. He first came out to his eldest sister he felt who loved him most; she cried and blamed herself for not fulfilling her duty as a sister. He tried hard to educate her about homosexuality. Years later, two of his brothers visited him in the USA and he introduced his partner Steve to them. Their doubt transformed into acceptance after several intimate talks. Lance then wrote a long

account of his experience of becoming gay with a series of questions attached. He circulated this draft around his brothers and sisters to see if there was consensus on whether he should come out to his parents. Instead of making the decision on his own, Lance included his siblings in the process as a strategy to defuse the anxiety of sole decision-making and to establish a well-prepared network of support for his parents. After much debate, however, his siblings decided that he should not come out to his parents because his parents were too elderly to sustain such shock. Instead of coming out to his parents, Lance decided to come back to Taiwan with Steve and introduced him as his 'best friend' in the USA. The mother immediately knew, checked with his sister and confirmed his gay identity.

Parents' framing of having a gay son

Although same-sex bonding among men was valued in traditional Chinese society, homosexuality as a distinct sexual identity is seen as a concept imported from the West. Homosexuality is heavily stigmatized, threatening to filial piety and associated with promiscuity and AIDS. To date, there is very little history of celebrities coming out, no articulate gay movement and no parent support groups in Taiwan. In addition, Chinese parents see their sons' performance and achievement as their own responsibility. Thus, a gay son creates a threatening situation for them to face. How parents regard their child as a gay man in this culture constitutes our next concern. In this analysis, men reported four types of framings that parents used to make sense of their son's gay identity.

Transitional framing: gay as something that will disappear when he grows older

Here, parents define homosexuality as being temporary and hope that time will eventually make things right. Sting (age 21) mentioned that his father once complained that 'you like to follow fashion, enjoy being individualistic and dressing up differently ... Why do you always have to be different in everything, even in the people you fancy sexually.' His father concluded that Sting had turned gay deliberately. Neither of his parents could accept the fact that he is gay, Sting mentioned that 'they think it's something that will disappear when I grow older, or get married.'

As Liao (1997) points out, many parents are often reluctant to accept the fact that their son is gay. Whenever stories of homosexuality being correctable appear in the media, hope of their son's marrying lights up again in their despairing hearts. For emotional reasons, parents can still accept their son, but in general they find it hard to accept homosexuality. It is regarded as of a bad habit and a consequence of not making enough of an effort. It is not surprising to hear parents say: 'Have you corrected that bad habit of yours?' or 'I still wish that you would spend time cultivating an interest in girls, and if possible, try to get married.' Although Fong had already come out to his mother, he had to play along in front of relatives, pretending that he was seeing a girl. This also gave his mother a story to believe in.

Social learning framing: gay as something learned from friends

Some interviewees reported that their parents believe that their son had become gay due to the influence of bad friends. For example, when Alex was about to leave the

house in the morning, his parents would say, 'Be careful of the company you keep.' Edward also reported having received advice such as: 'Don't sleep around, watch out for diseases, stay away from bad friends' from his mother every now and then. The media often connect homosexuality with promiscuity, AIDS, crimes of passion, unnaturalness; constructing the myth that homosexuals are bad people. Elsewhere Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) have asserted that, by finding an external cause of homosexuality, parents can project blame and purge themselves of guilt.

Filial piety framing: get married whether you are gay or not

In order to fulfill the obligation of filial piety, some parents insist that their gay son gets married. Fong, the eldest son and grandson in the family, was over thirty years old and was expected by all his relatives to marry. As he did not want to lie every time his father mentioned marriage, he decided to answer directly, 'I don't want to get married. I am not interested in girls.' Fong described that what then happened:

> My father didn't take me seriously no matter what! He said, how can anyone not get married? What will you do when you're old? ... I think they know but just don't want to recognize the fact, and still ask me to get married.

As a result, a heartfelt confession was treated as child's talk and with Fong's individual autonomy being rejected and denied.

Buddhist spiritual framing

Ben-Ari (1995) regards religious belief as a key factor influencing parents' reaction to coming out. Chou (1997, 372) points out that US 'Christian parents are likely to see homosexuality as a repulsive and perverse sin and find it extremely difficult to accept that their children are gay.' In Chinese societies, folk beliefs and ancestor worship substitute for the role of Christian religion in the West. Buddhism, a popular religion in Chinese societies, also provides viable discourses[5] to interpret homosexuality. For example, Buddhist teaching about reincarnation, in which the soul is believed to transmigrate from life to life and the quality of life is the result of deeds done in the previous life, reframes being a homosexual as a necessary burden that the gay son must carry. The belief in the existence of spirit in all living creatures and that all are in search of eternal enlightenment requires that parents respect their gay sons who are on an individual journey. What happens in one's life has its roots in one's previous lives. Therefore, River (age 30) 'used Buddhist ideas to convince them [parents] that marriage is not necessarily the definitive path for everyone.' As suffering is a necessary way to purify one's sin, parents may reinterpret the meaning of being gay as being a necessary process towards eternal enlightenment. Vincent (age 29) reported that his parents 'gradually found solace in Buddhism and began changing little by little in their ideas, to see through everything and stopped forcing me to get married.'

Sworn brotherhood

As mentioned earlier, when Lance's father became suspicious of Lance and then asked his wife, 'Is Steve [Lance's American boyfriend] gay?' He was probing the matter without directly consulting his son. According to Lance, his mother answered in a similarly roundabout manner, 'Both of them are eccentrics, they don't want to

get married but want to take care of each other for life.' Lance's father never raised the question again. By asking whether Steve (rather than his son Lance) is gay, the father avoided being confronted with the truth. The framing of the father's question was located in the intersection of race and sexuality because asking if an American is gay is less disturbing because an American is already an 'other'. The mother transcended the division of race by stating 'they are both eccentrics' but avoided the dichotomy of heterosexual-homosexual by framing their relationship as good friends committed to caring for each other. 'To take care of each other for life' is an answer that not only by-passes the issue but is also probably something that the septuagenarian father could readily accept.

In traditional Chinese culture, same-sex bonding among men is highly valued, perhaps even more so than spousal love (Chou 1997). The ritual of Golden Orchid (sworn brotherhood) (Jordan 1985) in Chinese custom allows men to become such close friends that they may even share clothes. Stigma attached to the term homosexuality may be defused by adopting local cultural notions about same-sex relationships, such as 'sworn brotherhood' as a reframing discourse that provides positive interpretation and understanding for men's intimate relationships.

Discussion

In a Taiwanese context, a son's responsibility to carry on the family line is an important framing for the struggle of coming out between parents and same-sex-attracted sons. Under the influence of such a framing, parents tend to resist giving up hope for their sons to be married and have children in order to avoid the accusation of being disrespectful to ancestors. Research on gay men and lesbians in China (Zhou 2006) and Taiwan (Shan 2004) have found a heightened significance of the family in influencing decisions regarding disclosure of sexual identity. In this study, we have demonstrated how filial piety and family ethics play an important role in shaping perceptions of gay men's responsibility to marry and parents' responses of denial, anger and persistence in persuading their sons into marriage.

Although filial piety discourse plays a key role in defining gay men as the 'other', its nature is different from the Christian discourses of the West. Gay men are not seen as immoral but as individuals with personal traits that prevent them from fulfilling their duties. This provides possibilities for resistance. As long as a gay man does not refuse the role, he will be excused for the time being. As a result, many Chinese gay men get married under the pressure of not disappointing their families. Zhou (2006) reports that gay men in China sometimes divorce after having their first child as a compromise. Shan (2004) documents the case of a Taiwanese gay man who chose to marry a Vietnamese bride but planned to divorce her if she found out the truth. Some gay men adopt children to fulfill their responsibility of carrying on the family line.

The strength of family discourse does not mean it has total dominance over the experiences of Chinese gay men. Differences between gay men in different Chinese societies suggests the importance of social, economic, political and historical factors in making various alternative discourses possible. The rapid industrialization in Taiwan in the past fifty years has provided adult children with the chance to seek education and jobs outside their parents' home. Education can sometimes equip gay men to manage their parents' understanding of the issues through providing information. The democratization of the political system makes a community of

others available to produce opposition of discourses to the constraints of heterosexism. The recent publication of the first Chinese gay parents' stories, *Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk about their Experiences* (Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association 2003), marks something of the progress in reshaping gay parents' worldviews in Taiwan.

Savin-Williams and Dube's (1998) notion of recognition without acceptance by the parents of gay offspring has some resonance in the Taiwanese context. As Liu and Ding (1998) stress, the reticence of Taiwanese parents to speak about homosexuality is itself homophobic and reinforces conventional (heterosexist) values. Tseng (1999) points out that even after their children have come out, parents continue to probe the possibility of them changing their sexual orientation. This never-say-never tenacity is an important characteristic of Chinese parents. Coming out to their parents may therefore be an interminable struggle.

Another interpretation of recognition without acceptance can be seen in the emphasis given to social role over selfhood in Chinese culture. Denial may be an over-simplified explanation for this phenomenon. Chinese scholars such as Gao (1995) and Hsu (1971) have argued that in Confucian thought, the self is defined according to hierarchy and the traits attached to that position. In pursuit of harmony, it is essential to conform to the requirements of position. Should there be conflict between personal will and social expectation, denying one's psychological characteristics is a necessary sacrifice for the successful fulfillment of role. This changeability is not seen as weakness of character but as self-improvement and as a road to privilege (Berry 2001). Therefore, Chinese parents tend to see gay sons' coming out as a personal behavior that should be changed to conform to the social role of a successful person in fulfillment of filial piety. In the end, gay men in Taiwan may have come out, but the closet remains around them. The deprivation and negation of public space to present oneself and be known as a gay, remains the most effective way of regulating homosexuality in Taiwan.

Notes

1. Here we use the word Chinese in a broad sense to refer to people who are brought up in Chinese culture, such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.
2. The one 5-hour interviewee was happy to have this opportunity to share his gay experiences with a person who he felt could understand. We also spent time exchanging information and ideas regarding to gay issues in Taiwan.
3. According to statistics from the Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, the average marriage age for men and women in 2001 was 29.5 and 25.9, respectively. Retrieved October 3, 2007, from http://www.moi.gov.tw/stat/index.asp
4. A famous film on gay issues directed by Ang Lee.
5. We use the word discourse in a general way to refer to structures of knowledge and systemic ways of shaping reality. The strength of family discourse does not mean it has total dominance over the experiences of Chinese gay men (Wang 2004).

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Résumé

Dans la culture chinoise, la dévotion pour les parents est, chez les fils, fortement liée à leur capacité à produire un héritier afin d'assurer la continuité de la lignée paternelle. Pour les hommes gays taïwanais, faire son *coming out* peut être interprété par les parents comme un refus de produire un héritier de sexe masculin, et constitue ainsi une source de conflit majeur au sein de leur famille. Cette étude explore comment les hommes gays à Taïwan révèlent leur sexualité à leurs parents, dans ce contexte culturel. Des entretiens ont eu lieu avec trente deux hommes au total. Les résultats démontrent que la décision de faire son *coming out* est souvent motivée par la perception de l'attitude des parents vis-à-vis de l'homosexualité. Les répondants se sont mobilisés pour préparer leur *coming out* et pour minimiser le risque et les impacts de ce processus; selon eux, certains parents font leur propre *coming out* (en tant que parents de fils gay) et/ou décident de rester dans le placard après le *coming out* de leur fils. Bien que de nombreux parents considèrent encore l'homosexualité comme une maladie, certains adoptent des discours différents pour donner un nouveau sens au fait d'être gay, celui d'une voie spirituelle vers l'illumination ou l'amitié éternelles. Ces résultats sous-entendent des sites de résistance au discours privilégié de la dévotion filiale, en constituant les expériences du *coming out* des hommes gays taïwanais et de leurs parents.

Resumen

En la cultura china, la piedad familiar por un hijo está estrechamente vinculada a su capacidad de procrear un heredero para asegurar la continuidad de la línea paterna. Para los hombres de Taiwán, salir del armario puede ser interpretado como un rechazo a querer procrear un heredero masculino y por tanto representa un conflicto importante con sus familias. En este estudio analizamos de qué modo los hombres de Taiwán confiesan a sus padres su condición de homosexual en este contexto cultural. Para este trabajo se entrevistó a treinta y dos hombres en total. Los resultados indican que la decisión de salir del armario muchas veces estaba motivada por la percepción que el hijo tenía de la actitud de sus padres ante la homosexualidad. Los entrevistados trabajaron duro para prepararse y confesar su condición de homosexuales a fin de minimizar el riesgo y las repercusiones de este proceso. Informaron que algunos padres experimentaron su propio proceso para salir del armario u ocultar su condición después de que los hijos confesaran su homosexualidad. Aunque muchos padres todavía ven la homosexualidad como una enfermedad, algunos adoptan discursos alternativos para reinterpretar el significado de ser gay como una vía espiritual hacia la iluminación eterna o la amistad. Estos resultados implican focos de resistencia que impiden que el discurso privilegiado de la piedad familiar defina las experiencias de salir del armario para hombres homosexuales de Taiwán y sus padres.