


# Homosexual Stories, Family Stories: Neo-Confucian Homonormativity and Storytelling in the Chinese Gay Community

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## Abstract

This article investigates the recent proliferation of family-themed homosexual stories in China based on life-history interviews and participant observation conducted in Shenzhen. We develop the concept of “neo-Confucian homonormativity” – characterized by a harmonious relationship between gay men and their families of origin and their ability and aspiration to enter a monogamous relationship and become parents – to explain the production, circulation and consumption of these stories in the Chinese gay community. We argue that these stories are socially embedded actions enabled by the emerging neoliberal sexual politics in the Chinese gay community that influence the organization of the Chinese gay community and Chinese gay men’s lived experiences. By analysing the emerging storytelling practices in the Chinese gay community, this article challenges the Western-centric way of theorizing homonormativity and opens up the possibility to conceptualize homonormativity from an Asian perspective.

**Keywords:** family; homosexuality; homonormativity; narrative sociology; storytelling; story

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Sociologist Ken Plummer argues that the modern Western world has become cluttered with sexual stories.<sup>1</sup> A similar trend can be observed in China recently. All sorts of sexual stories – stories of birth control, sexual harassment, buying and selling sex, female masturbation, male sexual impotence, rape, coming out and

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1 Plummer 1995, 4.



extramarital affairs, among others – have been constantly produced, reproduced, circulated and amplified.<sup>2</sup> Homosexual stories, or stories about homosexuals, are no exception. The past several years have witnessed an increasing number of homosexual stories in China. Researchers have begun to investigate, write and publish stories of Chinese lesbians and gay men, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have started to organize story-sharing activities for gay people and parents of *tongzhi*<sup>3</sup> (also known as *tongzhi* parents), cultural products – such as novels and online videos about lesbians and gay men – have emerged on the internet, and gay people have begun to tell their own stories with the development of new media platforms. These stories, however, *cannot* be seen as the truth of sexuality. Rather, they are “socially produced in social contexts by embodied concrete people experiencing the thoughts and feelings of everyday life.”<sup>4</sup> An examination of them from the perspective of narrative sociology, or the sociology of stories, will allow us to see the mechanisms through which they are produced and circulated, the social, cultural and political contexts that enable their telling, and the workings of globalization in sexual terms and its political dynamics in contemporary China.<sup>5</sup>

Although the stories of Chinese homosexuals have been much talked about, the telling of these stories remains underexplored. This article attempts to analyse homosexual stories and the telling process of these stories in contemporary China. We situate the production, circulation and consumption of these stories in the emerging neoliberal sexual politics of the Chinese gay community. With the great pace of globalization and neoliberalism, modern homosexualities have emerged in contemporary China since the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Caught up in the transnational flow of queer culture, gay identity, community and activism in China has been the rise of an assimilationist politics in a neoliberal form that has dominated the Western lesbian and gay movement in the past several decades.<sup>7</sup> Focusing on equal rights centred on sexuality and sexual citizenship, this neoliberal sexual politics, or what Lisa Duggan calls “homonormativity,”<sup>8</sup> distinguishes the publicly recognized, respectable, “good” gay from the dangerous, indecent, “bad” one, implying “a normative formation that makes homosexuality

2 Huang 2018.

3 There are different vocabularies used in Chinese gay communities as identity labels, for example, *tongxinglian* (homosexuals), *tongzhi* (synonymous for “gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender” in China), *gay*, *nantong* (male homosexuals), and so forth. Previous studies conducted in the 2000s suggest that *tongzhi* is the most popular term among the male same-sex-attracted population in China. However, most of our informants, even those in their forties or who are reluctant to accept their sexual identities, prefer the term *gay*, as they think the term *tongzhi* is too old-fashioned. But in activism, *tongzhi* is preferred and sometimes used interchangeably with *gay*. So in this research, we mainly use the term *gay* to describe our informants’ sexual identities, the term *tongzhi* to analyse issues related to the community or the activism, and the terms homosexual/homosexuality in both senses.

4 Plummer 1995, 16.

5 Huang 2018, 23.

6 Kong 2011, 194.

7 *Ibid.*, 34.

8 Duggan 2003, 50.

more acceptable vis-à-vis heteronormative society.”<sup>9</sup> These emerging neoliberal, homonormative changes “have been witnessed in most countries in the Global North, increasingly in several of the more dynamic emerging economies in the Global South ... and [in] a smattering of other nations.”<sup>10</sup> Under such circumstances, homonormativity has gained popularity and significance in related disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, human geography and interdisciplinary fields including gay and lesbian studies, queer studies, gender studies and post-colonial studies. However, in this process homonormativity has increasingly come to be presented as an “all-encompassing and unassailable” concept describing “a homogeneous, global external entity that exists outside all of us and exerts its terrifying, normative power on gay lives everywhere.”<sup>11</sup> In order to critically address this problem and contribute to the emerging interdisciplinary literature on homonormativity, this research emphasizes the production, circulation and consumption of family-themed homosexual stories as an analytical starting point to depict the encounter between the neoliberal assimilationist sexual politics and neo-Confucian familism in contemporary China.

Drawing on life-history interviews and participant observation conducted in Shenzhen, South China, this article focuses on the vital importance of family-themed homosexual stories in organizing the gay community and shaping gay men’s lived experiences in China. Adopting the perspective of narrative sociology, we are concerned not only with the content of these stories but also the social action of storytelling – the production and circulation of the stories and the contexts and consequences of their telling,<sup>12</sup> or how these stories act as constitutive parts of the real world and are passed off as simply “true” through what Clare Hemmings terms “technologies of the presumed.”<sup>13</sup> We ask the following questions: What are the natures of these homosexual stories and how is family implicated in them? In what ways are they produced and circulated in the gay community? What role do these stories – with their representations of certain images of family, individual–family relations and proper ways of being gay – play in organizing the gay community and influencing individual queer people’s lives? What are the contextual conditions that enable their telling? What can we learn from the Chinese case?

As will be seen in the following, our data indicate an emerging form of homonormativity in China that both resonates with and challenges its Western counterparts. It resonates with them as they each share an assimilationist strategy that seeks acceptance on heteronormative terms for the privileged, mainstream portions of the gay community while stigmatizing others;<sup>14</sup> it challenges them because of the vital and complicated role played by the family in shaping this

9 De Oliveira, Costa and Nogueira 2013, 1478.

10 Brown 2012, 1065.

11 Ibid., 1066–1067.

12 Plummer 1995.

13 Hemmings 2011, 19.

14 Branfman 2019, 1678.

strategy. As will be further elaborated, this Chinese version of homonormativity that locates individual queer desire in neo-Confucian familial norms, or what we call “neo-Confucian homonormativity,” structures the content of these family-themed homosexual stories, shapes the storytelling process and in doing so influences the organization of the Chinese gay community and the lived experiences of Chinese gay men. We develop this concept as an analytical tool to investigate the emerging narratives and politics in the Chinese gay community and to answer the questions mentioned above. This analysis, we believe, will contribute to recent efforts to decentre the West/Global North in gender and sexuality studies<sup>15</sup> by opening up the possibility of theorizing homonormativity and understanding homosexuality from an Asian/Global South perspective.

### Homonormativity and Its Discontents

Among the different areas of inquiry and theoretical formations relevant to this research, we mainly engage in dialogue with the emerging multifaceted research on homonormativity. Homonormativity refers to a privatized, depoliticized sexual politics of neoliberalism that “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them.”<sup>16</sup> This concept has gradually gained popularity and importance in academia. It has become an umbrella term “for LGBTQ assimilationist strategies based in respectability politics, consumerism and state recognition” – that is, a politics of gay community<sup>17</sup> – and “a collection of interconnected ideals about what constitutes a good gay life in the contemporary moment” – that is, a politics of gay life.<sup>18</sup>

Two problems emerge from the existing literature. First, the initial conceptualizations of homonormativity stem from the assimilationism of lesbian and gay movements in the West, in which people increasingly demand equal rights of citizenship on the grounds of being the “same” as most heterosexuals.<sup>19</sup> However, later discussions have also been dominated by a Western focus in both theoretical and empirical terms. With a specific emphasis on gay life “as it is lived in the centers of major metropolitan global cities”<sup>20</sup> these studies have situated themselves in the social and geographical contexts of the West that are characterized by the extension of neoliberal markets and democracies towards the inclusion of sexual minorities as legitimate members of society,<sup>21</sup> and have overlooked “the specific conditions in which homonormative policy discourses and practices occur and are (re)produced.”<sup>22</sup> There is an emerging body of literature dealing with

15 Wilson 2006; Connell 2014.

16 Duggan 2003, 50.

17 Branfman 2019, 1678.

18 Lovelock 2019, 551.

19 Duggan 2003; Richardson 2004.

20 Brown 2012, 1067.

21 Ozbay 2021, 3.

22 Brown 2012, 1067.

non-Western contexts including South Africa,<sup>23</sup> Turkey,<sup>24</sup> India,<sup>25</sup> Singapore<sup>26</sup> and China,<sup>27</sup> but it represents a minority standpoint. There is still a need to theorize homonormativity differently “in specific contexts”<sup>28</sup> in the non-Western world, wherein heteronormative traditions are still pervasive and neoliberal democracies and markets are still unevenly extended to include mainstream homosexual populations.

Second, the concept of homonormativity in previous studies is often characterized by a neoliberal individualism present in the Western context.<sup>29</sup> Under the neoliberal regime, “privatization and individualization encourage neoliberal subjects to conduct themselves as entrepreneurial selves,” indicating “individual freedom and self-responsibility as key aspects of a good life.” In this sense, homonormativity supports and (re)produces “the neoliberal ideals of privatization, individual freedom and independence from society and the state.”<sup>30</sup> It is noteworthy that a very different version of this individual–family relationship behind the assumption of individualization manifests itself in some Asian countries due to the persistent influence of (neo-)Confucian familism. Whereas the importance of the family among lesbians and gay men in the West has been illustrated in their fights for equal rights as adult citizens to get married and establish their own families,<sup>31</sup> among sexual minorities in Asia a significant emphasis seems to be placed on relations with one’s family of origin.<sup>32</sup> The intersection between neoliberalism and individualization under what Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim call “second modernity” in the West is rooted in the conditions of cultural democracy, the welfare state and classical individualism,<sup>33</sup> conditions which have been largely absent in the uneven individualization processes in Asia. China, for example, promotes and relies on neo-Confucian familism, or in Yan Yunxiang’s words “neo-familism,”<sup>34</sup> which highlights the persistent intersections, tensions and interdependencies between individual and family interests. In doing so, the family has become the principal safety net for individuals; as such, it is unsurprising to see a heavy reliance on one’s family of origin, even among adults.<sup>35</sup> However, our understanding of the reproduction, transformation and exercise of homonormativity in this neo-Confucian Asian

23 Oswin 2007.

24 Ozbay 2021.

25 Ghosh 2020.

26 Phillips 2014.

27 Luo 2020; Wei and Yan 2021.

28 Brown 2012, 1071; Oswin 2007, 658.

29 Brown 2012, Duggan 2003; Ludwig 2016; Luo 2020.

30 Ludwig 2016, 421–422; Luo 2020, 11.

31 Richardson 2004; Duggan 2003.

32 Berry 2001; Laurent, 2005; Choi and Luo 2016.

33 Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Yan 2010.

34 Yan 2018.

35 Ibid.

context is still in its infancy.<sup>36</sup> This research critically addresses both gaps with an analysis of homosexual stories and storytelling in contemporary China.

## Casing China

We chose China as an empirical case to theorize the encounter between Western-style (albeit increasingly globalized) neoliberal sexual politics and neo-Confucian familism in Asia. Several factors informed this choice. First, despite the developments of homosexual communities, culture and activism in the past several decades in metropolitan China, the legal status of Chinese homosexuals remains ambiguous, and their rights to marriage and freedom from discrimination are absent. In other words, China, like most Asian countries, governs its homosexual population in ways in which family and social harmony, instead of lesbian and gay rights, are emphasized.<sup>37</sup> Thus China differs from the West, where the rights-based agenda in sexual politics is central.

Second, recent years have witnessed the development of a neoliberal form of assimilationist homosexual activism in contemporary China. As Wei Wei observes, neo-Confucian family ideologies have been well incorporated into the Chinese homosexual community's fight for equal rights in recent years, as can be seen from the increasing numbers of *tongzhi* parents engaged in homosexual activism and the use of family-centred language, such as familial emotion (*qingqing* 亲情), love (*ai* 爱) and familial harmony (*jiating hexie* 家庭和谐), as a means to legitimate the fight for equal rights for homosexuals.<sup>38</sup> The family's vital role in Chinese homosexual activism provides fertile ground to rethink the assumed individualism of the neoliberal sexual politics as it moves outwards from the West.

Third, with the state's retreat from the comprehensive provision of social welfare and direct control over personal lives, China has experienced intensified individualization since Deng Xiaoping's programme of reform and opening.<sup>39</sup> However, this individualization process has been accompanied by the state's reinvention of traditional Confucian culture as a source of political legitimacy and soft power,<sup>40</sup> as well as the emergence of a family biopolitics centred on the economic, emotional and moral significance of the family in producing self-governing subjects.<sup>41</sup> This tension between individual and family interests in China makes it a good empirical case to investigate the complicated individual–family dynamics in relation to homonormativity in the Asian context.

36 A few scholars have started to pay attention to homonormativity in relation to the family in Asia, including in Chinese societies (including mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan) (Luo 2020; 2021a; 2021b; Kong 2011; 2020; Brainer 2019; Wei and Yan 2021), India (Ghosh 2020) and Singapore (Phillips 2014). However, there is still a lack of effort, overall, to theorize Asian homonormative stories or study homonormativity in “the specific conditions in which gay people live their lives” (Brown 2012, 1069) in the non-Western world.

37 Laurent 2005.

38 Wei 2015; Wei and Yan 2021.

39 Yan 2010.

40 Cheung 2018; Liu 2018.

41 Ong 1999, 118; Kong 2011, 98.

To sum up, China is an ideal starting point to examine the encounter between a globalizing neoliberal sexual politics and Asian neo-Confucianism and the applicability of the Western-centric concept of homonormativity in Asia. By reconceptualizing homonormativity from an Asian perspective, we hope to provide insights into Chinese homosexuality with a global gaze.

## Method

This research draws on qualitative data collected in Shenzhen, a rising metropolis in South China. Shenzhen provides a particularly appropriate setting for studying the fast-changing gay communities in post-reform China. As a first-tier city in mainland China, Shenzhen has become one of the major destinations for Chinese sexual minorities. The relatively long distance between Shenzhen and Beijing and the geographical proximity between Shenzhen and Hong Kong have provided this city with a relaxed environment for the development of civil society, evidenced by the vibrant community of NGOs serving sexual minorities in Shenzhen. Among these organizations, the Shenzhen branch of PFLAG China (hereafter SPFLAG) is the most influential and fastest growing, affording it a high level of social visibility. The primary mission of PFLAG China is to advocate for self-acceptance, family acceptance and social acceptance and strive for an equal and dignified social environment for sexual minorities. Lesbians and gay men and their parents constitute the majority of staff and volunteers. Their sharing of their own stories with other people facing similar situations is a central part of PFLAG China's activities and agenda, through which the goal of personal growth (in terms of accepting one's/one's children's sexuality) and community organization is achieved. Similar to other branches of PFLAG China, SPFLAG also prioritizes the production and circulation of stories about and from gay people in organizing their activities. These stories have profoundly impacted the gay community and gay people's daily lives in Shenzhen, making Shenzhen a good empirical starting point for this project.

This research adopts a qualitative approach to collecting and analysing data. The data collection process consisted of more than one hundred hours of participant observation and 61 life-history interviews conducted in Shenzhen from November 2017 to April 2019. The first author entered the field in November 2017, making contact with several key members of SPFLAG and attending one of its activities. In that activity, the first author introduced himself as a non-heterosexual sociologist researching the gay community in Shenzhen and then built connections with many gay and lesbian friends, gay volunteers, and *tongzhi* mothers volunteering at SPFLAG. Over the next 17 months, he continued his fieldwork by actively participating in activities organized by SPFLAG and other organizations in Shenzhen, joining private gatherings of gay and lesbian friends, and conducting participant observation in their working and living places. In total, more than one hundred hours of fieldwork were conducted across more than 21 sites in Shenzhen.



Life-history interviews constitute another major data source of this research project. We recruited and interviewed 61 gay men in Shenzhen, most of whom were migrants from other parts of China, utilizing purposive and snowball sampling. Our sample includes 38 gay men from rural areas and small towns (*zhen* 镇), 15 from counties (*xian* 县) and other cities, and eight gay men born and raised in Shenzhen. The predominance of non-local interviewees is understandable as Shenzhen is known as a “migrant city.” Their ages ranged from 18 to 45, and their education ranged from local primary schools to graduate schools of major universities in the United Kingdom and the United States. Some were well-educated professionals working in prestigious companies, while others were stuck in lower-end occupations in the manufacturing or service industries. Also, some were (or had been) in heterosexual marriages, with some even having several children, while others avoided heterosexual marriage by remaining single or establishing a long-term relationship with another gay man, in some cases with a surrogate child or children. All interviews were conducted face to face and audio recorded, with each interview lasting three hours on average. Some informants were interviewed more than once. A consent form with a detailed introduction to the research project was issued, and verbal consent was achieved before each interview. After/during the interview, a gift card (valued at 50 yuan, about US\$7.75) and/or a meal were provided as compensation. When presenting our data, we changed all identifiable information to protect our participants’ privacy.

### Family Stories, Homonormative Stories

On 18 August 2018, the first author went to a hotel in Dafen, Shenzhen, to attend the South China Regional Conference of PFLAG China. This regional conference (*quyu kentanhui* 区域恳谈会) is one of the major and regular activities organized by PFLAG China. It usually includes different sharing sessions in which guest speakers – mainly lesbians and gay men and their parents – share their stories with the audience. These stories, among other stories that have been and are still being produced and circulated in gay communities, often unfold around the theme of family: relations with one’s family of origin, varieties of marital relations, and possibilities of establishing a “rainbow family.” In this section, on the basis of stories emerging from this regional conference of PFLAG China we investigate the central elements, assumptions and structures of family stories in Shenzhen’s gay community and how the Western-centric notion of homonormativity is both challenged and evidenced by these stories.

The conference’s focus on family structured the themes of the sessions: “familial acceptance,” “*tongzhi* partners,” “the sadness of gay men’s wives,” “the performance of nominal marriage” and “active ageing.” The first two sessions involved stories of coming out to one’s family and of romantic, monogamous homosexual couples; both implied the importance of self-acceptance, familial acceptance and romantic love. The sessions on the “sadness of gay men’s



wives” and the “performance of nominal marriage” told the sad stories of gay men who could not fully embrace their sexuality and tried to cope with the pressure to marry by marrying an unwitting heterosexual woman or a consenting lesbian, and how their tragic lives were saved when they were brave enough to come out and accept who they really are. Such “indecent,” “unrespectable” intimate practices constituted the opposite of long-term monogamous relationships between homosexual partners of the kind recounted in the “*tongzhi* partners” session of the conference. They are framed as worsening sexual minorities’ situations by deception and delay and causing more problems among family members in the long run, not to mention the negative image of marriage fraud they may bring to the whole community. In the final session on active ageing, a 64-year-old gay man suggested to the predominantly younger audience that they plan their futures early, while another speaker, a representative of one of the major sponsors of the conference, a surrogacy agency, highlighted the importance of having children through surrogacy for lesbians and gay men.<sup>42</sup>

The stories told at the conference were family themed and homonormative in the sense that they clearly distinguished what Chinese lesbian and gay men should do from what they should not, and in doing so constituted those who “follow the rules” in terms of family practices as “citizens worthy of inclusion”<sup>43</sup> and those who fail to do so as sexual “others.” Unlike previous discussions of homonormativity with regards to homosexual family practices in the West, which have mainly concentrated on same-sex marriage,<sup>44</sup> family in this context has been given more complicated meanings. It is not, or not only, about legal and political rights granted by the state to get married and establish a family. Rather, it emphasizes the moral privilege of a long-term, monogamous relationship based on romantic love and acceptance of one’s family of origin as a source of legitimation for such family practices. Judith Butler argues that a focus on marriage rights in legal terms risks restricting “the domain of what will become recognizable as legitimate sexual arrangements, thus fortifying the state as the source of norms of recognition and eclipsing other possibilities in civil society and cultural life.”<sup>45</sup> She asks, “if the state monopolizes the resources of recognition ... are there not other ways of feeling possible, intelligible, even real, apart from the sphere of state recognition?”<sup>46</sup> The case of China provides a possible answer, although it is possibly a pragmatic response to the absence of progress in terms of legislation in China.

It is also noteworthy that the family in these homosexual stories includes one’s family of origin. In these stories, self-acceptance and coming out typically lead to an intimate relationship between homosexuals and their parents. While parents

42 Since commercial surrogacy is illegal in China, gay couples who need this service have to go overseas for help.

43 Richardson 2005, 521.

44 Duggan 2003, 65.

45 Butler 2004, 115.

46 *Ibid.*, 114.

get to know their children better and provide multiple forms of support when necessary, homosexual adult children, in turn, are expected to provide economic, emotional and caring support when their parents get old. This intergenerational intimacy well exemplifies the emerging neo-Confucian familism. On the one hand, there has been an intimate turn in the Chinese family in recent decades that emphasizes *qingqing*, *ai* and *jiating hexie* instead of the cold language of obligations or duties. On the other hand, mutual expectations, obligations and discipline between homosexuals and their parents accompany the intergenerational flow of love, support and resources.<sup>47</sup> For example, both our fieldwork and interview data suggest that in some cases, parents will continue to intervene in their adult children's private lives after accepting their sexuality. As one of our informants put it, "Before coming out, they push you to meet girls; after coming out, they push you to meet guys." Our data also show that the parents of Chinese homosexuals, like their counterparts in heterosexual families in China, are also expected to take care of their children's daily lives and share the burden of child-rearing when needed.<sup>48</sup>

It is safe to say that this emerging form of homonormativity results from the encounter between the globalizing neoliberal form of assimilationist sexual politics and neo-Confucian familism in contemporary China. By incorporating individual queer desires with neo-Confucian familial norms, it departs from and challenges the Western-centric conceptualization of homonormativity. Moreover, neo-Confucian familism does not necessarily undermine the importance of individuality, which was well evidenced by the closing remarks of the conference given by Mr D, a core member of PFLAG China. In the remarks, he emphasized the importance of "being yourself" (*zuo ziji* 做自己):

*Zuo ziji* means making your life different and wonderful. We are all sitting on a train terminating at the station of death, and the most important thing is the scenery along the way. How can you enjoy the trip if you are playing other people's roles?

Mr D's words encapsulated the underlying theme of the conference: that lesbians and gay men accept who they really are, become healthy and sunny members of the gay community, follow the mainstream ideologies of family and intimate relationships, accumulate wealth and prepare for the future. At first glance, the discourse of *zuo ziji* pertains only to one's sexual identity and family practices. However, a closer examination suggests an assumption behind this standard that also relates to one's socio-economic status.

For example, Jiajun, a 22-year-old young man, is a core volunteer of SPFLAG and a role model of the local gay community. He met his boyfriend in one of the activities he organized. They were selected for a group wedding ceremony for ten gay couples organized and financially supported by two Chinese companies for commercial publicity. Although it was just a ceremony with no legal recognition at all, it meant a lot for the couple and the gay community in Shenzhen. After the

47 Yan 2018; Luo, 2020.

48 Wei and Gao 2020.

wedding, Jiajun became a celebrity in the local gay community, and he repeatedly told his story to different people on different occasions. It seemed that Jiajun had been living the dream of most Chinese gay men. However, he told us during the interview that there was still a long way to go to live the life he really wanted, to *zuo ziji*. For him, *zuo ziji* required one to be self-reliant and self-responsible, at least economically. However, he had remained unemployed for several months when we interviewed him, and he told us that he really wanted a future where he did not need to “worry about bread and milk,” where he has his career, his family and free time to travel with his family. He also planned to have a child of his own through surrogacy at the age of 30, which, he expected, would cost 900,000 to 1,200,000 yuan (US\$139,500–186,000). He also needed to consider the cost of raising a child, especially the cost of education. However, before he gave up his job he made only 10,000 yuan (US\$1,550) per month on average, not to mention the extremely high cost of living in Shenzhen. The neoliberal dream has recently become increasingly difficult to achieve, even for those socio-economically advantaged gay men, in the intensified tension between the neoliberal-looking, market-oriented economic policies and the state’s centralized control in contemporary China.<sup>49</sup>

As we can see, the most “proper,” “decent” and “desirable” way of being gay in these family stories, or in the discourse of *zuo ziji*, assumes an urban, middle-class, consumerist and cosmopolitan lifestyle, and this was almost impossible for more than 90 per cent of our interviewees, most of whom were migrant workers and students. In this sense, homonormativity in China resonates with the Western-centric model of homonormativity, in that the acceptance of homosexuality as normative aligns with the interests of particular groups of lesbians and gay men.<sup>50</sup>

To conclude, in the emerging arena of family-themed homosexual stories, we observe a Chinese version of homonormativity, or what we define as neo-Confucian homonormativity, that departs from and simultaneously exemplifies the Western-centric model of homonormativity. It is characterized by a harmonious and intimate relationship between homosexuals and their families of origin, the ability and aspiration to enter a monogamous relationship, and the intention to become parents of surrogate children. Situated in the tension between individual desire and family norms, neo-Confucian homonormativity highlights both intergenerational intimacy in one’s family of origin and the bi-directional flow of obligations and disciplinary effects between homosexuals and their parents. This neo-Confucian homonormativity structures the content of the emerging homosexual stories that circulate in the Chinese gay community and organizes their process of their telling. It is to this latter point that we now turn.

49 Kong 2020; Harvey 2005, 120; Duckett 2020.

50 Duggan 2003; de Oliveira, Costa and Nogueira 2013; Sender 2005; Taylor 2008. For discussions on homonormativity in relation to class outside the Western world, see Ozbay 2021; Luo 2020; 2021a; 2021b.

## Storytelling and Assimilationist Politics in the Chinese Gay Community

Narrative sociology requires us to “go beyond the text” by emphasizing “the social processes of producing and consuming stories,” the social and cultural contexts that enable the storytelling process, as well as the “the social role that stories play.”<sup>51</sup> In light of this, this section examines the tellers (or producers) and audiences (or consumers) of family-themed homosexual stories, the context that enables the storytelling process – that is, the emerging assimilationist sexual politics in China – and the role these stories play in organizing gay communities and shaping individual gay men’s lived experiences in contemporary China.

### Actors

One notable aspect of the recent proliferation of homosexual stories in China is how some storytellers tell their stories repeatedly to different audiences on different occasions, while others have few opportunities to share their stories, if they are able to find willing audiences at all. After being interviewed, some of our informants even told the first author that the interview was the first time that they could tell their story to someone who really cared. Most of our informants generally lacked such opportunities and audiences to tell their stories to in their daily lives. In the gay community, they had always played the role of the audience to, or the consumers of, others’ stories. As Foucault asks, “Who is speaking? Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language? Who is qualified to do so? Who derives from it his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive if not the assurance, at least the presumption that what he says is true?”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, sociologists also ask how gender, class, race and other intersectional subjectivities have influenced how stories are organized, understood and told, making certain people more qualified storytellers than others.<sup>53</sup> Our findings, however, suggest that it is the content of the stories that one tells, instead of who one is, that constitutes the major mechanism that distinguishes story producers from story consumers.

On 4 February 2018, two weeks before the Spring Festival, the first author was in a sharing conference organized by SPFLAG themed “Going Back Home for the Spring Festival, Setting Sail for Love.” At first the invited speakers, several lesbians, gay men and *tongzhi* mothers, shared their stories of coming out and of expressing *qingqing*, *ai* and *jiating hexie*, and highlighted the importance of intergenerational communication. Then the two invited psychological counsellors taught the audience the appropriate and “scientific” way to communicate one’s sexuality to one’s parents, for example, by posting articles related to homosexuality on WeChat Moments to prepare their parents for learning about their

51 Plummer 1995, 24–25.

52 Foucault 2002 [1969], 55.

53 Riessman 1990; Bourdieu 1984; Lareau 2011; Hemmings 2011; Fernandes 2017.

sexuality. Then the floor was opened for questions. A young man from rural Hainan raised his hand and told his story:

They refuse to talk about this topic. My parents are pretty old, and they are typical rural people. You know, they are not even able to use a smartphone. So many of your tips, such as posting articles related to homosexuality on WeChat Moments so that our parents will read them, are not applicable in my case. So what should I do?

This young man's story challenges the key assumption of neo-Confucian homonormativity about the relationship between homosexuals and their parents: that through communication parents will eventually accept their children because they love their children, as love triumphs over everything. Although the first author encountered numerous stories that similarly challenged such neo-Confucian homonormative ideals, he did not see any of them being retold and circulated on occasions such as NGO conferences. While Q&A sessions like the one above may occasionally serve as platforms for the audiences to tell their own stories, they are typically fleeting and ephemeral, brief interludes among mainstream, neo-Confucian homonormative stories that are much more "worthy" of (re)telling, circulating and consuming. Mr B's parents' experience is a good example of such mainstream stories. In the "familial acceptance" session of the regional conference mentioned in the previous section, Mr B's parents shared how they accepted their son's sexuality, how they invited all their relatives for dinner and asked them to stop setting up blind dates for their son because he was gay, and how they became celebrities in the regional gay community and were always on their way to different places to tell their story to new audiences.

To sum up, in the gay community in Shenzhen, what kind of story one tells determines one's qualifications as a storyteller and the possibility of one's story being heard. The most desirable stories are the neo-Confucian homonormative ones. These are stories about *zuo ziji* and *qingqing, ai* and *jiating hexie*, about successful, respectable homosexuals and their families that "deserve" social recognition.

### *Community*

Storytelling is a highly selective process, as Sujatha Fernandes suggests in her studies on Afghan women's narratives and the construction of the Western concept of freedom. Fernandes notes that only stories that the audience expects to hear – for instance, in which miserable protagonists eventually overcome their predicaments through education – are allowed to be told, circulated and consumed.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in the gay community in Shenzhen only certain forms of stories – stories organized around neo-Confucian homonormativity and the language of *qingqing, ai* and *jiating hexie* – have been constantly produced, circulated and then received, with others being marginalized, silenced or even erased. This

54 Fernandes 2017.

selection process is enabled by the emergence of a gay community that adopts an assimilationist strategy and prioritizes the mainstream value of *jiating hexie*.

Plummer argues that the emergence of sexual stories often has its origin in a community that needs such stories.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, *tongzhi*-related social movements and related social organizations have proliferated in China since the 1990s, whereas the focus of the Chinese *tongzhi* movement has changed from fostering connections with global society to prioritizing institutional survival and traditional cultures in recent years.<sup>56</sup> This has led to the rise of an assimilationist politics that strives for social acceptance by upholding and adhering to mainstream socialist ideologies and traditional familial culture.<sup>57</sup> “For narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear [them].”<sup>58</sup> In Shenzhen it is precisely the gay community that needs to hear, and therefore tells, circulates, and consumes, homosexual stories in the language of *qingqing*, *ai*, *jiating hexie*, and planning for one’s economic future.

However, the intersection between story and community is twofold. While the telling of homosexual stories is enabled by a community that needs such stories, such stories, in turn, play an important role in organizing the gay community. Think about the question raised by the young man from rural Hainan and the discrepancy between his experiences and the neo-Confucian homonormative narratives. It is safe to say that the real value of a homosexual story, be it a mainstream one about *jiating hexie* or the story of a rural migrant that departs from this mainstream narrative, lies in its power to mobilize gay people and their allies to fight for the social acceptance of sexual minorities in a normative way, rather than its seeming “authenticity” or “universal applicability.” Aqiang, the executive director of PFLAG China, wrote on the internet recently:

We hope to see more family stories being circulated so that the multiple forms of *tongzhi* family can be seen by the community and the public ... Storytelling constitutes the very core of our service product in PLFAG China ... Story has inherently coherent power. When listening to your story, it is quite easy to build closeness [with you]. It helps to remove barriers among community members and leads us to a common belief that “we are all the same,” “we are all together,” and “we are a big family.” Story is also a way of self-healing. When sharing stories, we are exposing our weaknesses and vulnerabilities to each other. This is because these are usually a part of our life that we are most reluctant to tell, and that has been stuck in our mind for too long. The process of storytelling, then, is also a process of releasing pressures, being heard, being understood and being healed. Mutual hearing and mutual support, in turn, also help to cohere our community.

Here we can see the vital role of stories and storytelling in organizing PFLAG China’s work and to some extent in organizing the gay community in China. “Touching” stories about Chinese lesbians and gay men and their families that have been told and retold in the language of *qingqing* and *ai* instead of individual rights and freedom function powerfully in mobilizing family members and friends

55 Plummer 1995, 25.

56 Guo 2018.

57 Wei 2015; Wei and Yan 2021; Guo 2018.

58 Plummer 1995, 87.

of Chinese lesbians and gay men in participating in *tongzhi* activism and striving for the social acceptance of Chinese lesbians and gay men. As a matter of fact, different from PFLAG branches in other countries such as the United States, PFLAG China has played a major role in the *tongzhi* movement in Chinese society, and it is the parents of Chinese lesbians and gay men who take centre stage, and thus who have great mobilizing power.<sup>59</sup> As we have illustrated, their mobilizing power mainly comes from the telling of these stories.

An assimilationist and homonormative politics that is deeply embedded in, intersecting with, and manifested by the rise of neo-Confucian familism in Chinese society has emerged here. Stories have been produced, circulated and received to meet the community's needs, and the assimilationist and homonormative politics of the community, consequently, has also been profoundly influenced by the telling of these stories. It is safe to say that neo-Confucian homonormativity organizes the mainstream narrative of the family in the gay community in Shenzhen, not only in the “texts” of the stories themselves but also in terms of the act of storytelling that has been incorporated into the organization of the community.

### *Individuals*

Only a few gay men – all of whom were upper middle class – among our 61 informants were either able to *zuo ziji* – again, in the assimilationist sense of being a “contributing” and “respectable” citizen with a good relationship with one's original family and having a homonormative family that consists of a marriage-like relationship with a committed partner and one or more surrogate children – or had a realistic possibly achieving such a life in the future. Considering this, what role do homosexual stories play in shaping the lived experiences of those gay men who are on the bottom rung of the economic ladder? Arthur Frank argues that “stories precede experiences, not vice versa as we usually understand it.” According to him, “stories teach us what sort of consequences follow from what sort of action; that's their narrative logic. We then perceive moments in our own lives as fitting that narrative logic, and we act as if in the story.”<sup>60</sup> While not everyone was capable of enacting the prevailing assimilationist, homonormative stories in their own lived experiences, we argue such stories provided them with a possibility to imagine their future lives accordingly.

Beyond the small proportion of out interviewees who were working-class rural-to-urban migrants (*nongmingong* 农民工) with no courage to think or speak about a future, most were exerting themselves to achieve a neo-Confucian homonormative life. For instance, Fei, a 22-year-old active volunteer for SPFLAG, told us about his ideal future, characterized by loving parents, a stable relationship and a surrogate child. He realized the extreme difficulty of achieving such a future

59 Wei 2015, 89.

60 Cited from Neile 2013, 264.



as he only earned about 5,000 yuan (US\$775) per month, while it costs at least 600,000 yuan (US\$93,000) to have a surrogate child, not to mention the costs of living a middle-class urban life and supporting a family. But he remained confident and optimistic about his future and was working as hard as he could to fight for such a future.

Fei's story was not uncommon. Most of our interviewees held a similar belief, despite their socio-economic disadvantages. In this sense, the politics of neo-Confucian homonormativity that emerges from and is manifested by the process of telling mainstream homosexual stories in Shenzhen's gay community constitutes a mechanism for the dissemination of a homonormative future. However, the possibilities of achieving such a future have been unevenly distributed among different groups of gay men in Shenzhen. As we can see, although the assimilationist politics of neo-Confucian homonormativity "undermines certain heteronormative assumptions in the making of sexual citizenship by incorporating homosexuality in its design,"<sup>61</sup> it creates a fantasy of a good life/future that most gay men find difficult to realize. In doing so, neo-Confucian homonormativity nurtures a culture of self-responsibility in which "our selves are constantly made and remade."<sup>62</sup> Homonormative stories provide forces of liberation and empowerment to most gay men in the community while bringing new forms of inequality and exclusion to the rest.<sup>63</sup> For example, for those *nongmingong* who dared not to dream of a better future due to their economic predicaments and lack of family support, the mainstream homonormative story constitutes a remote reference point that implies their lives are a complete failure under the neoliberal framework. In short, *zuo ziji* is a class-based project that only a few can accomplish. It is also a neoliberal dream that seems to be achievable for almost everyone in the community as long as they make enough effort. Despite their slim chances, many of them truly believe they will live the kinds of successful lives depicted in these stories.

## Conclusion

In this article, we adopt the perspective of narrative sociology in analysing homosexual stories and storytelling in a Chinese gay community. We develop the concept of neo-Confucian homonormativity to explain the process of the organization, production and consumption of the proliferating family-themed homosexual stories, with particular concern for how these stories and their telling are situated in the encounter between the globalizing assimilationist sexual politics of neoliberalism and the emerging Confucian familism in contemporary China. We argue that mainstream homosexual stories are characterized by a tension between individual queer desire and neo-Confucian familism, as one can see

61 Kong 2020, 1007.

62 Ibid., 1016.

63 Luo 2021a, 342.

from the discourse of *zuo ziji* which, despite its superficial language of personal freedom, stipulates certain ways to practice family life. We also demonstrate how the emerging assimilationist politics in the gay community focusing on traditional culture as a source of legitimacy and mobilizing power has given birth to neo-Confucian homonormative stories, as well as how the stories of “respectable” Chinese homosexuals and their harmonious families have, in turn, profoundly influenced the landscape of homosexual activism and the experiences of homosexual people.

The concept of neo-Confucian homonormativity provides a new way to understand the logic of neoliberal, assimilationist sexual politics outside the Western world. Adopting the language of *qinqing*, *ai* and *jiating hexie*, and taking familial culture as a source of legitimacy, neo-Confucian homonormativity has mobilized the family and other possible alliances to challenge heteronormativity and strive for an equal and dignified social environment for sexual minorities in China. However, it also creates a hegemonic ideal of being gay that most homosexuals find difficult to accomplish and a culture of self-disciplining, self-responsible, self-enterprising and self-governing queer subjectivity. To put it differently, access to new freedoms and spaces of inclusion and the possibilities of achieving a homonormative life are unevenly distributed among Chinese lesbians and gay men of different socio-economic statuses, leading to new forms of inequality and exclusion.

However, it is noteworthy that our conceptualization of neo-Confucian homonormativity in this research is mainly based on an analysis of the narratives and experiences of male homosexuals in contemporary China. Although other sexual minorities in Asia may similarly face the tension between their individual queer desire and the neo-Confucian familistic culture, how they experience and narrate their everyday lives may differ from the Chinese gay men in this research. Nevertheless, the concept of neo-Confucian homonormativity still provides a reference for understanding sexual minorities who are similarly caught between the individualization process and the emerging neo-Confucian familism in many parts of Asia. In this sense, we believe our research will contribute to a more dynamic understanding of homosexuality in the context of neoliberal globalization.

Overall, we believe our research makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, it examines the intersection between family and homosexuality in Chinese society from the perspective of narrative sociology. In doing so, it extends the landscape of sociological studies of Chinese homosexuality that have mainly focused on issues of sexual identity and intimate relationships in the past.<sup>64</sup> Second, as a response to the call to provincialize Western-centric theories on gender and sexuality, it builds on recent efforts to theorize homonormativity outside the metropolitan areas in the West<sup>65</sup> by opening up the possibility to “go beyond the mere derision of the purported importation of a Western-style

64 Kong 2016.

65 Ozbay 2021; Brown 2012; Oswin 2007; Luo 2020.

queerness”<sup>66</sup> and reconceptualize homonormativity from an Asian perspective. Third, although this is a case study of homosexual stories in China, its implications should not be confined to the Chinese gay community. In fact, storytelling has always been prioritized in the broader Chinese society; for example, “speaking bitterness” (*suku* 诉苦) served as a political ritual of self-education and mutual education in Maoist China<sup>67</sup> and a strategy Chinese youth adopted to define their place in post-reform China.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, we can see plenty of stories with positive energy being produced and circulated constantly, say, through popular television shows such as *Inspires China* (*Gandong Zhongguo* 感动中国) or *The Most Beautiful People* (*Zuimei renwu* 最美人物), broadcast by China Central Television (CCTV). Our research on homosexual stories in China, we believe, provides a new way to look at what is going on in Chinese society from a novel approach – narrative sociology.

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### Conflicts of Interest

None.

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66 Oswin 2007, 658

67 Wu 2014.

68 Anagnost 1997.

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**摘要:** 建基于在深圳的生命史访谈与参与观察, 本文检视了中国社会日益普遍的以家庭为主题的同性恋故事。我们提出新儒家同性恋正统性的概念来解释这些故事在中国男同性恋社群的生产、流通与消费, 而新儒家同性恋正统性的特征在于男同性恋与其原生家庭之间的和谐关系, 及其进入一对一的亲密关系并拥有自己孩子的欲望与能力。我们认为这些故事是嵌入于社会之中的社会行动, 而这一社会行动是在中国男同性恋社群正在浮出水面的新自由主义性政治——该政治影响着男同性恋社群的组织与男同性恋个体的生命经历——的基础上才得以成型。通过对中国男同性恋社群中正在出现的讲故事实践的分析, 本文挑战了西方中心的同性恋正统性理论, 并且为我们从亚洲视角重新概念化同性恋正统性打开了新的可能。

**关键词:** 家庭; 同性恋; 同性恋正统性; 叙事社会学; 讲故事; 故事

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