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Performative family: homosexuality, marriage and intergenerational dynamics in China

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Abstract

Using in-depth interview data on nominal marriages – legal marriages between a gay man and a lesbian to give the appearance of heterosexuality – this paper develops the concept of performative family to explain the processes through which parents and their adult children negotiate and resolve disagreements in relation to marriage decisions in post-socialist China. We identify three mechanisms – network pressure, a revised discourse of filial piety and resource leverage – through which parents influence their gay offspring's decision to turn to nominal marriage. We also delineate six strategies, namely minimizing network participation, changing expectations, making partial concessions, drawing the line, delaying decisions and ending the marriage, by which gay people in nominal marriages attempt to meet parental expectations while simultaneously retaining a degree of autonomy. Through these interactions, we argue that Chinese parents and their gay adult children implicitly and explicitly collaborate to perform family, emphasizing the importance of formally meeting society's expectations about marriage rather than substantively yielding to its demands. We also argue that the performative family is a pragmatic response to the tension between the persistent centrality of family and marriage and the rising tide of individualism in post-socialist China. We believe that our findings highlight the specific predicament of homosexual people. They also shed light on the more general dynamics of intergenerational negotiation because there is evidence that the mechanisms used by parents to exert influence may well be similar between gay and non-gay people.

Keywords: Family; homosexuality; marriage; intergenerational relationship; China

This paper addresses a gay marriage paradox and uses it as a case study to understand the intersection between family and sexuality in post-socialist China. The marriage paradox in question is the increased prominence of legal marriages contracted between a gay man and a lesbian to give the appearance

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of heterosexuality, in an era when partnering options for gay people are increasing globally and the Chinese state has considerably reduced its repression of homosexuality. We refer to this type of marriage as a nominal marriage. Sometimes it is referred to as a 'fake marriage' (*jia jiehun*), 'pro forma marriage' (*xingshi hunyin*), or 'contract marriage' (Engebretsen 2009). There is evidence that nominal marriages have become increasingly popular among homosexual people in China. Two Web-based surveys conducted in 2008 and 2009 showed that around half of the gay respondents had either contracted a nominal marriage or were looking for a nominal marriage partner[1]. Social networking and business sites that provide services for gay people seeking a nominal marriage partner have flourished since 2005. The first paid website for nominal marriages between gays and lesbians (ChinaGayLes.com) was launched in 2005 and now has around 370,000 registered members. The first free website serving the same target audience (Baidu Post Bar-*xingshi hunyin*) was launched in 2006. In 2005, the Chinese term for nominal marriage (*xingshi hunyin)* appeared 39,000 times on the Internet, whereas a quick Google search in 2014 generated 294,000 items.

Previous studies have suggested that marrying a straight person used to be the only option for the majority of gay men in China (Li 2002). Liu and Lu (2005) estimated that 90 per cent of homosexual males in China are married to or will marry females. Wives of homosexual men are referred to as homowives (*tongqi*) (Rofel 2013). The increasing number of nominal marriages among gay people in China in an era of increased options for gay people globally is perplexing. In many Western, Latin American and Asian societies, gay people either remain single, cohabit or contract legal marriages if their country allows it (Esteve, Lesthaeghe, and López-Gay 2012). The number of countries granting gay people the right to marriage and family life has increased substantially over the past two decades[2].

Within this broader global context, civil society in China has actively campaigned for the government to legalize same-sex marriages since the late 1990s (Rofel 2007, 2013). In 2001, sociologist Li Yinhe proposed the Chinese Same-Sex Marriage Bill as an amendment to the marriage law to the National People's Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference. She resubmitted the same amendment in 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2012. In 2009, gays and lesbians in China made international headlines as they campaigned for the rights of same sex marriages (see *Guardian*, 25 February 2009). On 13 January 2010, *China Daily* published a front-page splash photo of Zeng Anquan and Pan Wenjie, a gay couple, getting married in Chengdu. Although the Chinese State does not recognize same-sex marriages and civil unions, the state media's high-profile publication of a picture of a married gay couple and the state's general tolerance of public campaigns for same-sex marriage rights indicate that the government at least is not hostile to same-sex intimacy. The gradual reduction of state repression of consensual same-sex relationships is also reflected in

several revisions of the legal code. Sex between men was previously criminalized in the People's Republic of China (PRC) by identifying it with hooliganism, the Revised Criminal Law of 1997 deleted this specific reference, which was generally interpreted as a step towards decriminalization (Jeffreys 2006). Previously pathologized and included as a mental disorder in the second edition of the Chinese Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Disorders, the Ministry of Health removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses in 2001 (Davis and Friedman 2014).

Legal reforms and increased grass-roots mobilization to campaign for the rights of gay people in China certainly do not mean that social discrimination and stigmatization against homosexuality is disappearing. Higgins and colleagues showed that among university students in China, as many as 79 per cent of men and 66 per cent of women did not agree with allowing homosexuality (Higgins et al. 2002). In the study by Liu and Choi (2006), homosexuals reported being viewed as a failure and a disgrace if they did not get married and have children as a major source of enacted and felt stigma. Lesbians in Beijing studied by Engebretsen (2008, 2009) reported facing tremendous parental pressure to marry and being emotionally abused and physically assaulted by parents when their involvement in same-sex relationships was discovered. Homosexual men in heterosexual marriages recalled how they rationalized marriage with a straight person, and having sex with a woman as fulfilling their duty to their parents (Burger 2012).

In sum, gay people in China face a tension between the increased visibility of same-sex intimacy and the continued pressure of being considered 'un-filial' sons and daughters by disavowing family responsibilities such as marriage and childbearing. This tension arises because despite the rapid social changes that China has experienced in the past five decades, marriage remains highly desirable (Davis 2014a, b), and there is still strong support for traditional familial obligations and parental authority. As Davis (2014b) reported, in comparison with other countries in East Asia, Europe and North America, China is the only country in which crude marriage rates rose between 2004 and 2010. Furthermore, in China marriage continues to be a nearly universal practice; in 2009 less than 5 percent of 35 year-olds had never been married. Davis and Friedman (2014) have argued that despite the weakening of links between sexual intimacy and marriage, in China marriage has remained the sole gateway to childbearing. Turning to the salience of parental authority, Whyte (1997) reported that 61 per cent of adult children agreed that the older generation should generally have the final say on important family matters, and 96 per cent supported children's obligation to be filial towards their parents. According to the 2006 Chinese General Social Survey, about 50 per cent of Chinese believe that married people should bear children, around 45 per cent agree that it is necessary to have a son to carry on the family name and 68.5 per cent agree that family happiness should come before individual interests (Chinese General Social Survey 2006).

Bear this structural context in mind, our analysis focuses on two questions: (1) the mechanisms by which Chinese parents influence the decisions of their adult homosexual offspring regarding nominal marriage; and (2) the strategies that adult homosexual offspring use to conform to parental expectations while simultaneously retaining a degree of autonomy. We develop the concept of performative family to explain how Chinese parents and their adult children resolve the tension between the enduring importance of family and marriage and the growing tide of individualism (Yan 2010). Nominal marriage presents a valuable case for understanding how these forces of change and continuity have played out in the realms of family and sexuality in post-socialist China. First, by focusing on nominal marriages, we can largely remove personal motivation for marriage from the equation and thus highlight the role of parental influence. By examining nominal marriage, we can also explore how children negotiate filial piety and individual freedom – given their sexuality and the nominal nature of these marriages, retaining autonomy and asserting some freedom from parental intervention presumably remains an important objective for adult gay offspring, even, or perhaps especially, after marriage. Second, the mechanisms of parental influence and the desire for children to retain autonomy observed among gay adults and their parents might well be similar for non-gay men and women. Focusing on nominal marriages can thus reveal the specific predicament and social dilemma of gay people in post-socialist China, but also allows us to investigate the more general dynamic of the intergenerational negotiation of issues related to marriage and sexual autonomy.

Marriage, sexuality and parent-adult children negotiation in China

In the so-called 'totally arranged marriage' that prevailed in China before 1949 (Whyte 2000: 163), marriages were arranged by parents with the family's interests as the primary consideration (Parish and Whyte 1978). Personal affection between the bride and groom was not only disregarded, but actually considered harmful (Wolf 1972). If marriage in old China was not about meeting the emotional and sexual needs of the bride and groom, it is therefore logical that traditional Chinese thinking considered love, sex and marriage to be quite separate matters (Lang 1968). A loveless marriage was not viewed as a problem because it was intergenerational harmony rather than conjugal love that was essential for the family (Watson and Ebrey 1991). Sex in marriage was primarily functional and for procreation (Hsu 1971[1948]). It was often considered legitimate for men to find sexual satisfaction outside of marriage, for instance through taking in concubines and patronizing prostitutes (Watson 1991).

When the Communist Party came to power in China in 1949, it redefined marriage as a largely voluntary agreement between the marriage partners (Parish and Whyte 1978). The Marriage Law enacted in 1950, and its subsequent revisions in 1980 and 2001, promoted individual freedom and so-called free

love. Rather than eliminating parental influence on mate selection, scholars observed that the Marriage Law legitimated and popularized companionate marriage, weakened direct parental interference and allowed an intermediate marriage model containing elements of parental influence and child consent to emerge (Croll 1981). Croll (1981: 40) argued that this intermediate model was based on 'shared control of the marriage negotiations' and helped to resolve generational conflicts on the matter. Xu and Whyte (1990)'s survey of one provincial capital city showed that the percentage of marriages based on negotiated consent between parents and their adult children had remained quite stable at around 33 to 45 per cent of all marriages since 1949, showing the endurance of parental influence on their children's marriages.

The traditional expectation that every person will get married has also persisted in post-socialist China (Davis 2014a, b). Women who remain single after the age of 27 are derogated as 'leftover women' (*shengnü*), ridiculed by the media and viewed by state agencies and government officials as a social problem (Fincher 2014). A recent study on marriage-matching corners in Shanghai showed that Chinese parents feel stigmatized if their children are not married before the age of thirty. Parents also feel responsible for helping their children to establish a good life by finding them a marital partner (Zhang and Sun 2014). Parents' cases are furthered bolstered by the intensification of intergenerational emotional bonds and mutual material interdependence as a result of state policies such as the one-child policy, and market volatility. Whyte (1997) showed that in urban China, grown children depend heavily on their parents for access to housing, desirable schools and jobs, and for financial assistance and help with domestic chores and childcare.

Parental influence notwithstanding, there are also visible signs of the rise of individualism in China (Yan 2010). Whyte (1997) observed a significant generational gap in sexual attitudes. Adult children in his study were significantly more likely than their parents to support premarital sex among engaged couples, and to consider it possible for men and women to live a full and happy life without marrying. Yan (2003) and Zhang (2009) documented the common practice of pre-marital sex among engaged couples, the younger generation's active role in negotiating their own marriages and young couples' desire and bargaining for separate living spaces from their parents after marriage. Farrer (2014) delineated the increased social acceptability and cultural legitimacy given to the younger generation's demand for more autonomy in romance, courtship and mate selection.

Caught between the emerging individualist ideology and the continued prominence of familial values and marriage, Chinese people do not choose simply to comply with one or the other. Instead they aspire simultaneously to satisfy respectability norms and carve out the space to pursue personal goals. For example, Gaetano (2014) showed that not all single women who were labelled as 'leftover women' succumbed to social pressure and rush into marriage. Some contested traditional gender norms, criticized gender inequality and equipped themselves with qualifications and social support which enabled them to be

financially independent and emotionally fulfilled whilst they searched for a desirable marital partner. Engebretsen (2009) showed that although many lesbians (*lala*) in Beijing viewed the traditional marriage ideal as desirable and were eager to please their parents, this did not preclude them from pursuing same-sex intimacy in the face of parental opposition. In the section that follows, we use the practice of nominal marriage between gays and lesbians to explore responses to the often conflicting pressures imposed by post-socialist China's emerging individualist ideology and persistent familial influence.

Methods

Data collection

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in City N in Northern China. City N has had a plethora of exclusive bars, saloons and public meeting places for gay people since the 1980s. We participated in three social events for gay people organized by various lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (LBTQ) civil groups and Diamond Bar, a gay bar that provides services such as blind-date parties for people seeking a nominal marriage partner. We also joined QQ nominal marriage chat groups. In all of these contexts we openly declared our intention to conduct research on nominal marriages; we obtained permission from the event organizers and QQ group owners to record the activities. Our participation in these activities allowed us to gain a general picture of nominal marriage and to recruit respondents for our in-depth interviews. The data quoted in this paper are mainly from verbatim transcripts of 30 in-depth interviews with 14 gay men and 16 lesbians conducted between December 2010 and August 2014. At the time of the interviews, nine of our 30 respondents were in a nominal marriage, two were divorced from a nominal marriage partner, four were dating a potential nominal marriage partner, ten were seeking or considering the possibility of contracting a nominal marriage and five were against nominal marriage. Our respondents were on average younger (mean age 29) and more educated (all except four had tertiary or above qualifications) than the general population. Past studies have found that younger and more educated people are less likely to be influenced by their parents (Goode 1970). The findings concerning parental influence in this particular group therefore provide strong evidence of the continued grasp that Chinese families have on their members' lives.

Why nominal marriage?

Despite its increasing popularity in the gay community, nominal marriage remains a contentious issue. Five of our respondents said they opposed the practice due to its emotional cost, the practical challenges and its implications for the

gay social movement. First and foremost, all five respondents felt that nominal marriage is a lie that can only bring 'surface peace' (*biaomian de ningjing*) to homosexuals rather than liberating them from the stigma of society. For them, the lie is a barrier rather than a facilitator of mutual respect, understanding, sharing and intimacy between homosexual people and their parents. All five contended that when the lie is exposed, the emotional damage to parents might be even greater. Second, all five opposing respondents felt that nominal marriage is not practically feasible – they argued that it is nearly impossible for a nominal marriage couple to sustain the lie in the long run without being exposed; they also believed that nominal marriage couples cannot solve the issue of having and rearing children. Third, two respondents criticized nominal marriage as colluding (*hemou*) with the social stigma against homosexuals. For them, nominal marriage mimics heterosexual marriage, perpetuating and legitimating its dominance. It provides a space for homosexuals to hide rather than to come out. It is a compromise in response to social pressure rather than a force to change it, and is therefore detrimental to the long-term welfare of the group as a whole.

All 25 respondents who supported nominal marriage were well aware of the emotional costs to parents when it is exposed and the practical challenges it may entail – the first two factors cited by its opponents. However, they distinguished between entering into a nominal marriage and marrying a straight person. For them, a nominal marriage is a mutual agreement between two strategic partners to act out a well-intentioned and largely harmless lie to make their parents happy. It also provides both partners with a disguise to escape societal pressure. They considered marrying a straight person to be a much bigger and morally objectionable lie because it can ruin the life of the straight partner, who often has considerable emotional investment in the relationship. Such a marriage also compromises heterosexual normative hegemony because compared with a nominal marriage, it often involves fulfilling more marital obligations. Twenty respondents, accounting for 80 per cent of those who had entered into a nominal marriage or were seeking a nominal marriage partner at the time of the interview, cited family pressure, and in particular the need to meet parental expectations of marriage or to protect parents from social stigma, as the main reason for their decision. How do parents exert such pressure, especially when they have long since lost both the legal and cultural legitimacy to directly interfere in their adult children's marriages? This question is addressed in the next section.

Mechanisms of parental influence

Network pressure

Fei (2007 [1949]) argued that the Chinese regard the family as a community with shared values, common interests and collective honour and status. Outsiders often judge the reputation of a family on the behaviour of its members.

Individuals are collectively accountable for both the honour and shame of the family: if a child fails to meet societal expectations, parents are held accountable for this failure and face pressure from relatives, neighbours and friends; in turn, parents use this responsibility to bolster their case and to put pressure on their children to conform. Within this interlinked network of responsibilities and accountability, decisions about sexuality, intimacy and marriage – which in Western societies are regarded as personal matters – are treated as family matters by many Chinese. When parents try to persuade their adult gay offspring to return to 'normality' by entering a heterosexual marriage, they often cite the pressure they face from the wider community. As Jun, a 28-year-old gay man seeking a nominal marriage partner explained:

> They [his parents] never say that they want me to get married. . .They talk about what other people say, and use other people, such as our relatives and our friends, even the larger society, to demand that I conform.

Zhu, a 28-year-old lesbian currently dating a potential nominal marriage partner, reported a similar experience:

> [My parents said] 'You have to give us a result, right. You now live far away from home [she migrated from a city in the northeast of China to City N eight years ago], you can live in peace and be relaxed. You live your life the way you want it to be. You can do anything you want over there. But we have to face all the pressure [due to her single status] at home. How can we bear the pressure?'

Zhu's parents' complaints highlight that while single gay people may escape community pressure and social stigma through migration, this option is less readily available to their parents because of their advanced age. Parents' social embeddedness may make them subject to strong social pressure, for instance through gossip. As Liu, a 25-year-old lesbian who used to date a potential nominal marriage partner reported:

> It is very annoying that they [neighbours] always gossip and talk about other families' affairs. Then my mum would say 'you have made us ashamed of even going out of this house. Whenever we step out of this door, people start to ask questions. We are afraid to go out'.

While increased population mobility may have weakened the community's informal control of individuals and families in contemporary China, many urban residents still live in housing provided by their work unit (*danwei*), in communities where their neighbours are also their colleagues. It is not unusual for neighbour-colleagues in a *danwei* housing community to have known each other and each other's families for a long time. This familiarity sometimes makes them feel entitled to make judgments about another family's affairs, especially the 'welfare' of the children.

Likewise, relatives feel that they have an obligation to intervene. For instance, Zhu recounted how all of her relatives openly discussed her marriage prospects at a family gathering for Chinese New Year's Eve.

> There was a time when we had nothing to do and everybody was bored. Suddenly…my grandmother, my mum, my aunt, my cousins, and my sister-in-law…started to discuss my [not having a] marriage. The whole family attacked [gongji] me [for not having got married yet].

The intervention of relatives often goes beyond discussion to active involvement, such as arranging blind dates. As Hua, a 31-year-old lesbian in a nominal marriage, recalled:

> My aunt once tried to match me with her upstairs neighbour's relative's son. My aunt lives in Suzhou and I live in City N. This man that she wanted to introduce to me also lives in City N. I could not believe that she would try to remote-control me like that. [sarcastically].

Nie, a 29-year-old lesbian who was dating a potential nominal marriage partner, explained why she put up with her relatives' interventions:

> My last blind date was arranged by a relative. It was difficult to turn it down. They arrange the dates for you in good faith…I have to give face [mianzi] to my relatives.

In Chinese society, there is a cultural expectation that junior members of an extended family will show deference to their elders (Hsu 1971[1948]). Older relatives, especially women, often feel that they have both an obligation and a right to intervene in marriage matters, yet they are not close enough to experience the emotional ramifications of their interventions. In our respondents' view, this combination makes these relatives much less restrained than their parents in asking questions, passing judgments and taking actions concerning their marriage matters, and this in turn exacerbates the pressure on their parents and on themselves.

> In China, marriage is not only an issue of the immediate family…the people who are very close to you (e.g., your parents) feel embarrassed to ask all the time. But my uncle is very anxious [about his marriage prospects] and he tries to fix blind dates for me every time he sees me. My auntie is mobilizing her networks to help me find a spouse…when you reach a certain age, all your relatives become concerned about your marriage plans…You can come out to your parents, but you cannot come out to your wider family. (Xin, 27, Male)

Xin's words not only sum up the dilemma that gay people and their parents face in China, it also highlights the importance of parents and children jointly maintaining the appearance of respectability to people outside the nuclear

family. Among our 25 respondents who had entered into or were currently seeking a nominal marriage, ten had already come out to their parents and another eight said that their parents were suspicious or 'more or less' knew about their sexual orientation. Even once they are aware of their children's homosexual orientation, some parents still want their children to enter a heterosexual marriage. Wei, a 22-year-old gay man seeking a nominal marriage partner, is a case in point:

> A few years ago my mother told me that she knew that I was gay because she had seen my boyfriends. I guess inside her heart she rejected homosexuality. Then she remained silent on this issue for a long time. Occasionally she would remind me not to do 'bad things' [probably referring to having same-sex intimacy]. Then she started to push me to date girls. She talked about finding me a girlfriend all the time and she even set up blind dates for me. I thought that it would hurt her feelings if I completely ignored her request. So I brought home a girl and she was really happy.

Similarly, after coming out to her parents, Zhu reported that they still wanted her to get married:

> Because I have already come out to my parents…when I brought my nominal marriage partner home, it was easy. My parents knew very well what was going on. We are just acting for other people to see.

Lin, a 38-year-old gay man, recalled attending a gay friend's nominal marriage wedding banquet:

> It was like a farce…the wedding banquet was so grand, really grand and it lasted for two days…despite the fact that the groom's mother knew that he was gay and that it was all only an act…Perhaps because of that she needed to be doubly committed to the act…It was hilarious.

In other words, gay people turning to nominal marriage sometimes collaborate with their parents to stage a marriage act to satisfy the expectations of their relatives and friends. Three respondents (Hua (31, female), Ji (27, female) and Jia (29, female)) informed their parents before getting married that the marriage was nominal. Even then, their parents were still supportive of it. Hua told us:

> I directly told my parents that it was a nominal marriage. My father did not say anything…my mother commented that it was just to live a life (guo rizi) and as long as he is good to me, it is ok…I told her that he and I are leading separate lives…I want to let them know that they cannot expect us to behave like other couples…I think many Chinese parents just need the formality…that you formally get married.

Ji's mother took a very pragmatic approach towards her nominal marriage – she worried that Ji's same-sex partner would leave her for a man and thought

that it would be safer for Ji to marry a man who would look after her. The mother later urged Ji to divorce her nominal marriage husband for fear that she would need to be responsible for his debts. Bu (24, male) argued that parents' acceptance of nominal marriage stems from their need to 'meet their friends and relatives' expectations'. Cheng (31, female) suggested that parents' acceptance of nominal marriage is largely related to Chinese face culture:

> Chinese have this face culture – regardless of whether you are happy or not, regardless of the nature of your marriage, you get married and this gives your parents face.

Resource leverage

As mentioned in the literature review, adult children in China rely on their parents for various forms of material support, such as parental investment in education, assistance with purchasing a house (Davis 2010) and mobilization of social networks to help adult offspring obtain better job opportunities (Lin 1999). Parents' control of resources gives them a lever with which to elicit conformity. Ya, a 22-year-old lesbian university student, was financially dependent on her parents and admitted that this dependence had prevented her from coming out. At the time of the interview, Ya was in the process of looking for a nominal marriage partner.

> If I come out now, my parents would definitely come and take me home [she migrated from Jinan to City N to pursuit her studies three years ago]. Or they would just stop supporting me financially. How am I going to continue studying without their [financial] support?

Parental influence is often exerted through the expectation of a reciprocal exchange; for example, if parents mobilize their social networks to help their adult children find a job, they expect them to try their best not to shame them or make them lose face in the network. Ji explained why she arranged to marry a gay man and then divorced him:

> My parents found and arranged a good job for me [in a state-owned enterprise]… You see, they hired me because they gave face to my parents…I needed to be very careful about how I conducted my personal life. I could not simply quit the job or leave the enterprise…I had no choice but to get married.

Chen, a 27-year-old lesbian in a nominal marriage, explained her decision to enter a nominal marriage.

> I have already bought a house here with my parents' help. But the thing is, after I bought the house, my parents pressurised me [to get married] every day. They wanted us [Chen and her nominal husband] to live together and have children as soon as possible.

The purchase of property signifies the readiness of the younger generation to enter a new phase of life, marriage and childbearing. It also gives parents legitimate grounds for voicing their concerns because, from the parents' point of view, the material conditions for their children to fulfil these traditional obligations are ripe. The story of Yong, a 30-year-old lesbian in a nominal marriage at the time of the interview, further illustrates the dynamic of this mechanism. Yong's parents-in-law had built a four-storey house in the expectation that their son (Yong's nominal husband) and daughter-in-law would move in with them after they got married.

> We live on the second floor, which has a big bedroom and a small bedroom. I sleep in the big one and he (her nominal husband) sleeps in the small one. Then one night his parents came down and started to scold him [chuckles]...and poor guy...his parents forced him to take his duvet and pillows and come to my room to reflect [on his bad behaviour in not sleeping with his wife].

A revised discourse of intergenerational obligation

Traditionally, a grown son's obligation to care for his ageing parents was seen as a core element of the intergenerational dynamic, as epitomized by the custom of filial piety (Whyte 2005). Six of our male respondents linked their decision to contract a nominal marriage directly to their need to find a partner who would help them care for their parents in old age. This reflects the cultural expectation that sons and daughters-in-law will assume primary responsibility for caring for elderly parents. Although women were not traditionally required to care for their parents after marrying, in reality many daughters took up this caring role, especially in urban areas (Xie and Zhu 2009). The changing responsibility of daughters in elderly care means that it is now not only gay men who may face pressure to find a partner to help care for their ageing parents, lesbians may also face the same pressure.

Of course, another reason parents want their adult children to get married and have children concerns the traditional duty of men to produce heirs who will continue the patrilineal blood line and pass on the family name. The Chinese saying that 'of the three most un-filial behaviours, childlessness is the most serious' (*buxiao yousan, wuhou weida*) illustrates the weight attached to this filial duty and accounts for the power and perceived legitimacy of parents exerting their influence to procure grandchildren. Wei and Lin's parents urged them to get married even though they knew their sons were gay, because they wanted them to produce grandchildren. Four of the 14 male respondents, Jun, Wei, Shi and Lin, said that their desire to have children was the major driving force behind their decision to enter a nominal marriage.

However, the intergenerational dynamic in post-socialist China is no longer defined solely by filial piety that emphasizes grown children's duties towards

their parents; increasingly, it also stresses 'parents' undying devotion to their children' (Zhang and Sun 2014: 138). Quite a few of our respondents interpreted their parents' wish for them to get married as reflecting the former's concern (*guanxin*), care (*guanhuai*) and love (*ai*) towards them. Similarly, they rationalized their decision to turn to nominal marriage as based on strong emotional ties between the generations, or as a way of protecting their parents from worrying about their future. For example, Zhu told us that her parents had wanted her to get married because 'they worried that when I am old, I would be lonely, I would not have anybody to look after me'.

Negotiating individual autonomy

For gay people, the ideal nominal marriage is one that gives both partners full autonomy to lead an active gay life while fulfilling the minimum expectations of family and society. In practice, however, the partners may have different expectations of the arrangement, in addition to the discrepancies between their wishes and their parents' expectations. This section examines the strategies that gay people in a nominal marriage use to negotiate the boundaries between family responsibilities and personal autonomy.

Minimizing involvement in family networks

Among the 11 respondents who were currently in/ever in a nominal marriage, seven had not come out to their parents. Moreover, none of their nominal marriage partners had come out to their parents. This makes passing (Goffman 1963) a necessity. All except one of our respondents in a nominal marriage conceded that they knew very little about each other before they registered the marriage. They lived together only during family visits or for the first few months of their marriage and separated thereafter, either to enter an intimate same-sex relationship or simply to preserve their privacy. Couples in nominal marriages have to fabricate details about their married life in response to the questions of parents and other relatives during family gatherings. Typical questions include 'How was your honeymoon?', 'What have you [the couple] done this week?' and 'Did you like the food that I sent you last week?' The more questions the partners in a nominal marriage have to answer, the more details they have to fabricate, and the greater the possibility that their answers will fail to convince. To 'pass' as a real couple, partners in nominal marriages need to learn the basic facts about each other and avoid situations in which the real nature of their relationship may be uncovered. Avoiding family gatherings and reducing involvement in one's partner's family affairs are common strategies used by people in nominal marriages; for example, they may refrain from making comments and suggestions at family gatherings and may avoid any

involvement in decision-making processes. Pang, a 32-year-old woman who was in a nominal marriage at the time of the interview, explained:

> All the arrangements related to our wedding were decided by his parents when they met. . .I just sat in the meeting, my presence was enough.

Changing cultural expectations

There may be discrepancies between the needs of the partners in a nominal marriage and the expectations of their parents. Some of the respondents had tried to change their parents' expectations. Cui, a 28-year-old in a nominal marriage for two years, was seen by her parents' friends and neighbours as a woman in a failed marriage who was not close to her husband because of their childlessness. The community gossip bothered Cui's parents. Cui reacted by trying to alter her mother's view of marriage:

> I always tell my mother that the relationship between the couple, their small world together, is what really matters, not the comments and gossip of relatives and neighbours.

By making distinctions between the private (the small world of the couple) and the public (the big community), Cui redefined what was really important to her happiness. Likewise, Yu, a 32-year-old man in a nominal marriage at the time of the interview, drew his mother's attention to what his marriage offered (a good wife) in compensation for what it lacked (children).

> Every time my mother nags about our marriage [because the couple were not living together and did not yet have children], I say my wife is very good. Then my mum shuts up.

Making partial concessions

While people in nominal marriages might initially intend it to be a mechanism for passing, once the marriage had taken place some found it difficult not to make any concessions to their parents' expectations. For example, Hua found herself helping to look after her husband's mother after she got sick.

> Shortly after we got married, we visited his family for the Chinese New Year. Unfortunately his mother suddenly fell ill and it was me who cared for her.

Although partners in nominal marriages tried to avoid visiting each other's families and getting involved in their family networks, some, such as Hua (31, female), Tao (28, female), Huang (28, female) and Chen (27, female), did make occasional visits, such as during important cultural festivals. They felt that these concessions had made their nominal marriages work.

> You cannot get away with not showing up all the time. It would look really bad. You need to show up on occasions when your presence is necessary. This also helps your partner in the nominal marriage. Otherwise, how would you expect him to explain to his parents? (Tao)

Cheng, a 31-year-old woman who was considering the possibility of a nominal marriage, attributed the failure of her friend's nominal marriage to the nominal husband's failure to pay a single visit to her friend's father when he was sick.

> The guy was a real asshole. When my friend's father was sick…he did nothing. So they separated and divorced in the end.

In some cases, the respondents in nominal marriages made concessions to their nominal marriage partner's family's expectations (e.g., visiting them and buying them gifts, etc.) out of a feeling of gratitude. They sometimes developed genuine emotional ties with their nominal marriage partner's parents because the latter treated them like family. In other cases, such as Mao, a 26-year-old lesbian engaged to a nominal marriage partner, they felt guilt and pity:

> I do sometimes feel guilty because after all we are lying to them. I do feel sorry for them. So I try to be nice to them whenever I can.

Drawing the line

Even where partners in a nominal marriage tried to make concessions to sustain the appearance of marriage in front of their respective families, there were certain lines that could not be crossed. For men in nominal marriages, this line often related to inheritance of their parents' property. The Marriage Law of 1950 and its subsequent revisions entitle the wife in a legal marriage to a share in her husband's property when her husband dies or if there is a divorce (Davis 2010). Of the 11 respondents who were currently married/engaged/ever married, six had made a prenuptial agreement or property notarization before marriage.

> My flat took all of my parents' savings…This makes a prenuptial agreement necessary. I do not mean to scare you, but, anyway, it does not feel safe [without a prenuptial agreement]. (Bu, a 24-year-old gay man looking for a nominal marriage partner)

For women who entered nominal marriages, the line that could not be crossed related to their sexuality. They often stipulated that neither their husband's nor their own family's desire for children could be used to compromise their sexual autonomy. Owing to the obligation on Chinese men to bear children to carry the family name and bloodline, men who contract a nominal marriage usually want to have children; however, women in nominal marriages

vehemently reject the idea of heterosexual intercourse. While five of the male respondents (Xin, Bu, Jun, Wei, Zhang) indicated that they would try their best to accept heterosexual intercourse to father children, none of the women we interviewed had consented or were prepared to consent to it. This finding corroborates the findings of an earlier study (Zhang 1994), which reported that 65.5 per cent of gay male respondents indicated that they would try to have sexual intercourse with a woman to father a child. Our female respondents, including Jia (29, female), Zhu (28, female), Huang (28, female) and Ji (27, female), were so anxious about their nominal marriage partner crossing this line that they planned to include or had included a clause stipulating no sexual intercourse in their mutual agreement[3]. The women in our sample who wanted to have children said they might consider using assisted reproduction technology. They wanted their children to be brought up in an intimate same-sex relationship not in their nominal marriage. As Chen said:

> If I really wanted a baby, I would want him or her to be the child of my girlfriend and me. I cannot imagine myself serving as some sort of reproduction tool for him [her nominal marriage husband].

Delaying decisions

When partners in a nominal marriage cannot resolve discrepancies between their own and their parents' wishes, or conflicts between themselves, they may delay the decision. For example, Chen (27, female) was trying to buy time by telling her own and her husband's parents that she and her nominal husband had decided to postpone childbearing until her husband moved back to City N. Jia (29, female) wanted to wait and see whether Chinese people will become more receptive to 'dinky' ('double income, no kids yet') families after several years of increasing living expenses and house prices. If this happens, she will be able to describe her marriage as a 'dinky' relationship. Hua's (31, female) husband wanted to have children, but Hua's lover, Ma, objected to her having children with her nominal husband, so Hua was using financial pressure as an excuse to persuade her husband to agree to postpone the decision.

Ending the marriage

When partners have been in a nominal marriage for some time, delaying tactics simply cease to work and they have to devise new strategies. For example, Ji (27, female) and Tao (28, female) simply ended their nominal marriages for three reasons. First, they could not resolve the issue of children with their husbands. Second, they could not bear the trouble of constantly maintaining a lie. Third, they had developed stable same-sex relationships and wanted their parents to accept their same-sex lovers.

Pang (32, female) contracted a nominal marriage when she was 27 years old because of enormous pressure from her mother, who called her every three days, cried every time she called and pushed her to get married. However, one year after her nominal marriage, she planned to divorce her nominal marriage partner and decided to come out to her mother:

> I have always been very close to my mother. . .I had to lie to her about my nominal marriage and this made me feel bad. . .You start a lie and you need many lies to sustain this lie. I was exhausted. . . (Interviewer: What was your mother's response?) Of course she was unwilling (to accept it). . .She still wanted me to bring my nominal marriage husband home so that she could answer to our neighbours. . .

Pang has not yet divorced her nominal marriage partner at the time of interview. However, coming out to her parents has made things much easier – at least she no longer needed to act in front of her parents. Neither Pang nor her mother has let their relatives know that her marriage is nominal and that she is gay.

Discussion: performative family and its implications

This paper documents and analyses the mechanisms and strategies through which Chinese parents and their adult children negotiate their disagreement over the latter group's marriage. Parents push their children to get married because marriage is considered desirable, an obligation and a stage that everybody needs to pass through. Parents do not want to be constantly questioned by relatives, neighbours and friends, and are anxious that their children bear children and find a partner to look after them in their old age. Parents see their children's marriage as a practical issue that they need to solve (*jiejuediao*). They seem less concerned about the young couple's emotional feelings towards each other. This is particularly the case for parents who already know their children's sexual orientation. In fact, some parents prefer their children to get married and then divorce. Some parents continue to want their children to take wedding photos and organize wedding banquets after learning about the nominal nature of their children's marriage. Nevertheless, some of the respondents felt that they could come out to their parents after contracting a nominal marriage – after all, they had already fulfilled their duty to get married and could now be forgiven and left to live their lives the way they want to.

Family in this sense is performative – its essence is to formally meet society's expectations about family and marriage rather than to substantively live a family (and married) life. Sometimes the performative family is a strategic collaboration between the partners in a nominal marriage to escape parental pressure. In other cases it is a show jointly staged by parents and their children to answer to the demands of the wider community and maintain the family's respectability

within it. The cultural origins of the performative family may be traced back to the deep-seated Chinese concern for face. Some respondents referred to nominal marriage as 'face engineering' (*mianzi gongcheng*). This is also consistent with the traditional Chinese view that dirty family business should be kept away from public view (*jiachou buke waichuan*) (Davis 1991). Yet we argue that the performative family is also a pragmatic response to the new tension created between the continued centrality of family and marriage and the rise of individualism in post-socialist China. Five decades of state engineering, marketization and Westernization have dramatically transformed the institution of marriage and sexual values in China, and consequently changed people's expectations and practices in related realms (Yan 2003; Davis and Friedman 2014). Despite these changes, marriage remains a core marker of normative adulthood and an important source of family pride. The entrenched cultural value attached to marriage has resulted in an intriguing situation whereby, according to our respondents and women studied by Gaetano (2014), some Chinese parents believe that having a divorced grown child is less stigmatizing than having a child who has never married and is 'stuck' in lifelong singlehood. Likewise, despite the rise of individualism (Yan 2010), the one-child policy, bureaucratic systems of housing, employment and school placement and market reforms, have in various ways intensified the emotional ties and material 'mutual interdependence between the generations' (Whyte 1997:25). It is the combination of younger Chinese people's desire for greater autonomy over sexual orientation, their continued need to rely on their parents for emotional and material support and the existence of generational gaps in sexual mores that have motivated young Chinese gay people to turn to nominal marriage.

Our findings thus highlight the specific predicament of homosexual people in post-socialist China. Although same-sex intimacy has become more visible, compared to their Western counterparts, gay people in China continue to face more challenges of overcoming stigmatization from society and gaining acceptance by their families. Nominal marriage is therefore an attempt by young gay Chinese to strike a balance between the desire to develop same-sex intimacy and the hope of not being rejected by their parents. The practice of nominal marriage also reflects gender strictures that can be traced back to deep-seated patriarchal norms and new inequalities resulting from market socialism. Both gays and lesbians face parental pressure to marry, but the motivations underlying this pressure are different. Parents of gay men very often want their sons to marry so that they can have children who will continue the family bloodline and name and inherit the family property. Parents of lesbians, on the other hand, want their daughters to get married so that they will have a man to take proper care of them. These differing parental motivations reflect traditional Confucian, patriarchal norms according to which only men are legitimate heirs; they also reflect wage and status inequalities that put women at a disadvantage against men that are intensified or newly created by economic reforms (Shu

and Bian 2003). These gender inequalities in turn lead to gays in nominal marriages to seek maximum protection of their marital home (often paid for by the husband's parents) and lesbians strive to establish a sexual boundary within the marriage.

The issue of nominal marriage also shed lights on the more general dynamics of intergenerational negotiation in this fast-changing country. The three mechanisms – network pressure, resource leverage and a revised discourse of intergenerational obligation – that parents use to exert influence have also been found among people who are not identified as gay. For example, in Sun's (2012) and Gaetano's (2014) discussions of urban singles, they described how parents used pressure and stigma from relatives to persuade their children go on blind dates. They also showed how parents rationalized their efforts to find a marriage partner for their children by emphasizing parents' obligation to protect their children and their deep love towards them. Similarly, Davis (1991) suggested that parents, particularly mothers, cultivated strong emotional ties with their children to safeguard old age support. With respect to resource leverage, it has been a central mechanism through which Chinese parents obligate their children to respect, obey and reciprocate (Whyte 1997; Davis 1991). In post-socialist China, young Chinese must rely on their parents to act as a sanctuary against the turbulence and instability caused by market reforms (Wang 2010), and one can only expect the mechanism of resource leverage to stay salient.

To conclude, although this paper has described the concept of 'performative family' in terms of a specifically Chinese response to the tensions produced by thirty years of economic reform, modernization and Westernization, other variants of 'performative family' may exist outside China. After all, the practice of hiding 'dirty' or shameful family business from public view is common to many cultures. Other countries undergoing rapid social changes, such as India and countries in the Middle East, may also experience tension between increasing individualism and the continuing importance of marriage and family. In other societies, market forces have made the public display and performance of romantic coupledom and family status through extravagant wedding celebrations an imperative (Tso 2012). To ascertain whether the mechanisms and strategies of intergenerational negotiation identified here have a wider application and whether the concept of 'performative family' has explanatory power outside the specific cultural context of the Chinese homosexual community, we need to amass more evidence from China and other societies.

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Notes

1. In 2008, *G-spot*, an independent magazine for gay people in mainland China, conducted a survey of nominal marriage. Twenty of the one hundred respondents

had already been in a nominal marriage, while twenty-four were looking for a nominal marriage partner. In 2009, a Web survey launched by a gay support group in Shanghai showed that around twelve per cent of the three hundred respondents had already contracted a nominal marriage, and more than thirty per cent of gay respondents in this survey reported that they would consider it.

2. 'Gay Marriage Timeline: History of the Same-Sex Marriage Debate'. ProCon.org (California, US) 18 September 2013. Retrieved 4 October 2014.

3. This mutual agreement is considered a pre-nuptial agreement by both parties, except that the agreement is drafted without the help of a lawyer. The respondents did not seem to be aware that non-consummation is grounds for annulling a marriage.

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