

Mom and Dad, I will always love you:  
The pressures of “coming out” in China and Taiwan

Kylie Zhang  
History 200: The Sexual Revolution in Global Perspective  
May 12, 2021

American philosopher John Rawls' theory of distributive justice is justice that takes into account the arbitrariness of assigned social positions at birth. It is choice, or the lack of it (we do not get to choose to which family we are born), that causes Rawls' to posit a system of justice that calls for "social and economic inequalities... to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society."<sup>1</sup> Like racial or ethnical minority groups, sexual minorities do not get to choose their sexuality, or the trait by which they are defined and for which they face discrimination. However, unlike members of other minority groups, members of the LGBTQ+ community can choose to "come out" and reveal their sexual, romantic, or gender orientation to the outside world. Oftentimes, such a decision can have widespread consequences for both the LGBTQ+ identifying individual and their family, especially in collectivist cultures. In China and Taiwan, parental pressure on LGBTQ+ individuals negatively impacts their decision to come out, while extended familial and peer pressure on the parents themselves hinders acceptance for their children. While increased Western discourse seems to positively impact an individual's decision to "come out" to family, LGBTQ+ individuals in China and Taiwan still seem to view "coming out" as more a private matter as opposed to the more "out and proud" narrative of Western individualistic society.

The popular "coming out" Western narrative equates sexual identity disclosure with a feeling of pride as LGBTQ+ individuals proclaim that they are "out and proud." In fact, over eighty people on the anonymous English coming out story sharing website [whenicameout.com](http://whenicameout.com) used that exact phrase to describe their self-identities post-coming out.<sup>2</sup> Professor Perry Halkitis notes that "the sentence 'I am gay' can be seen as a proxy for the sentence 'I am proud of who I

---

<sup>1</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1971), 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> "Search Results for: 'Out and Proud,'" When I Came Out, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://whenicameout.com/?s=out+and+proud>.

am.”<sup>3</sup> This pride that Western LGBTQ+ individuals experience from coming out can be understood through the lens of individualism. For LGBTQ+ people in the West, “coming out is... about the people coming out and not about those whom they need to tell,” Halkitis writes.<sup>4</sup> In other words, coming out in the West is a strictly individual decision made by the LGBTQ+ individual and with that given individual’s best interests in mind. Yet, just like “the [metaphorical] closet” has a “limited value... for understanding queer identities and communities outside the English-speaking world,”<sup>5</sup> the “out and proud” coming out narrative does not extend to China and Taiwan, where LGBTQ+ individuals navigate the pressures of a collectivist society when choosing to come out.

Compared to the United States, a much smaller percentage of Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals choose to come out to family, and this non-disclosure stems from fear of parental disapproval or disappointment. A 2016 survey of 28,454 Chinese LGBTQI-identifying individuals conducted by the United Nations Development Program found that less than fifteen percent of surveyed individuals “disclosed their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression” to family.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, 59% of 1,197 American LGBT-identifying individuals surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2013 have disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity to at least one parent.<sup>7</sup> Although there are differences in sample size and methodology

---

<sup>3</sup> Perry N. Halkitis, introduction to *Out in Time: The Public Lives of Gay Men from Stonewall to the Queer Generation* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2019), <https://oxford-universitypressscholarship-com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/view/10.1093/oso/9780190686604.001.0001/oso-9780190686604-chapter-1>.

<sup>4</sup> See note 3 above.

<sup>5</sup> Carrie Hamilton, *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 165.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Development Programme, “Being LGBTI in China,” UNDP, last modified 2016, [https://www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/library/democratic\\_governance/being-lgbt-in-china.html](https://www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/library/democratic_governance/being-lgbt-in-china.html).

between the two surveys, the large gap between familial sexual minority status disclosure in the United States and China suggests that Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals are significantly less comfortable “coming out” to their family than their American counterparts. This discomfort, and thus non-disclosure on the part of Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals, can be attributed in large part to fear of poor parental reactions to the revelation. Wu Youjian, who became an advocate for LGBTQ+ acceptance in China after her son came out to her as gay, blogged a coming out letter that a self-identified male homosexual wrote to his parents. (Wu’s well-known advocacy has led to many LGBTQ+ identifying individuals to share their stories with her, and she subsequently blogs select material.) In the letter, the young man writes about his fears of letting down his parents, which is why he states he has not talked to his parents about his sexuality before:

Mom and Dad, I know that after you read this letter, your world will undergo a great change, and I would hope that I can remain in your world instead of being abandoned by you. Mom and Dad, I will always love you, but I don’t know if you will always love me. I have lived as your son for over twenty years, and you have raised me for this long. On the outside, I look carefree, but in fact, every day, when I think of this, my heart is bleeding; in fact, there were many times when I thought about just dying to make everything go away. I didn’t dare tell you; I am afraid of your disappointed eyes; I’m afraid that, for this reason, you will not want to admit that I am your son.<sup>8</sup>

The author of this letter felt immense pressure to be a good son to his parents, and his internal torment over choosing to reveal his sexuality to his parents specifically illustrates that it was this pressure, more so than any other factor, that caused him to delay coming out to them in his past.

The young man’s inability to fathom a positive response from his parents to his sexual identity disclosure indicates that older generations (including the parental generation of the

---

<sup>7</sup> “A Survey of LGBT Americans,” Pew Research Center, last modified June 13, 2013, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>.

<sup>8</sup> Unknown Author, “Coming Out Letter to My Family: I don’t want to always keep my heart separate from you, my dearest parents,” Wu Youjian’s blog on Sina, last modified August 10, 2012, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4b7a5b610102e0dz.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b7a5b610102e0dz.html).

LGBTQ+ individuals that I am studying) in China hold a negative image of homosexuality, which can be attributed in large part to the collectivist, Confucianist culture in which they grew up. Confucianism stresses filial piety, or *Xiao* (孝), and as Frank T. Y. Wang, of the National Yang Ming University in Taiwan notes, “the foremost misbehaviour against filial piety is not bearing a male heir to the family,”<sup>9</sup> so homosexuality, which does not allow couples to naturally produce a male heir, violates the cultural norms of the parental generation. In fact, when a homosexual woman who asked to be identified by her Sina Weibo @BuleRM recounted her coming out conversation with her mother, many of her mother’s questions pertained to having children and continuing the bloodline. BuleRM remembers that her mother asked, “can you find a [male] person and give birth to a child for me, then go and live the life you want to live?”<sup>10</sup> When BuleRM assured her mother that she could still have children with a female partner through artificial insemination, her mother pointed out, “but then the child won’t be related to you by blood.”<sup>11</sup> One of the key concerns that BuleRM’s mother had about her sexuality was that it limited BuleRM’s ability to produce blood-related children, and thus limited her ability to be a filial daughter who could give her mother grandchildren to continue the family line. Yet throughout the recounted conversation, BuleRM responded to her mother’s worries calmly—to the first question she replied “Mom, you have to believe that I will find happiness... you don’t need to worry, okay?” To the second she replied “this [raising children not of her blood] doesn’t matter to me.” That BuleRM took her mother’s concerns and comments that could be perceived

---

<sup>9</sup> Frank T. Y. Wang, “Have they really come out: gay men and their parents in Taiwan,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 11, no. 3 (April 2009): 287.

<sup>10</sup> @BuleRM, “Xiamen Lesbian Coming Out Dialogue with Her Mother,” Wu Youjian’s blog on Sina, last modified June 5, 2017, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4b7a5b610102xvy3.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b7a5b610102xvy3.html).

<sup>11</sup> See note 10 above.

as rude or unaccepting in stride shows that she too is familiar with the principles of filial piety and understands the pressure and influence that it exercises on her mother's worldview. It also shows that BuleRM, like the anonymous author of the excerpted coming out letter, anticipated a negative reaction in response to disclosing her sexuality. The familial pressure that many Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals face stem from Confucian cultural attitudes about marriage and continuing the male family line.

In addition to making parents biased against the notion of homosexuality by indirectly positioning homosexuality against filial piety, China's collectivist culture applies pressure to the parents of LGBTQ+ individuals to ensure that their children conform to traditional heterosexual Confucian ideals. Oftentimes, this pressure comes in the form of extended family members or friends of parents inquiring about the marital status of the LGBTQ+ individuals. In his coming out letter, the anonymous author introduced above writes, "I know that as Chinese people, various relatives and friends will definitely ask why I'm still unmarried. You can directly throw this question to me. Just say, I'm an adult now, outside of your control, so whether or not I get married is my choice."<sup>12</sup> Because heterosexual marriages and relationships are the norm, deviation from such, such as remaining single or engaging in a same-sex relationship, loses "family face" and "respectability,"<sup>13</sup> which directly correlates to social standing in collectivist societies. Thus, the anonymous author attempts to save his parents' face and social standing by asking them to answer invasive questions about his life in a way that absolves his parents of responsibility for his deviation from the norm. Yet conformity and maintaining good

---

<sup>12</sup> Unknown Author, "Coming Out Letter to My Family."

<sup>13</sup> Gerda Wielander and Derek Hird, *Chinese Discourses on Happiness* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018), 92.

relationships and respectability are paramount in a collectivist society, and in Chinese society, where Confucianism so closely ties together parent-child bonds, parents often worry that outsiders will consider their child's perceived failures as an extension of their own failure as parents. So, parents have a strong incentive to disapprove of their LGBTQ+ child's sexual and gender identity, which further explains why many queer individuals delay their coming out to their parents or do not do so altogether.

On the other hand, increased Western discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ issues appears to encourage Chinese and Taiwanese LGBTQ+ individuals to come out to family. For example, Chinese and Taiwanese LGBTQ+ individuals often reference Western studies and attitudes surrounding homosexuality when attempting to destigmatize the concept. In a coming out letter to her mother, a 25-year-old Chinese performer writes that “the American Psychological Association published a scientific paper announcing that long-term research shows that homosexuality cannot be ‘corrected’ or changed... Mom, being gay is not my choice, nor is it something that I can control.”<sup>14</sup> Another Chinese woman, from the Jiangsu province, notes that “Socrates, Plato, Leonardo da Vinci and Turing” were all gay, and that the U.S.-based Association for Computing Machinery “established the ‘Turing Award’ as the highest award for computer scientists” in her coming out letter to her father.<sup>15</sup> Both women allude to Western associations and people in order to reference the universality of their situations by contextualizing their individual identities globally. In their collectivist society that views deviations from heterosexuality as abnormal, these two women use Western acceptance for

---

<sup>14</sup> Unknown Author, “25-year-old Female Performer’s Coming Out Letter,” Wu Youjian’s blog on Sina, last modified December 5, 2017, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4b7a5b610102y3m5.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b7a5b610102y3m5.html).

<sup>15</sup> Unknown Author, “Jiangsu Lesbian’s Coming Out Letter to Her Father,” Wu Youjian’s blog on Sina, last modified August 19, 2014, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4b7a5b610102v0il.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b7a5b610102v0il.html).

homosexuality and successful Western examples of LGBTQ+ individuals in order to further the credibility of their identities by establishing its “normalcy” elsewhere in the world—thus destigmatizing the “otherness” of being LGBTQ+. This Western “normalcy” also allows for LGBTQ+ individuals in China and Taiwan to feel hope, and this hope encourages them to come out to family. In his coming out letter, the anonymous male author referenced earlier tells his parents about feeling hope upon meeting an older gay couple as an American exchange student, writing, “I told you guys about an old man who was very kind to me... His name is Kent...[and] he has a boyfriend named Mark... It’s them who let me know that gays could also have stable love and beautiful lives.”<sup>16</sup> By exposing them to the plausibility of living openly, Western discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ issues encourage Chinese and Taiwanese LGBTQ+ individuals to come out.

Yet, it is also important to note that some Western discourse, like the stances of many Western religious institutions on LGBTQ+ issues, is not positive. These negative stances, however, do not appear to negatively impact the coming out decisions of Chinese and Taiwanese LGBTQ+ individuals as they do their Western counterparts. Currently, the Roman Catholic Church, while urging “respect” for “persons with homosexual inclinations,” adopts the position that “the blessing of homosexual unions cannot be considered licit.”<sup>17</sup> Disapproving religious discourse such as this applies the pressure against coming out for religious LGBTQ+ individuals living in Western countries. In her coming out letter to her parents, an Englishwoman going by the pseudonym “Nicky” writes, “I’ve argued with God since I was 17... I guess I hoped that if I

---

<sup>16</sup> Unknown Author, “Coming Out Letter to My Family.”

<sup>17</sup> “Responsum della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede ad un dubium circa la benedizione delle unioni di persone dello stesso sesso,” Holy See Press Office, published March 15, 2021. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2021/03/15/0157/00330.html#ing>.



just held out long enough, prayed hard enough, and was a good enough Christian then it [homosexuality] would just go away.”<sup>18</sup> For Nicky, her belief in an inconsistency between her sexuality and religion—her individual relationship with God—caused much of her pain. Yet, for Chinese and Taiwanese LGBTQ+ individuals whose pain stems more from an inconsistency between who they are and who their parents and society expect them to be, Western religion does not have the same effect. Xiaogang Wei, a Chinese LGBTQ+ rights activist, notes that “religion... is definitely not a big problem in China... the problem is from like family pressure.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, while LGBTQ+ individuals are aware of negative LGBTQ+ Western discourse, the negative discourse itself does not affect them in the way it does Westerners who live their lives surrounded by the cultural impacts of such discourse. So, Chinese and Taiwanese LGBTQ+ individuals have the liberty to internalize identity-affirming messages from Western societies that facilitates their coming out while disregarding that which may hinder it.

Like Nicky and her fellow Western LGBTQ+ individuals, Chinese and Taiwanese LGBTQ+ individuals come out in a bid for parental understanding, but the way they do so is much more family and community oriented than their Western counterparts. For example, the anonymous Chinese male homosexual (referenced earlier) frames his coming out reasoning in terms of how it relates back to his parents, writing that “today I must tell you my secret... I don’t want to always keep my heart separate from you, my dearest parents.”<sup>20</sup> Conversely, Nicky

---

<sup>18</sup> Nicky, “‘Coming Out’ Letter to Parents,” published by the Seventh-day Adventist Kinship International, accessed on May 9, 2021. <https://www.sdakinship.org/pt/170-someonetotalkto/stories-from-about-parents/1304-coming-out-letter-to-parents>.

<sup>19</sup> Xiaogang Wei interviewed by Kristie Lu Stout, “LGBT,” *CNN* video, 2:20, Alexander Street, December 31, 2014, <https://video-alexanderstreet-com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/watch/lgbt/transcript?context=channel:cable-news-network-cnn>.

<sup>20</sup> Unknown Author, “Coming Out Letter to My Family.”

frames her reasoning for coming out in almost exclusively individualistic terms. She writes to her parents, “I can no longer hide from you... and there should be no need for me to go [at] this secret alone.”<sup>21</sup> Both Nicky and the anonymous author acknowledge a shared feeling of alienation and distance between them and their parents due to their respective sexualities, which they both refer to as a “secret,” yet while Nicky seeks comfort *from* her parents, the anonymous author seeks *to* comfort his parents. Chinese and Taiwanese LGBTQ+ individuals are driven to provide reassurance to their parents when coming out, which means that they avoid speaking about their futures negatively—BuleRM immediately reassures her mother that she could have a happy future as a homosexual woman in their exchange. In contrast, Nicky’s Western upbringing encourages her to share her suffering with her parents so that they could empathize with her individual experience. So, she tells them about the anguish she feels over her future, writing, “I hurt so much when I think about all the things I won’t ever have or experience—like children, marriage, being needed and having a family of my own.”<sup>22</sup> Though Chinese and Western LGBTQ+ individuals express similar sentiments when explaining their decision to come out, Chinese and Taiwanese LGBTQ+ individuals tend to come out in a way that anticipates parental fears and pre-emptively provides reassurance while Western LGBTQ+ individuals do so in a way to evoke parental empathy.

Ironically, it is precisely this family and community based social orientation of Chinese and Taiwanese LGBTQ+ individuals that makes them regard coming out as private affair. The anonymous author made sure to emphasize to his parents in his coming out letter that “as long as

---

<sup>21</sup> Nicky, “‘Coming Out’ Letter to Parents.”

<sup>22</sup> See note 21 above.

you can accept me, I will not tell others,”<sup>23</sup> indicating that though the author has come out to his direct family, he still views his sexuality in explicitly private terms so that it will not further impact his family in relation to its community. However, such sentiments might also be changing as pro-LGBTQ+ discourse increases. When CNN interviewer Kristie Lu Stout asked if “the situation [of hiding one’s sexuality] would be different for the current or next generation of LGBT Chinese,” LGBTQ+ rights activist Xu Bin answered, “yeah, definitely. Many young people, young LGBT people are... coming out every year to their family... they have more resource[s].”<sup>24</sup> So, increased discourse and the increased resources derived from it appear to positively impact LGBTQ+ individuals’ decisions to come out. Thus, though collectivist pressure, parental pressure, and peer pressure still exist and prevent LGBTQ+ individuals from coming out in China and Taiwan, Western global influences may provide a counterbalance to traditional forces. Ultimately though, the decision to come out to family is an individual choice. This paper cannot possibly encapsulate all of the nuances and pressures that Chinese, Taiwanese, and Western LGBTQ+ individuals have to navigate when deciding how to express or repress their respective identities, but it does try to provide a very generalized analysis of the situation, like how philosopher John Rawls analyzed societies to determine the basic tenants of a just society (though this work is in no way comparable to Rawls’ work). A just society, Rawls once wrote, should grant each person “an equal claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties,”<sup>25</sup> and though the ability to live openly is not yet defined as a basic liberty, much less an equal liberty, perhaps one day we’ll get there.

---

<sup>23</sup> Unknown Author, “Coming Out Letter to My Family.”

<sup>24</sup> Xu Bin interviewed by Kristie Lu Stout, “LGBT,” 7:35.

<sup>25</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1971), 5-6.

## Bibliography

- “A Survey of LGBT Americans.” Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. Pew Research Center, June 13, 2013. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>.
- @BuleRM. “Xiamen Lesbian Coming Out Dialogue with Her Mother.” Wu Youjian’s Blog. Sina, June 5, 2017. [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4b7a5b610102xvy3.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b7a5b610102xvy3.html).
- “Coming Out Letter to My Family: I Don’t Want to Always Keep My Heart Separate from You, My Dearest Parents.” Wu Youjian’s Blog. Sina, August 10, 2012. [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4b7a5b610102e0dz.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b7a5b610102e0dz.html).
- “Jiangsu Lesbian’s Coming Out Letter to Her Father.” Wu Youjian’s Blog. Sina, August 19, 2014. [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4b7a5b610102v0il.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b7a5b610102v0il.html).
- Halkitis, Perry N. "Introduction: Pride." In *Out in Time: The Public Lives of Gay Men from Stonewall to the Queer Generation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2019. doi: 10.1093/oso/9780190686604.003.0001.
- Hamilton, Carrie, and Elizabeth Dore. *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory*. University of North Carolina Press, 2012. Accessed April 26, 2021. doi:10.5149/9780807882511\_hamilton.
- Nicky. “Coming Out Letter to Parents.” Seventh-Day Adventist Kinship International. Accessed May 9, 2021. <https://www.sdakinship.org/pt/170-someonetotalkto/stories-from-about-parents/1304-coming-out-letter-to-parents>.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.
- “Responsum della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede ad un dubium circa la benedizione delle unioni di persone dello stesso sesso.” Holy See Press Office, March 13, 2021. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2021/03/15/0157/00330.html#ing>.
- Stout, Kristie Lu, interviewer. *LGBT*. Featuring Xiaogang Wei, Chung To, and Xu Bin. Anonymous Cable News Network (CNN), 2014. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/LGBT>.
- United Nations Development Programme. “Being LGBTI in China: UNDP in China.” UNDP, March 16, 2016. [https://www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/library/democratic\\_governance/being-lgbt-in-china.html](https://www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/library/democratic_governance/being-lgbt-in-china.html).

Wang, Frank T.Y., Heng-Dar Bih, and David J. Brennan. "Have They Really Come Out: Gay Men and Their Parents in Taiwan." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 11, no. 3 (2009): 285-96. Accessed May 11, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27784443>.

Wielander, Gerda, and Derek Hird, eds. *Chinese Discourses on Happiness*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018. Accessed May 11, 2021. doi:10.2307/j.ctvfxv929.

"You Searched for out+and+Proud." When I Came Out, January 6, 2021.  
<https://whenicameout.com/?s=out%2Band%2Bproud>.

"25-Year-Old Female Performer's Coming Out Letter." Wu Youjian's Blog. Sina, December 5, 2017. [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4b7a5b610102y3m5.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b7a5b610102y3m5.html).