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Disclosure as family practice: Changing family dynamics in Hong Kong after a gay son comes out

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Abstract

This paper examines the family dynamics between parents and gay sons after the latter's disclosure of their sexual orientation. Situated in the "doing family" and life course literature, the paper offers a sociological account of coming out and family dynamics in Hong Kong that presents the narratives of both gay sons and their parents, examining the changing moral and emotional economies of family life across two generations. Thirty-five in-depth individual interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of gay sons (n = 15) and their mothers (n = 14) and/or fathers (n = 6). The findings revealed that heteronormative family life, as part of the moral economy of family life, is challenged after disclosure, with parents forced to admit or accept the queer component of their family. Yet, both parents and gay sons work hard to accomplish a "correct" version of sexual normativity that views homosexuality as inborn (sexual essentialism) and conforms to the "good homosexual" image. Sons' disclosure also shifts the burden of the closet, as part of the emotional economy of family life, to their parents, especially mothers, on whom that burden often takes an emotional toll. The paper concludes that disclosure is a contested site of negotiation of the meaning of male identity, parenthood, and homosexuality, as well as a key family practice that changes the moral and emotional economies of families, eventually leading to the formation of new family

forms. By viewing disclosure as family practice in a culture where intergenerational closeness and family co-residence are prominent, this paper rethinks coming out, arguing that in the Chinese context it should be understood not only as identity politics, as it often is in Western contexts, but also as relational politics, thus revitalizing the coming-out debate across cultural contexts and offering new insights on the relationship between homosexuality and contemporary family life.

KEYWORDS
coming out, disclosure, doing family, Hong Kong, parent–son relationship, relational politics

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is a well-established international literature on LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) coming-out-to-the-family stories but such stories are largely based on Western gay and lesbian experiences, quantitative and psychological in orientation, and told by LGBTQ themselves rather than by their family members. The coming-out literature is largely based on an identity development model that views homosexual identity formation as an individual act and developmental process aimed at wider community acceptance, thus linking identity formation to identity politics. This paper draws on experiences from a non-Western locale—Hong Kong—and brings the family voice (parents) into the discussion. It offers a sociological account of family dynamics following gay men's disclosure of their sexual orientation based on two focused case studies gleaned from 35 in-depth interviews with gay sons and their parents in Hong Kong. Situated in the "doing family" and life course literature, the paper examines the moral and emotional economies of gay sons and their parents during the disclosure process. It argues that disclosure challenges heteronormative family life, as part of the moral economy of family life, with parents forced to admit or accept the family's queer component, although both gay sons and their parents work hard to accomplish a "correct" version of sexual normativity that views homosexuality as inborn (sexual essentialism) and conforms to the "good homosexual" image. Moreover, the burden of the closet, as part of the emotional economy of family life, is shifted from gay sons to their parents, especially mothers, on whom that burden often takes an emotional toll. The paper thus views disclosure as a contested site of negotiation of male identity, parenthood, and homosexuality in contemporary Hong Kong family life. It conceptualizes disclosure as a key family practice that changes the moral and emotional economies of family life, eventually leading to the formation of new forms of family. By viewing disclosure as family practice in a culture where intergenerational closeness and family co-residence are prominent, it concludes that coming out in the Chinese context should best be understood not simply as identity politics, as in the Western context, but also as relational politics, thus revitalizing the coming-out debate and contributing to new understanding of the relationship between homosexuality and contemporary family life in the international literature in general and Asian queer studies in particular.

2 | DOING THE LGBTQ FAMILY: PUTTING THE FAMILY OF ORIGIN INTO LGBTQ STUDIES

The classical coming-out model focuses on the psychological development of self-identification as a homosexual. Cass's (1984) seminal identity development model views homosexual identity formation as a developmental process of the self: identity confusion → comparison → tolerance → acceptance → pride → synthesis. The model (see also

Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989) has been highly influential in understanding of the coming-out process, with later discussions examining it as an interpersonal process whereby the self comes out to itself, then to parents and friends, and finally to the workplace and world. The self thus integrates sexuality into all aspects of life. The developmental model is also the basis of identity politics in the West: "a struggle for identity, a development of sexual communities, and the growth of political movements" (Weeks, 1985, p. 195). Later discussions focus on the social and economic conditions that make coming out possible (with particular attention to social class, gender, and race/ethnicity; e.g., Schmitz et al., 2020), with some arguing that the closet has declined in significance in the West, where young people no longer define their lives through sexuality in a post-gay era (Savin-William, 2005; Seidman, 2002). However, certain areas need further investigation in the coming-out literature, which is dominated by the white gay and lesbian experience in Anglophone contexts and psychological and/or quantitative approaches (D'Amico et al., 2015). The conceptualization of coming out has also been criticized as overly individualistic, neglecting the collective and historically situated context (Plummer, 1995), overemphasizing LGBTQ agency and neglecting the role of others (e.g., parents), especially in family-centric, collectivist cultural contexts (Bertone & Franchi, 2014), and too static, failing to see disclosure as an ongoing process (Dziengel, 2015; Orne, 2011; see also Jhang, 2018). Moreover, family members' reactions are usually reported retrospectively by LGBTQ themselves, with the literature lacking first-person accounts of how family members experience disclosure. These deficiencies point to the importance of including family members' voice and viewing coming out as an ongoing family practice. There is a small but growing body of literature putting the voice of the family of origin into the queer picture (Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014). While important, such studies focus overwhelmingly on the psychological and emotional reactions of parents (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Amico et al., 2015; Grafsky, 2014; Saltzburg, 2004), with few on those of siblings (Rothblum, 2011) and grandparents (Scherrer, 2010). They also tend to view disclosure as a family crisis that must be resolved to promote family acceptance and protect LGBTQ youths from distress (D'Augelli et al., 2010). Little attention is paid to the connection between familial and social norms, thus failing to recognize that parents can be "agents" of the normalization of heteronormative life or to understand family-centered cultures where there is no way to "leave" one's natal family.

There are a few coming-out studies that give voice to family members (mainly parents) in non-Anglophone Western countries (Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014) and a smaller body of research in qualitative sociology and anthropology that explores the connection between family responses and social norms such as those pertaining to parental identity and gender (Fields, 2001) and LGBTQ parents as agents of social change (see Broad's (2011) discussion of PFLAG [Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays]). Studies on coming out in Chinese societies are abundant (e.g., Chou, 2000; Kong, 2011, 2023; Liu & Ding, 2005; Wong, 2007), but the paucity of research on families of origin is striking given the prominence of intergenerational closeness and dependence in Chinese societies. Notable examples of studies that give a voice to family members (mainly parents) and discuss changes in family dynamics, family relationships and parenting include Brainer (2019) and Lee (2018) in Taiwan, Wei and Yan (2021) and Engebretsen (2019) in mainland China, and Hung (2014) in Hong Kong, although the latter is from a social work and psychological perspective.

Building on these studies, this paper offers one of the first sociological accounts of coming out in Hong Kong that presents the narratives of both gay sons and their parents. It is necessary to give voice to parents and position coming out as a family practice because the Chinese self is intimately related to the family-centered culture (Chou, 2000; Yan, 2016). In contrast to Anglophone culture, where growing up and coming out usually entail leaving home, there is no space for leaving natal families behind in Chinese culture. Coming-out stories in Chinese societies are best understood by recognizing the prominence of intergenerational closeness and family dependence. Situated in the doing family and life course literature, this paper examines the changing dynamics of family relationships across two generations, the young gay generation (born in the 1980s and 1990s) and the generation of their parents (born from the 1950s–1960s), under the socio-historical transformations in Hong Kong society.[1]

The doing family literature (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 1996, 2001; Ng et al., 2009; Silva & Smart, 1999) views the family as a set of everyday practices rather than an institution. Families are what families do (Silva & Smart, 1999). Morgan (1996) has argued that "family" should be used "as an adjective rather than as a noun … to refer to sets of

practices which deal in some way with ideas of parenthood, kinship and marriage and the expectations and obligations which are associated with these practices" (p. 11); family thus "represents a quality rather than a thing" (p. 186). Moreover, family life encompasses a political economy (e.g., allocation of time and resources), moral economy (moral choices concerning health and sickness, life and death), and emotional economy (emotional labor, work and bodily concerns) (Morgan, 2001). Situated in the doing family literature, this paper examines changes over time in the quality of family relationships and practices. It focuses less on the psychological reactions of LGBTQ and their parents and more on the changing moral and emotional economies of family life centered around a sexual orientation disclosure.

The doing family approach is complemented by the life course approach, which highlights the link between human lives and larger historical and social transformations (Glen et al., 2003). Elder (1996) has argued that the individual life course constitutes "age-graded life patterns embedded in social structures and cultures that are subject to historical change" (p. 31). Applying this approach to LGBTQ studies is important because LGBTQ individuals have to negotiate with a master narrative that negates their thoughts, feelings, and actions (Hammack & Cohler, 2011). The individual life course should thus be linked to families through "a *contextual*, *processual*, and *dynamic* approach to the study of change in the lives of individual family members over time, and of families as social units as they change over historical periods" (Bengtson & Allen, 1993, p. 492; emphasis in the original).

By combining the doing family and (individual and family) life course approaches, this paper reveals the way in which family members' stories are interwoven with the social and historical changes in Hong Kong society. In examining the changing dynamics within families following a gay son's sexual orientation disclosure, it views such disclosure as a contested site of negotiation over the changing meanings of male identity, parenthood, and homosexuality against the backdrop of the transformations in Hong Kong society, thereby understanding disclosure as a key family practice that changes the moral and emotional economies of family life, eventually leading to the formation of new family forms. By viewing disclosure as family practice, it highlights the relational Chinese self and concludes that relational politics, rather than identity politics, better captures the dynamics of coming out in the Chinese context, thus contributing to new understanding of the relationship between homosexuality and contemporary family life.

3 | CHANGING SOCIAL CONDITIONS, COMING OUT, AND THE YOUNG GAY GENERATION

A British colony from 1842 to 1997, Hong Kong transformed itself from an industrial city in the 1960s into an international financial center in the 1970s and then into a cosmopolitan world city in the 1990s, becoming increasingly affluent and developing a strong middle-class ethos in the process. Coming out has always been difficult but three social factors make it more possible for the younger gay generation in Hong Kong. The first is intergenerational closeness, reflected in the dominant pattern of family co-residence, together with a reduction in family size and changes in parenting. Owing to high housing prices, family co-residence is very common in Hong Kong, especially for young people and the working class. Up to the 1970s, large families were the norm, and parents often worked long hours, leaving children unattended or in the care of siblings. Since the 1980s, Hong Kong parents, especially middle-class parents, have had more time and resources to expend on their smaller number of children. Parenting has also shifted from an authoritarian to reciprocal style, with a downward focus on children's happiness and well-being (Leung & Shek, 2018). The new parenting focuses less on children's material needs and more on their emotional and psychological needs. Parents actively monitor their children's bodies, behavior, and choices, making it almost impossible for gay children not to come out (see Brainer's (2019) discussion of similar issues in Taiwan). The second factor is the change in masculinity over the past few decades. The main form of male identity in the past was breadwinner masculinity, defined in terms of material security, possessions, and ability to contribute to the family's livelihood. Men's responsibility was expressed through fulfilment of their familial and filial duties to marry, sire children, and work hard to support their parents, wives, and children, and their respectability was expressed by being a socially accepted, morally upright person who brought no shame to their families (Kong, 2019). Since the 1990s, breadwinner masculinity has

gradually been replaced by neoliberal entrepreneurial masculinity, measured by individual competence and material success through entrepreneurship, upward mobility in the realms of education and work, and success in building and maintaining family wealth (Choi et al., 2012; Kong, 2021). Hence, education and work are privileged over family and marriage, with the former compartmentalized as "public" face issues and the latter as "private" individual matters, thus giving room for delaying and even resisting marriage and for tolerance of gay masculinity within the family setting. The third factor is increasing social tolerance of homosexuality. Male homosexual acts were criminalized under the British Offences Against the Person Act of 1861, which was incorporated into Hong Kong law in 1865, but decriminalized in 1991 (Chou, 2000). Although the dominant view still holds that homosexuality is a mental illness or form of social deviance, increasing numbers of people, especially young people, view it as normal (Kong, 2023; Suen et al., 2016). Hong Kong now has a well-established *tongzhi* (local parlance for LGBTQ) world, with a vibrant pink economy and consumer infrastructure, and *tongzhi* activism has emerged since the 2000s (Kong, 2023; Kong et al., 2015), giving the young gay generation an important resource for coming out.

4 | METHODOLOGY

Between October 2021 and October 2022, 15 families were interviewed, consisting of 15 gay men, 14 mothers, and 6 fathers, all of whom were interviewed individually, for a total of 35 individuals. They were recruited through non-probability purposive sampling (e.g., the author's previous research network, collaborating NGOs, social media publicity, and the snowball technique). All interviewees were Chinese, aged 18 or above, and permanent Hong Kong residents. The gay interviewees self-identified as gay (or adopted some other same-sex sexual identity label) and had disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents in a planned or unplanned manner. Those selected were as diverse as possible in terms of age, educational background, relationship status, religious beliefs, health status, and occupation. Only gay men who had come out to their parents were included. Those of their parents who were willing to be interviewed were also included. Although neither sample is representative, being largely self-selected, these interviews, especially the parent interviews, provide an important piece of the puzzle by introducing the hitherto missing voice of family members, thereby not only filling a knowledge gap in the coming-out literature but also helping to establish a baseline for future research. Due to spatial limitations, two focused case studies (two sons and two mothers) are presented in this paper to give more nuance and depth to the discussion. They were chosen to contrast with each other and reflect theoretical diversity. See Table 1.

The questions for the gay interviewees centered on their life stories, with a focus on their coming-out story and how coming out had affected family relationships over time. The questions for parents focused on their relationship with their gay son before and after the disclosure, their moral struggles (the right/wrong of homosexuality, "moral failures," "mother blaming") and emotions (sadness, shame, guilt, anger, happiness, pride), their relationship with significant others, and their support systems, if any. The overall aim was to examine, through the combined narratives, the changing meaning of male identity, homosexuality, and parenthood and changes in the moral and emotional economies of family life over time.

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board. The nature of the study was carefully explained to all participants, who were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. A small honorarium (approx. US$25) was provided to defray the cost of travel and inconvenience. All names in this paper are English pseudonyms, as most Hongkongers have an English name. Minor alterations have been made to participants' biographies to protect their identities. Written consent was sought before audio-recording the interviews. Spoken Cantonese was transcribed verbatim, with quotes translated into English. Guided by the grounded theory approach, data analysis included identifying themes, building codebooks, and marking texts. The interview findings were analyzed with reference to the local and international literature. As noted, Morgan (1996, 2001) has argued that family practices can be understood in terms of three economies: the political economy of time and resource allocation, moral economy of choices surrounding sickness, care, and obligation, and emotional economy involving a complex mixture of control

TABLE 1 Profile of participants.

	Son (*n* = 15)	Mother (*n* = 14)	Father (*n* = 6)	Parents (*n* = 20)
1. Age	33.27	62.29	59.33	61.40
2. Education				
Primary	0 (0%)	5 (35.7%)	1 (16.7%)	6 (30%)
Secondary	0 (0%)	7 (50%)	3 (50%)	10 (50%)
Tertiary or above	15 (100%)	2 (14.3%)	2 (33.3%)	4 (20%)
3. Occupation				
Elementary or manual worker	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (16.7%)	1 (5%)
Clerical support worker	2 (13.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Manager	3 (20.0%)	1 (7.1%)	1 (16.7%)	2 (10%)
Professional	7 (46.7%)	2 (14.3%)	1 (16.7%)	3 (15%)
Housewife	0 (0%)	5 (35.7%)	0 (0%)	5 (25%)
Unemployed	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Freelancer	2 (13.3%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)
Retired	0 (0%)	5 (35.7%)	3 (50%)	8 (40%)

and expression of embodied feelings and bodily practices. This paper focuses primarily on the latter two[2]: How does a gay son negotiate his gay identity, and how do his parents reconcile that identity with heteronormative family life? In other words, how does gay sons' sexual orientation disclosure affect the moral and emotional economy of everyday family practices?

5 | BEFORE DISCLOSURE

The gay interviewees are members of the post-80s and post-90s generations. They live in a relatively affluent environment, enjoy a cosmopolitan lifestyle, and receive 9 years of compulsory free education but face a highly competitive education system. Most, even the middle-class interviewees, still live with their parents owing to the high cost of living and have one or no siblings. Central to the moral economy from a son's point of view is how to negotiate a gay identity within heteronormative family life. The major obligation and responsibility of a son is to fulfill the parental (and societal) expectation to embrace neoliberal entrepreneurial masculinity measured by individual competence and material success. The concomitant reduced emphasis on the traditional demand to marry and bear children gives them greater leeway in love and romance, which are seen as private matters, and thus subject to less parental control and intervention. As entrepreneurial masculinity focuses primarily on success in education and work, it tolerates gay masculinity. In contrast to previous generations who viewed homosexuality as "criminal, sick and shameful," the interviewees have a positive gay identity, which they view as an "acceptable and normal form of masculinity," with some even criticizing straight masculinity as "boring, burdensome, and rigid." They find other gay men for love, sex, and friendship through schools/universities, gay venues, dating apps, and social media and enjoy an established gay or *tongzhi* community. Most described themselves as having a good or very good relationship with their parents, especially their mothers, particularly when young. Although most view coming out as the responsible thing to do, they struggled with how to deliver the news to their parents, whom they feared might be upset, creating a moral dilemma that imposed a huge emotional burden. Before coming out, most tried hard to perform a straight role, the emotional toll of which was often difficult to bear.

The parents in this research were born from 1949 to 1967. Most were from a working-class background, although some had experienced upward social mobility. They thus reflected the general developmental pattern of

Hong Kong society, which had a largely working-class population in the 1950s and 1960s but has had a more diverse class mix since the 1970s. They strongly believed that forming a family was a natural way of being a son or daughter. Most of the parent interviewees were unaware that homosexuality was a crime before 1991 but still adhered to the dominant understanding of homosexuality as a disease or abnormal behavior that would bring shame to their family. What then was the pre-disclosure moral economy from the parents' side? They overwhelmingly said that being a good parent meant making sure their children were "normal," that is, followed a conventional heteronormative life course: "obtain a stable job, buy an apartment, get married, and have children." They were particularly concerned with their children's education. They actively nurtured a neoliberal entrepreneurial masculinity emphasizing individual success, competition, and performance. Some of the parents, especially mothers and middle-class interviewees, were more concerned about their sons' psychological rather than material needs, and thus had suspected their sons might be gay. One mother (age 57, freelancer, university-educated) said: "When we were together, like having lunch, shopping, or walking down the street, he never looked at girls." Others, usually fathers, said they had been unaware of their son's sexuality but had noticed they were not the masculine type: "very quiet," "not manly (but not feminine)," an "introvert who likes reading and non-sporty stuff, like painting and music." Their emotional economy was different from their sons'. Most were not overly worried about their sons' sexual orientation, but expressed concern about their studies or health. They all said they had "a good or very good relationship with [their] sons."

6 | THE DISCLOSURE

Studies have revealed a variety of closeting and coming-out strategies in Chinese contexts, for example, marrying a straight woman or lesbian, making such excuses as "no time, no money," lying, leaving home, keeping silent, or living a double life (Choi & Luo, 2016; Kong, 2011; Wang et al., 2009; Zhu, 2017). Coming out or disclosure can be planned (e.g., deciding to come out at a particular moment), unplanned (e.g., being suddenly asked by family members), or tacit ("I know that you know") (Brainer, 2019; Jhang, 2018; Kong, 2023). One tacit disclosure strategy is "coming home," that is, bringing home an intimate partner without disclosing the same-sex relationship, which provides an alternative that goes beyond the coming out/closeting binary (Chou, 2000; Liu & Ding, 2005; Wong, 2007). A new strategy commonly used in mainland China is "coming with," for example, coming out to parents but getting married to a lesbian (Huang & Brouwer, 2018). In contrast to previous gay generations, who tended to adopt closeting strategies or tacit disclosure, most of the gay interviewees in this study had deliberately chosen to come out to their parents (usually their mother) at a particular, planned moment.

Bob, 38, university-educated, is an only son born in 1984 to a lower middle-class family who lives with his mother. He knew he was gay when he was young and described himself as "pretty out" during secondary school and "very out" now that he works with social justice-oriented NGOs. He told his mother when he was 18:

> That night, I was sitting next to her … while she watched television. I was a bit frightened and was waiting for the right time…. Then, I broke the news during a commercial break: "Have you ever thought that your son does not like girls?" … It was a historic moment, and I do not quite remember what I said after…. She was crying and self-blaming … Then, my mom told my dad and other family members. I told my grandma, as we were very close, and she was very supportive.

Matt, 32, was born in 1990 to a middle-class Catholic family. He has a younger twin brother who is also gay. Except for a few years in a university dormitory, he has always lived with his family. Matt came out to his closest classmates in secondary school and was "pretty out" at university:

> I was close to my parents when I was young, much closer to my mom than my dad…. In 2012 … I had just split up with my first boyfriend and was dating another guy…. My mom was always asking me who

> I was seeing, [so] I … decided to come out to her. I told her that I was dating a guy. She [started] crying. You know, [a mother] always knows…. It was difficult for me, as she had always said she expected grandchildren…. After [I came out], we didn't talk about it for half a year. I didn't talk to my dad … [but] we know he knows.

The moral economy of disclosure for sons centers around three aspects of being a son: asserting that coming out is a responsible act, assuring their parents that they have done nothing wrong, and presenting themselves as a "good" homosexual. First, disclosure is an assertion of individuality. In contrast to previous generations, the gay interviewees considered it ethical to tell their parents who they really were even though they might not accept it. They described coming out as "natural," a "responsible act," something one is "obliged to do," and "nothing to be ashamed of." It was seen as a matter of integrity, of being responsible and respectable. Accordingly, they were more inclined to opt for direct, active, overt disclosure than for indirect, passive, covert disclosure. Second, they said they had known they liked boys from an early age, and thus made use of the sexual essentialism argument, that is, that homosexuality is inborn, to help their parents to accept their sexuality and assure them they had done nothing wrong. Third, their disclosure tended to be only partial, as they presented themselves to their parents as "good" (i.e., socially acceptable) gays. This "strategic outness" (Orne, 2011) lies on the good/bad sex hierarchy (Rubin, 1993): a "good" sexual citizen is straight-acting, physically fit, coupled, and middle-class and engages in "socially acceptable" sex, thus positioning the "bad" homosexual as "promiscuous," sick with HIV/AIDS, on drugs, for sale, into public sex, and, accordingly, worthy of shame, regulation, and punishment. For example, the few interviewees who were in a monogamous relationship (e.g., Matt) were happy for that relationship to be "open." The single interviewees dated frequently or dated more than one man at a time and were fine with polyamory (e.g., Bob). Most (e.g., Bob) had engaged in gay sex before the age of 16, the age of consent in Hong Kong. They had a lot of casual sex, and some had even tried out commercial sex, chemsex, bareback (unprotected anal) sex, sex in public, and/or sex with men of a different generation, although all asked the author to conceal this information from their parents, to whom they wished to convey a good homosexual image. Apart from the moral economy, their disclosure was of course emotional, as they had carefully planned their disclosure and worried about what might happen afterward. Despite their concern for their parents' emotions, most said they had felt "a lot lighter" after telling the truth. Johnny's (age 29, freelance writer, bachelor's degree) reaction was typical: "It [had] been years … [and was] a load off my mind…. Once my parents knew, I didn't care [what] others [might] think."

How was the news received by parents? Bob and Matt's mothers give us some answers. Born in 1957, Bob's mother Lynn, who worked at a hair salon but is now retired, received only primary education. She was 45 when Bob, then 18, came out to her while the two watched television:

> He suddenly took my hand, and I felt very scared. My heart was pumping…. Then he told me…. I … felt like I was falling into an abyss. I kept weeping…. I am a very traditional person, and he is my only son. Since I was young, I had had a very clear plan for his life: studying, working, getting married, having children. I would have grandchildren. That is what I had dreamt of…. I told him that it was a very difficult road, [that] people will look down on you [and] not accept … and discriminate against you.

Born in 1956, Matt's mother Samantha received secondary education and was a flight attendant but is now retired. She described the coming-out event:

> He was still in university. Both of them [her two sons] were sitting with me. Matt told me that he liked boys…. It was a shock to me. I [blamed] myself. I thought I had not given them correct information about clear gender roles, [that] I had given [them] too much freedom…. As a Catholic, I could not accept it…. I also thought about the continuation of the blood[line], but because I have two sons, I put all of my expectations onto the younger one…. I later found out that [he] was also gay…. I collapsed…. I

> [worry] about who will take care of them when they grow old [and] how to make their lives easier. What will their employers think of them?

These two cases reveal four typical concerns among parents that relate to their moral economy. The first are ethical concerns, with parents arguing that homosexuality is not normal and that they do not know how to deal with it. The second are concerns over tradition based on the perception that homosexuality means discontinuation of the family bloodline. Such concerns were particularly acute for the parent interviewees with only one son (e.g., Lynn) or with two sons, both of whom are gay (e.g., Samantha). The third are religious concerns, expressed primarily by parents who are Christians, such as Samantha, who said that the Bible clearly states that homosexuality is a sin. The final concerns are social and economic, based on the view that the social stigma against homosexuality remains strong and that gay people are viewed as lesser persons. Parents thus feared that their sons' future would be adversely affected, particularly in terms of career and promotion prospects. These concerns urged parents to rethink the parental role, their parenting style, and the definition of homosexuality (right/wrong). Most were shocked, surprised, or felt that "it had finally happened." After the "bomb" had been dropped, they, usually mothers, were left to deal with the emotions their sons had been dealing with for years.

7 | AFTER DISCLOSURE

After gay sons had disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents, they still had to perform the role of a good son. Further, as disclosure is not a one-off event but an ongoing process, some had to come out repeatedly to various family members. Some simply left their parents alone and behaved as if nothing had happened. Others were more active in involving their parents in their gay lives. For example, Johnny, Jerome (age 26, assistant bank manager, bachelor's degree), and Felix (age 32, master's student) introduced their boyfriends to their parents. Tom (age 42, teacher, bachelor's degree) asked his boyfriend to move in with him and his parents. Bob and Felix invited their parents to participate in gay events (e.g., PinkDot) or gay NGOs (e.g., Gay Harmony). Johnny and Harry (age 36, lawyer, master's degree) even invited their parents to attend their same-sex weddings overseas, and Danny (age 30, therapist, master's degree) invited his parents to his same-sex marriage celebration in Hong Kong. Although some did not discuss their sexuality with their parents after coming out, they checked in with them from time to time. Others were very happy that their parents had accepted their sexuality. None seemed to regret coming out to them.

What did the act of disclosure mean for parents? The two mothers' narratives provide some hints. For Lynn, it took several months to accept her son:

> He asked me "why don't you write down what you [would] wish [for] if the world was to end tomorrow?" … I wrote down, "If tomorrow were the end of the world, I [would] wish [for] you [to] get married and have children [so] I can have grandchildren." … When he learnt about my wish, he said, "if this is what you want, in this moment, I will promise you [that] I will get married and have children, but I will never be happy for the rest of my life." When I heard this, I thought I would be happy but … he would be unhappy…. I then realized that I could not be that selfish.

When Samantha learned that her second son was also gay, she collapsed. She complained that her sons did not talk to their father, leaving her to deal with the emotional toll. Unable to cope, she flew to Taiwan to calm herself down and ended up staying for several months.

> It was a major blow to me [to] learn that both my sons were gay. I will not have grandchildren. I am worried about their future. I did not talk to my husband. My sons kind of expected me to tell [him]. But they know he knows, and he knows they know he knows…. I needed a clear mind [so] I escaped

> and went to Taiwan for a couple of months. I stayed with a friend … and watched television [programs] about *tongzhi* and learnt a lot about homosexuality.

Many of the parents, like these two mothers, took a long time to accept their sons' sexuality. They had to reconstruct their parental identity, revise their parenting strategy, and redefine homosexuality by undergoing three shifts in terms of moral economy. First, most had to make a moral decision to make things "right." Most, especially the mothers, initially blamed themselves for (1) not giving their sons enough attention or appropriate gender socialization when they were young; (2) focusing too much on work and thus not spending enough time with their children to ensure that "normal" and clear gender roles were in place; or (3) giving them too much freedom. They then began to rationalize—unsurprisingly, with their gay sons' backing—by arguing for sexual essentialism: if homosexuality is an inborn trait, then no one should be held responsible for it. They began to search for evidence in books or on the internet (e.g., Samantha) to support the argument that homosexuality is part of a person's genetic makeup and to look for other family members who happened to be gay or lesbian to justify the view that their sons had a hereditary predisposition to homosexuality. Even the few who thought homosexuality might be the result of peer influence believed that once formed, it could not be changed. Second, parents made a moral decision to change their parenting strategy by redefining happiness. Previously, they had held the normative idea that the heteronormative life course was the only route to happiness. Now, they began to accept that queer difference could be a source of happiness (e.g., Lynn). In redefining happiness, they changed from parent-oriented concern over the lack of grandchildren, and hence no continuation of the family bloodline, to child-oriented concern, worrying that their sons would grow old alone and unhappy, suffer social stigma, have poor career prospects and limited social mobility, and be rejected by society. Finally, the parents redrew the good sex/bad sex binary to include homosexuality within the "charmed circle" (Rubin, 1993), although they tended to qualify it in conformity to the parameters of "good" sex. Their sons might be gay, but they conformed to societal norms in terms of gender performance (e.g., one father [age 55, secondary-educated, manual worker] said, "he is not manly but is not feminine … he never cross dresses … he is just a gentle kind of guy"), health (e.g., another father [age 60, secondary-educated, retired] said, "he knows about safety and won't be irresponsible"), relationships (e.g., one mother [age 67, tertiary-educated, retired] said, "he is in a lovely, decent, and monogamous relationship"), and sexual standards (e.g., another father (age 61, secondary-educated, IT director] said, "I don't think he messes around … he is not promiscuous"). This image of the "good homosexual" was also reinforced by their gay sons. The emotional economy plays out both during and after disclosure, as all of these moral decisions require considerable emotional investment. Most mothers cried during the interviews while recounting their sons' coming-out stories, even though they had occurred many years ago. Mothers in particular bear a heavy emotional burden, often unnoticed by their partners or sons.

8 | THE FORMATION OF NEW FAMILY IDENTITIES

The order in which a gay son comes out to his family is usually first to his siblings (if any) and/or mother and then to his father and grandparents. The latter are usually the last to know because they are believed to be patriarchal and homophobic (Ben-Ari, 1995; Scherrer, 2010; Svab & Kuhar, 2014). This pattern was also reflected in this research, as fewer fathers (n = 6) than mothers (n = 14) were willing to be interviewed. After a son comes out, the order in which his parents (usually his mother) convey the news to others is generally spouse first, then siblings, and then relatives with known out gay or lesbian children. Their own parents are usually the last to know, if they are told at all. Family members can act as allies (e.g., helping other family members to accept the gay family member), a shield (e.g., an elder brother gets married, thus reducing the pressure on the gay brother to do so), or a threat (e.g., arranging a blind date with a member of the opposite sex for the gay family member) (Jhang, 2018; Rothblum, 2011; Scherrer, 2010).

Once disclosure has occurred, the process is seen as a "becoming" process of acquiring new family identities (Grafsky, 2014), which takes three forms. It may lead to full acceptance, an "LGBTQ or *tongzhi* family," as it did in

Bob's case, with the gay son integrating his natal family into his *tongzhi*/queer life (see Fields (2001) and Broad (2011) for a discussion of PFLAG in the U.S. and Wei and Yan (2021) of PFLAG in China). Most often, however, it results in a "transparent closet," with family members never discussing the son's sexual orientation, or "family closet," as it did in Matt's case, with parents helping their son to hide his sexuality from broader kinship networks, neighbors, friends, and colleagues (Svab & Kuhar, 2014). In any case, the emotional and moral economies of the dyadic relationships within families are affected.

9 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A son's sexual orientation disclosure is a defining moment that changes family dynamics. The sons in this study tried hard to negotiate a gay identity within heteronormative family life before, during, and after their disclosure. They did so by attempting to accomplish neoliberal entrepreneurial masculinity, whose greater emphasis on education and career success than on marriage and children gave them leeway to focus on the former and postpone or reject the latter. Some, especially middle-class sons, tried hard at school or work to prove that they are good citizens (i.e., achieve the masculine ideal) to compensate for being unable to fulfill the expectation that they marry and have children. In any case, they insisted that coming out is a responsible act and tried to maintain their former relationship with their parents. Disclosure was never complete, however, as they felt they still had to play the good gay card. Gay masculinity is thus subsumed under neoliberal entrepreneurial masculinity and has to take a normative form of sexual citizenship. Nevertheless, they generally felt better after the disclosure, as they no longer had to hide their emotions. Some even became closer to their parents, as they felt they now knew each other better.

Pre-disclosure, parents had usually focused on their sons' studies (on whether they could achieve entrepreneurial masculinity) and physical health and had generally been unaware of or paid little attention to their sexuality, although some (mainly mothers or middle-class parents) had had suspicions, particularly those who focused more on the psychological rather than material needs of their sons. The disclosure then forced considerable change in parents' identity, parenting style, and understanding of homosexuality: from self-blame to "there is no one to blame"; from a focus on one's own happiness to concern over one's children's happiness; and from the belief that homosexuality is bad to the belief that their own son is a good homosexual. They still faced a moral dilemma, however, over whether to disclose their son's homosexuality to siblings, relatives, friends, and colleagues. The working-class parents and fathers tended not to integrate too much into their sons' gay life, preferring to live in a "transparent closet" or "family closet."

Using the doing family and life course approaches to understand gay sons' disclosure of their sexual orientation to their parents, this paper makes two important contributions. The first is empirical. The paper examines the changing meanings of family practices and homosexuality in Hong Kong over the past few decades. Instead of presenting just one side of the coming-out story, it provides both sides, thus demonstrating that coming out is both an individual and relational act. Instead of viewing family as an institution and discussing changes in its structure, size, and function, the paper views the family as a series of practices, and coming out as an ongoing family practice. Central to the social change in family practices is a shift in moral and emotional economies, as reflected in the gay interviewees and their parents. Heteronormative family life, as part of the moral economy of family life, has been challenged, with parents forced to admit or even accept the family's queer component. However, as queer theory would argue, both gay sons and their parents have worked hard to accomplish a version of sexual normativity that views homosexuality as inborn and thus reinforces the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary and the notion of homosexuals as a minority group, leaving heteronormativity intact (Stein & Plummer, 1994). Such sexual normativity also conforms to the "good homosexual" image. They have redrawn the line between "good" and "bad" sexuality by including homosexuality in the former but only on condition that it affirms a heteronormative and homonormative conception of normalcy (e.g., cis-gender performance, monogamy, in a relationship), leaving the sex hierarchy (Rubin, 1993) unquestioned (see also Fields, 2001). Moreover, the emotional burden of the closet, as part of the emotional economy of family life, has shifted from gay sons to their parents, especially mothers, who have to devote considerable emotional effort

to dealing with their sons' homosexuality and adjusting themselves to the new family secret. Regardless of who is doing the emotional labor, however, sexual norms and sexual stigma persist, with rigid and "normal" gender/sexual roles and orders remaining firmly in place. Disclosure has thus become a site of negotiation of the meaning of male identity, parenthood, and homosexuality, leading to the formation of new family forms (e.g., LGBTQ/*tongzhi* family, transparent closet, family closet).

The paper's second contribution is theoretical. The interviewees' biographies exemplify how social actors "do" family in the life course approach. Coming out to one's family has always been difficult in most places across the globe, and there are many similarities and differences between the Western and Chinese experiences. Although it is necessary to develop a culturally specific discourse to understand coming out in the Chinese context, one should be mindful not to essentialize Chinese (or Western) cultures and fall into a dualistic West/East binary (Chou, 2000; for a critique, see Liu & Ding, 2005; Wong, 2007). However, two features seem to be distinct to the Hong Kong/Chinese context: first, the close relationship between the self and one's family, evidenced by the difficulty of leaving the collectivity of the natal family behind and the importance of maintaining strong bonds of reciprocal support with parents into adulthood (see also Brainer, 2019; Wei & Yan, 2021), and, second, the unanimous agreement on the need to accomplish neoliberal entrepreneurial masculinity in post-colonial, neo-liberal Hong Kong. Coming out should be seen as a reconciliation with family relations, and thus better understood as relational politics rather than identity politics, as usually assumed in the Western context. The Chinese individual is a relational self within a structured, socially reciprocal, and hierarchically ranked web of interpersonal relations with specific roles, duties, and obligations (Yan, 2016). Such a conceptualization of the individual consists of the small or individual self, centered on personal desires and interests, and the great or relational self, which bears the interests of a collectivity such as the family. Coming-out practices thus carry a burden, exemplified by the discrepancy between the small and great self, the individual and relational self, and individuality and collectivity and manifested in the moral and emotional economies of family life. Families are thus the main site of relational politics in identity formation. Accordingly, this paper theorizes coming-out strategies as both identity politics and relational politics without falling into the Western/Chinese binary. It offers new insights that revitalize the coming-out debate and a new lens for understanding the relational self within family life and social change in contemporary societies.

In addition to making these contributions, the paper also suggests several areas of future study that would contribute to a fuller examination of the family dynamics surrounding sexual orientation disclosure. First, the paper is based on a small, self-selected sample comprising only gay men who had come out to their parents and those of their parents who were willing to be interviewed. Hence, neither group is representative of the wider population. Moreover, owing to limitations of space, an overall picture of family dynamics between gay sons and their parents is provided without devoting too much discussion to the negotiation process and the internal differences among the sample (e.g., class differences among the gay son and parent generations, different reactions among parents). More specifically, mainly the voice of two mothers is reported. The negotiation process, class differences, and the voice of other family members—fathers, siblings, and grandparents—should be captured more fully in future. Second, only gay men born after the 1980s were selected. However, the coming-out process, disclosure, and family reactions should be understood in a generational context, as different generations likely have different coming-out strategies, and their families are likely to react in different ways. These differences should thus be understood in a broader social context. Third, this research focuses on gay men. The parents of other sexual minorities on the LBTQ spectrum should be examined to elucidate the similarities and differences in the moral and emotional economies of family life. Finally, this research could be extended to other Chinese or Asian societies where families play a vital role in the self-making process of queer generation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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ENDNOTES

[1] One study is particularly worthy of mention here. Employing a similar "doing family" approach, Jackson and Ho (2020) compare and contrast mother-and-daughter relationships in Hong Kong and Britain, albeit largely in a heterosexual context.

[2] The political economy (e.g., property inheritance) of family life was seldom discussed in the interviews, probably because same-sex marriage is not recognized in Hong Kong, and the parents in this study did not see the introduction of a new family member (if their son married another man) as a threat to family inheritance.

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