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Chinese gay men’s coming out narratives: Connecting social relationship to co-cultural theory

Bijie Bie and Lu Tang

College of Communication and Information Sciences, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA; Department of Communication Studies, College of Communication and Information Sciences, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA

ABSTRACT

Theorizing the intersection of queer identity and culture values, this study examines Chinese gay men’s coming-out experiences through a narrative analysis of 60 self-reported stories online. It finds that Chinese gay men’s decision to come out, their communication orientations, and the outcomes of their coming out are influenced by traditional Chinese cultural values such as family, marriage, and duty. Assertive assimilation, assertive accommodation, and nonassertive accommodation are the most used communication orientations. The study adds to co-cultural theory by demonstrating that types of social relationships affect the communication orientations adopted, at least in the context of China.

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On July 15, 2012, Luo Honglin, a 31-year-old newlywed, jumped out of a window of her 13th-floor apartment (“Homowife committed suicide”, 2012). The day before her suicide, her husband came out to her by publishing a post on Sina Weibo, a Chinese social media site: “Teacher Luo, Come on. I am sorry. I am gay. I pretended to be bisexual. I lied to you and married you to cover myself. I am sorry.” Luo Honglin was one of China’s 16 million tongqi or homowives,1 i.e., heterosexual women married to gay men (Liu & Lu, 2005).

According to Li (1998), one of China’s best-known sexologists, the most significant difference between Western and Chinese gay men is that 90% of the gay men in China stay in the closet their entire lives and eventually enter opposite-sex marriages, while this figure is much lower in the West. Chinese gay men face unique cultural and social pressures (Liu & Lu, 2005). Simply put, all men in China are expected to marry the opposite sex and produce heirs (Law, 2012; Li, 1998). Those who fail to fulfill this duty will inevitably be socially marginalized, regardless of their sexual orientation. Hence, most gay men in China choose to marry heterosexual women (Law, 2012; Li, 1998). Coming out, therefore, is especially difficult for them.

A 2013 special issue of the Journal of International and Intercultural Communication highlights the intersection of queer identity and culture values and calls for the study of LGBTQ communities in non-Western contexts. In their dialogue, Aiello et al. (2013) argued that LGBTQ issues were culturally specific and should be studied as such. Similarly, Chávez (2013) pointed out, “A significant body of queer scholarship still
emphasizes the United States and other western countries” (p. 86) and contended that intercultural communication scholars need to explore queer politics and theory within different cultural contexts. While many previous studies have attempted to address the experiences of coming out, most are still Western focused. This creates the exigency of understanding the experiences of non-Western populations (Wong & Tang, 2004). In particular, Liu (2010) argued that the queer scholarship needs an account of China, since China provides an important and unique sociopolitical context for studying gender and sexuality.

In response to the special issue’s call, the current study examines the coming-out experiences of Chinese gay men anchored in the intersectionality of national identity, gender identity, and gay identity. Co-cultural theory (CT; Orbe, 1998a, 1998b) is adopted as the theoretical foundation, as it focuses on the adaptation and adjustment in intercultural communication, and has been extensively used in studying the communication between underprivileged and dominant groups in society. The narrative approach is used as the primary analytical tool, as it is especially useful for studying the life experiences of members of minority groups (Manning, 2015). Our study analyzes Chinese gay men’s stories about coming out and finds that their co-cultural status as undutiful sons who cannot get married affects whether and how they choose to come out, as well as how their disclosures are received. Furthermore, gay men’s coming-out communication with their parents, relatives, friends, and homowives is largely influenced by these gay men’s respective social roles as sons, brothers, friends, and husbands as specified by the Chinese culture. Theoretically, the current study adds to the co-cultural theory by demonstrating how interpersonal relationships influence the communication orientations of co-cultural group members. Practically, it sheds light on the special challenges Chinese gay men face in asserting their sexual orientation, negotiating their identity, and maintaining their social relationships, which is the first step in enabling them to overcome cultural barriers to gain acceptance and accommodation from the Chinese society.

**Literature review**

**Homosexuality in China: A historical and cultural context**

Historically, male homosexuality was considered a harmless hobby among Chinese aristocrats and literati and largely tolerated (Liu & Lu, 2005). However, most gay men in ancient China were bisexuals married to heterosexual women since Confucianism dictates that a person’s primary duty is to beget children (Liu & Lu, 2005). During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), homophobic sentiments emerged with the arrival of Catholic missionaries from Europe (Hinsch, 1990). The tolerance toward male homosexuality finally disappeared after 1949 when same-sex relationships were outlawed as part of the corrupted capitalist lifestyle (Li, 1998). This law was abolished in the 1990s, but homosexuality was still officially considered a mental illness until 2001 (Lau, 2010). Since then, due to the tireless efforts of the Chinese gay community, including LGBTQ rights activists and advocacy groups such as the China chapter of Parents, Friends and Family of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), Chinese society’s attitudes toward homosexuality have begun to change (Lau, 2010). The first Chinese LGBT hotline was opened in 1997, and the first Chinese LGBT website (aibai.com) was launched in 1999.
Today, the Chinese society as a whole still holds a conflicted view toward homosexuality. At the policy level, the government practices a “Three No’s” policy toward homosexuality: “not encouraging (bu zhichi), not discouraging (bu fandui), and not promoting (bu tichang)” (Hung, 2011, p. 379). Consequently, gay and lesbian issues are rarely discussed in public by either Chinese authorities or state-controlled media (Lau, 2010). At the societal level, the public also has an ambivalent attitude toward homosexuality. A 2007 national phone survey conducted in large and medium-sized cities in China found that about 70 percent of the respondents said homosexuality was wrong or somewhat wrong and same-sex marriage should be illegal. However, 91 percent of the respondents supported equal employment rights for gay men and lesbians and more than 60 percent said they would make friends with gay men or lesbians (Li, 2011).

Despite Chinese society’s increasing tolerance toward homosexuality, gay men face special challenges due to the lack of legal recognition and protection as well as cultural pressures from immediate family members, relatives, work, and the community (Lau, 2010). Compared with their Western counterparts, Chinese men are under much more familial pressure to marry the opposite sex and produce heirs (Li, 1998). As a result, most Chinese gay men hide their sexual orientations and marry heterosexual women to have children (Li, 1998). In recent years, façade marriages (xinghun)—in which a gay man marries a lesbian so that they will appear to be a normal married couple—have started to appear (Bergstrøm, 2014). The two parties in a façade marriage have a clear understanding that they do not have any marital responsibilities to each other besides appearing as a couple in front of each other’s parents and family members on holidays and special occasions. However, such an arrangement usually does not involve having children. As a result, opposite-sex marriage is still the route chosen by most gay men in China (Bergstrøm, 2014). It is within this historical and cultural context that we study the coming out narratives of Chinese gay men.

**Culture and the decision to come out**

Coming out is the process through which a person becomes aware of their sexual orientation and starts to communicate the said orientation to others (Rasmussen, 2004). Aspects influencing one’s decision to come out include individual level factors (e.g., outness), interpersonal level factors (e.g., anticipated support), and contextual level factors (family, workplace, and other contexts; Sabat, Trump, & King, 2014).

Recently, researchers have documented how gay men’s decision to come out is influenced by local cultural values. They argue that the idea of coming out reflects Western individualistic understanding of selfhood but fails to recognize the importance of relational selfhood and family obligations essential in Confucian cultures (e.g., Tan, 2011; Wang, Bih, & Brennan, 2009; Wong & Tang, 2004). For instance, Wang et al. (2009) found that the emphasis on maintaining harmony in interpersonal relations plays a central role in Taiwanese gay men’s coming-out decision-making and strategies. Wong and Tang (2004) found that gay men in Hong Kong usually would not come out to their parents, which they attributed to Chinese culture’s emphasis on family continuity. Moreover, Tan (2011) found that Chinese gay men in Singapore generally considered sex a taboo topic and were reluctant to talk about their sexual orientation with their parents. All these factors become cultural barriers to gay men’s coming out in different Confucian
societies. The studies cited above were conducted in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore; yet very little is known about the coming-out decision making in mainland China, where people hold a stronger bias against homosexuality because of its unique social, cultural, and historical background (Wang et al., 2009). Hence, we ask the first research question (RQ1):

**RQ1: How does culture affect Chinese gay men’s decision to come out?**

**Coming out as co-cultural communication**

Coming out is a form of co-cultural communication. The idea of co-cultural groups can be traced back to muted group theory, which posits that dominant groups in society have the ability to create language to define their own experiences, while marginal groups are voiceless and muted (Kramarae, 1981). Another theoretical precursor of CT is the standpoint theory (Harding, 1991), which argues that individuals’ understanding of the world depends on the position they occupy in society. According to CT, a co-cultural group is one that is traditionally marginalized and disadvantaged. Co-cultural group members are often muted (Orbe, 1998a). Co-cultural communication refers to the “interactions among underrepresented and dominant group members” (Orbe, 1998b, p. 3). In communicating with dominant group members, co-cultural group members could adopt different communication orientations.

Preferred outcome and communication approach are the most critical components of communication orientations (Orbe, 1998b). CT proposes three preferred outcomes in co-cultural communication process: assimilation (e.g., becoming integrated into mainstream culture), accommodation (gaining acceptance and space in a society and achieving cultural pluralism without hierarchy), or separation (maintaining a culturally distinct identity in intercultural interactions; Orbe, 1998b). One of the following three communication approaches is used when a co-cultural group member presents himself to the dominant culture: nonassertive (when individuals are constrained and nonconfrontational, putting the needs of others first to avoid conflicts), assertive (when individuals express feelings, ideas, and rights in ways that consider the needs of themselves and others), or aggressive (when individuals express feelings, ideas, and rights in ways that ignore the needs of others). In the end, CT identifies nine communication orientations with different combinations of preferred outcomes and communication approaches: nonassertive assimilation, assertive assimilation, aggressive assimilation, nonassertive accommodation, assertive accommodation, aggressive accommodation, nonassertive separation, assertive separation, and aggressive separation (Orbe, 1998b). Each communication orientation is typically associated with a set of communication practices.

CT is particularly useful in studying LGBTQ population’s communication with heterosexual individuals (Howard, 2012). When certain outcomes are expected (e.g., gaining acceptance) and specific discourse strategies are used, such an experience clearly demonstrates all of the fundamental elements of co-cultural communication. Therefore, CT is particularly suitable for studying the “what” and “how” of this phenomenological process. Camara, Katznelson, Hildebrandt-Sterling, and Parker (2012) investigated the narratives of gay men and lesbians about discriminatory interpersonal interactions and found that the most frequently used communication orientations are: assertive accommodation, nonassertive assimilation, and nonassertive separation. Similarly, Anderson and
Giovanini (2009) examined gay and lesbian college instructors’ identity disclosure and found that many would take the assimilation orientation by passing as straight.

According to CT, co-cultural group members’ choice of communication orientations is affected by their personal experience, communicative capabilities, situational factors that affect power relations, and predicted costs and rewards (Orbe, 1998a). In examining coming out as a form of co-cultural communication, we argue that the co-cultural group member’s (in this case, a gay man) communication orientation is also influenced by his need to manage social relationship in a culturally appropriate manner, a factor thus far missing from existing research on coming out (Manning, 2014, 2015). Hence Chinese gay men’s coming-out communication practices should be understood within the country’s distinctive social relation patterns.

The Chinese culture is collectivist, masculine, and high in power distance as well as uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), which creates a set of strict rules and expectations for social interactions. First, within its highly collectivist culture, family interests are valued above individual interests. In addition, the Chinese culture is high in power distance, which creates a highly hierarchical structure of social relationships. At the center of the traditional Chinese culture is the Confucian principle of three Cardinal Guides (san gang) for the relationship between father and son, ruler and subject, and husband and wife. In addition, Confucius also dictates the relationship between older brother and younger brother, as well as the relationship between friends. The first four relationships are hierarchical. The sovereign, father, husband, and elders are superior and powerful, while the subject, son, wife, and younger siblings are expected to act in a submissive way following the principles of loyalty, filial piety, harmony, and obedience, respectively. Only the relationship between friends is horizontal, and an attitude of mutual trust/honesty is considered appropriate between them. An individual’s failure to behave in a culturally appropriate manner may cause interpersonal tensions (Hwang, 1999). Being highly masculine, the Chinese culture has very different expectations for men and women. A virtuous woman is expected to demonstrate obedience to her father and husband.

The last three decades of modernization and Western influences have left their imprints on traditional Chinese values. Individualism has been on the rise, and the younger generations have become more willing to assert their opinions and feelings (Faure & Fang, 2008). Traditional family values and structures as a model for structuring social relationships are also challenged (Faure & Fang, 2008). For instance, in big cities, it is no longer a scandal if a couple chooses not to have children or have children at a later stage in life. Even in traditional families, grown-up children are more likely to take control of family matters and challenge their parents.

To further investigate how the expectations of proper social relationships in China might affect gay men’s communication orientation in coming out, we ask RQ2:

RQ2: How does culture affect the communication orientation in Chinese gay men’s coming out?

**Culture and the reception of coming out**

Paradoxically, while the collectivist Chinese culture discourages gay men from expressing their sexual orientations, it helps them gain acceptance when they do decide to come out.
Li and Orleans (2001) found that the Chinese culture’s emphasis on family could help resolve conflicts between gay men and their families, because “[a]lthough it is the responsibility of all members to bring honor to the family, the family does not abandon a member who brings disgrace” (p. 75). A 2007 national phone survey found that three quarters of respondents said they would choose to “tolerate” a gay family member who came out (Li, 2011). In order to systematically understand the relationship between Chinese culture and how gay men’s coming out is received, we ask RQ3:

RQ3: How does culture affect the outcome of Chinese gay men’s coming out?

Method

Data collection

In 2012, PFLAG China held a “My Coming-Out Story” essay contest to provide an opportunity for gay men and lesbians to share their coming-out experiences. The competition was open not only to gay men and lesbians, but also to their colleagues, classmates, friends, and parents. Winners were awarded cash prizes and certificates of merit. Submissions were then published on the official blog of PFLAG China. For the purpose of this study, all stories written by gay men were downloaded (n = 60) and analyzed. Each story was assigned an ID, and each narrator was given a pseudonym.

Data analysis

We conducted a narrative analysis of the 60 stories. Narrative analysis is a qualitative research method focusing on the verbal expression of human experience (Smith, 2000). Analysis of individual narratives allows researchers to make sense of a narrator’s subjective experience, as well as social roles, social structures, and cultural norms (Smith, 2000). Put together, a group of narratives can serve as a metastory that allows the researcher to gain broader insight into “a coherent world within which social action occurs” (Berdajes & Berdayes, 1998, p. 109).

Our data analysis was conducted in three phases. First, we read all the stories multiple times in order to obtain a general idea of story lines, backgrounds, and sociocultural meanings of events. We focused on how gay men disclosed their sexual orientation to their families, friends, and acquaintances. In the second round of reading, special attention was paid to the following three aspects of the stories: how narrators made the decision to come out, what communication strategies were used, and what were the outcomes of the coming-out communication. Finally, we used constant comparison method to identify recurring themes and subthemes in the three aspects identified above (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Following the suggestion of Twinn (1998), we conducted the analysis in Chinese to capture the full richness and complexity of the data. This technique was especially useful for studying the narrators’ original languages about their sexual orientation and details of how coming-out stories were told in different scenarios. Sample quotations were later translated into English for the purpose of this paper. Twenty-five stories were quoted to represent a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

The data analysis and translation were conducted by the two authors of the article. Both authors have been studying homosexuality in China from a cultural perspective and have
read related English- and Chinese-language literature extensively, even though they are not members of the LGBTQ community. Both authors are Chinese nationals who grew up in China and currently live in the U.S., and have intimate knowledge of the Chinese culture. To ensure the validity of the interpretation of the stories, meanings and symbolism, we used the “peer debriefing” approach (Marshall & Rossman, 2010, p. 40) and invited several critical scholars who are themselves members of the LGBTQ community and deeply invested in LGBTQ research to critique two earlier drafts of this paper. They are university faculty members in the U.S. and have published extensively on topics related to gender, sexuality, queer theory and identity. The data and the analysis were also discussed at a regional research panel focusing on the topic of diversity as well as a national conference. Feedbacks from peers were incorporated into our interpretation of the data. The second author has been using English as the primary working language for 18 years and was responsible for translating the quotes from Chinese into English.

Results

The results are organized around the three RQs: (a) how culture affects the decision to come out, (b) how culture influences the communication orientation of gay men’s coming out, and (c) how culture impacts the relational outcomes of coming-out communication.

Role of culture in the decision to come out

Culture was the predominant factor mentioned by narrators in describing how they decided to come out. The notion that being gay is contrary to Chinese cultural expectations of marriage and family responsibility was present in a large percentage of the stories. Narrators mostly attributed the difficulty of coming out to social pressure and familial pressure. Ling said:

> Every gay man faces huge social pressure, and marriage is an unavoidable problem. As I get older, this pressure intensifies. Many gay men marry women because they cannot bear the pressure; only a small number choose to come out. After all, coming out takes courage; not everyone can do it. (No. 33)

Several narrators commented specifically on the difference between Chinese and Western cultures in discussing the difficulty of coming out. For instance, Hui said, “Western culture values individual independence and personal freedom, while traditional Chinese culture places great emphasis on family values and collectivism” (No. 60).

The Chinese culture’s emphasis on family and marriage was not only the primary reason that gay men chose to stay in the closet, but also the key incentive for their eventual coming out. Many narrators chose to come out to avoid the tragedy of entering heterosexual marriages. So their coming-out communication was centered on telling their parents that they would not and could not marry a woman. In some instances, gay men’s decision to come out was driven by a sense of morality toward the women whom they would eventually marry. According to Cheng, a 24-year-old software engineer in Shanghai, one of the two reasons for his coming out was to avoid marrying a woman. He said, “Don’t marry a
woman if you are gay; it is immoral because you cannot give her happiness” (No. 26). Similarly, Lun also reported that coming out was his only choice because he thought it was too “selfish and cruel” to “make a woman suffer emotional abuse at the hands of a gay husband” (No. 59). For thousands of years, Chinese gay men have been pursuing same-sex relationships while maintaining heterosexual marriages, because traditional Chinese culture values the happiness of men more than that of women. Hence, today Chinese gay men’s concern about the happiness of their potential homowives, as reflected in the quotes above, is likely to have come from the influence of Western culture, which acknowledges women’s rights for happiness and fulfillment. Chinese culture not only influenced gay men’s decisions to come out, but also affected their communication orientations.

Role of culture in selecting communication orientations

Our analysis indicates that Chinese gay men demonstrated different communication orientations when coming out to different types of relational partners—parents, peers, and homowives—and their choice of orientation was determined by the rules about proper behavior in dealing with different social relations as dictated by the Chinese culture.

Coming out to parents

Coming out to parents, grandparents, and senior relatives was deemed most difficult yet most important. Wen, 28, summarized: “There are many different situations involving coming out: to classmates, to friends, to colleagues, to family members. Coming out to parents is most difficult and complex” (No. 6). As a result, gay men often chose to come out to their parents last. Guo, who was in his late 30s, shared:

When I discovered my true identity, I didn’t know how to tell my parents. I told all my teachers, classmates, and friends, but it was so hard to tell my parents … especially my dad. He loved me so much. (No. 44)

In coming out to their parents and grandparents, gay men often demonstrated assertive communication. Depending on whether they perceived full embracement or merely tolerance of their sexual orientation as the realistic outcome of their coming out, gay men used either assertive accommodation or assertive assimilation orientation.

Assertive assimilation orientation is characterized by the downplay of differences between the co-culture and the dominant culture, and an emphasis of co-cultural group members’ good qualities through direct and expressive communication (Orbe & Spellers, 2005). A few communication practices associated with this orientation originally identified in CT were observed in the stories, including extensive preparation and bargaining. Since coming out to one’s parents or grandparents was most difficult, many gay men did extensive groundwork prior to coming out. Qin recalled his preparation by stating: “I designed a ‘Grand and Formal’ coming out. I downloaded many materials, printed them out, and prepared for questions that they might ask” (No. 5). Bargaining is used when co-cultural and dominant group members negotiate with each other to reach an agreement to cover up or ignore cultural differences. Several gay men disclosed that their parents would only tolerate their sexual orientation on the condition that they
would conform to Chinese cultural norms of having a heterosexual marriage and biological children. Kun’s parents had three daughters before giving birth to him, the only son and the only hope of the family. He felt extremely guilty in depriving his parents of the opportunity to see him marrying a woman and having a son of his own. Thus, coming out to his parents involved prolonged negotiation between him and his parents about what he needed to do to be accepted. In the end, they reached the agreement that the family would accept him if he entered a façade marriage with a lesbian and had a child through surrogacy (No. 55). In doing so, his family reached a compromise between preserving the family’s face and accepting their son’s sexual orientation.

Assertive accommodation orientation refers to balancing the needs of both co-cultural and dominant group members with the goal of seeking complete acceptance and changing social structures (Orbe & Spellers, 2005). Narrators used several strategies typically associated with this orientation, including communicating self, utilizing liaisons, and educating others (Orbe & Spellers, 2005). Communicating self refers to the expression of one’s identity in a truthful and open way. Feng described his coming out: “At the end of that year, I knelt down before my parents and explained to them who I really was. I told them my stories, expressed the pressure I felt, and shared my suffering” (No. 36). By kneeling down to his parents, Feng dutifully followed the hierarchical father-son relationship prescribed in traditional Chinese culture; at the same time, he adopted the Western practice of expressing his feelings and thoughts to his parents. Sometimes gay men used an intergroup networking strategy and introduced their parents to their gay friends before coming out so that the former would become comfortable with the idea of homosexuality. In talking about his coming out, which took 5 years of preparation, Ding said, “I brought my gay friends home so that my parents could get to know them…. My mother said to me that she didn’t think being gay was a big deal and all my gay friends were lovely” (No. 52). Utilizing liaisons was another commonly used communication practice. Many narrators discussed how they confided in their family members who would be more understanding and supportive, and then asked for their help when eventually coming out to parents. Ling said:

My sister was very open-minded. Last winter when we were chatting online, she asked about the relationship between my boyfriend and me. So I spilled the beans to her. She took it quite well. She promised to help me persuade our parents to accept me. (No. 33)

Taking such an indirect route is also consistent with Chinese culture’s emphasis on family and harmony, since recruiting the help of siblings allowed these gay men to avoid embarrassing confrontations with their parents while gaining their acceptance. Finally, gay men often educated their parents about what it meant to be gay. Liang used gay movies to teach his parents: “I introduced them to movies such as Brokeback Mountain and The Wedding Banquet, and mentioned how homosexuality is accepted in other countries” (No. 43). This strategy is especially useful in the Chinese context as the older generation has very little knowledge about what it means to be gay and often misunderstands homosexuality as a mental illness.

**Coming out to peers**

Compared with begging for or hoping for accommodation in coming out to parents, gay men expected and demanded accommodation and full acceptance in coming out their
peers, such as siblings, friends, classmates, and co-workers. In fact, in quite a few stories, narrators considered the response of peers as a test of friendship. Peng asked rhetorically, “If your friends cannot even accept the fact that you are gay, are they your true friends?” (No. 12).

When coming out to peers, gay men were most likely to use assertive or nonassertive communication strategies with the goal of seeking accommodation. Nonassertive accommodation orientation is usually associated with using subtle communication to increase visibility and dispel stereotypes (Orbe & Spellers, 2005). To many gay men included in this study, the word “gay” (tongxinglian) was associated with too many negative stereotypes and thus needed to be avoided. So some came out to their peers by saying, “I like men.” Others chose to use the English word rather than the Chinese word. Shun talked about how he came out to his best friend when they were in middle school:

I summoned up all my courage and told her I was G-A-Y. I was not brave at all and didn’t even dare to pronounce the word gay. Her English was not very good and she asked me what gay meant. I told her to look it up in a dictionary. (No. 27)

More often, gay men demonstrated the assertive accommodation orientation by coming out directly. For instance, Jing took his boyfriend to the store where he worked and introduced him to his co-workers. He said, “I told them that he was my boyfriend. Now everybody in the store knew that I had a boyfriend” (No. 32).

However, gay men used aggressive strategies to demand accommodation or to seek separation when they were provoked. In such situations, they often came out with aggression and even violence in defiance. Hai talked about how his roommates were rubbernecking when his boyfriend accompanied him to his college dormitory to pick up his belongings when they decided to move in together. He got extremely annoyed because of this: “I could not bear it after a while and started to curse them loudly. I called them sons of bitches and told them I was proud to be gay.” He continued: “I said a lot. I was totally done with them. I cursed them and they didn’t dare say a word” (No. 8).

**Coming out to female heterosexual partners**

Gay men came out to their heterosexual female partners for a number of reasons. Sometimes, they wanted to end the relationship. Other times, gay men came out to their homewives to demand the latter to turn a blind eye to their romantic relationships with other men. For these men, keeping the appearance of a heterosexual marriage would allow them to sustain the appearance of heteronormality to society.

Compared with coming out to parents and peers, coming out to heterosexual female partners did not involve one or two dominant strategies. Instead, gay men in these stories used a variety of approaches in revealing their sexual orientation to female partners. Aggressive separation approach was used when gay men considered themselves to be the victim and their wives the source of their suffering. Their communication strategies often included attacks and accusations (Orbe & Spellers, 2005). Guang had been married for 5 years when he finally came out to his wife. He sensed that his wife knew he was having an affair with a man. One day, they had an argument, and the wife said, “You are just afraid I am going to tell your dirty secret.” At this point, Guang “couldn’t bear it anymore and lost control.” He said, “I lost control and kicked a fish tank in the living room as hard as I could and yelled, ‘I am gay. I like men.’” Later when his wife wanted a divorce, Guang accused
her of marrying him only for money (No. 4). The nonassertive assimilation approach was used by men who felt guilty for marrying their homowives. For instance, Ming dropped hints about his sexual orientation to his wife, believing that she eventually found out about it. He said, “Even though my wife sort of already knows about my sexual orientation, I regret not telling her the truth when we got married. Even though she understands the situation, I still can’t forgive myself” (No. 39). Sometimes, gay men would take the assertive approach in coming out. Ding e-mailed his girlfriend to break up with her:

> It was the winter of my junior year in college. I did not have the courage to face her. So I wrote her a long e-mail, explaining why I was often depressed during the year of our relationship, why I had often been cold to her, and everything else. (No. 52)

In choosing to come out through email, Ding was able to assert his sexual orientation and end his relationship with his heterosexual girlfriend without confronting her face to face. This is consistent with the Chinese culture’s emphasis on harmony. However, in another story (Hong, No. 3), the narrator simply said, “I gritted my teeth and told her the truth.”

**Role of culture in communication outcomes**

Chinese gay men’s coming out as reported in these online stories usually resulted in three outcomes: full acceptance, rejection, and passive tolerance.

**Full acceptance**

Sometimes, Chinese gay men’s coming out was met with full acceptance, mostly from peers such as friends, siblings, and classmates, and less often from parents and grandparents. Cheng, who came out to his college classmates, wrote, “My classmates were not surprised by the news; the most common words they used to describe me were special and brave” (No. 26). Long described how his heterosexual best friend responded to his coming out: “He said: ‘I’m just shocked. I know that some people are gay, but I never thought this would be you, my best friend.’ Then he said, ‘No worries, we are still best friends’” (No. 40).

Unfortunately, this type of positive response was rarely found in parents. There were a few exceptions. In two stories, the narrators said that they got acceptance because their parents were already knowledgeable about homosexuality. Jun recalled: “My dad comforted me and told me it was not a big deal, and that actually he had read gay-related stories in the news” (No. 23). In Liang’s case, his parents had some knowledge about homosexuality and were suspicious about their sons’ sexual orientation before he came out. Liang reported:

> [At first,] luckily, my mother read a lot of gay-related news stories. Later she read medical research papers and finally understood that homosexuality was not a disease or a disorder. She also persuaded my father and other family members to accept me. (No. 43)

Lastly, in two other cases, Hong (No. 3) and Guang (No. 4) explained that their previous unsuccessful heterosexual marriages helped them to gain parental acceptance, because their parents thought that at least they tried to live with the opposite sex. Hong shared:
It has been 6 years since [my divorce] … especially in this year, my life has been getting so much better. Every day I feel cheerful. [My mother] never pushes me to marry a woman again. One day she told me, "After seeing your tireless efforts and determination, and your happy life today, I’m not worried anymore."

**Rejection**

Some stories documented complete rejection, mostly from parents. Narrators attributed such rejection to two typical homophobic beliefs in the Chinese culture: homosexuality as an illness and homosexuality as deviance.

The narrative that described homosexuality as an illness included statements about homosexuality as a disease that can be cured. For instance, Jay said his parents thought that “homosexuality is a developmental stage or a mental illness” so it can be either outgrown or cured (No. 20). Kong recalled his mother’s response to his coming out: “Her answer was: ‘There is nothing that cannot be changed. It depends on what you decide, and you can definitely change [your sexual orientation]’” (No. 18). Some men also reported their parents’ belief that if their gay sons did not know how to change themselves, their parents should help them. For example, Jin reported:

My father’s first reaction was very confident. … He thought it wasn’t a problem at all and felt he would be able to heal me. But he didn’t expect it to be so hard. We had a lot of conflicts after that. (No. 59)

The narrative that described homosexuality as deviance treated homosexuality as a social disgrace, a transgression against moral standards, and a resistance to cultural expectation. Tao described his father’s response to his coming out: “My father said everyone bore some responsibility, and refusing to get married was irresponsible to society, to traditional moral values, and to them” (No. 2). Qi stated, “My dad pointed at me and screamed: ‘I should have strangled you when you were born. You ruined our family’s reputation. How did I come to have such a bad son?’” (No. 19).

Occasionally, coming out to peers was received with rejection, even though peers were usually very positive and supportive. Among the few stories that mentioned rejection from peers, Hong described the response of his onetime best friend: “The suggestion he gave me was to ‘be a man and follow the normal way [of life]’” (No. 3).

**Passive tolerance**

Gay men’s coming out, especially to parents, was sometimes received with passive tolerance. Some narrators described how, although they encountered some resistance from their parents at the beginning, their parents eventually chose a compromise between approval and disapproval. Wu wrote: “My dad said, ‘You are a grown-up now. There is nothing that we can do if you want to make that decision, but you will be responsible for your own decisions’” (No. 15). Passive tolerance is often the result of a compromise made by the sons to put on the appearance of heterosexuality outside of the immediate family. Wen reported: “Eventually my mom said, ‘If other people ask me, I will tell them that you don’t want to get married; you want to live on your own’” (No. 6). In a similar story, Tian said,

My father told me not to discuss [my sexual orientation] with my mom anymore. If mom asks us, we need to use a unified answer: I’m still young, and it’s too early to think about
marriage. If other family members and acquaintances ask me questions about girlfriends and marriage, I should say: “I’m still young and need to focus on my career now.” (No. 17)

In most cases, narrators’ coming out was received with rejection (separation) or passive tolerance (somewhere between assimilation and accommodation), although their preferred outcomes were accommodation or assimilation. It shows that the identity negotiation and communication for most Chinese gay men is culturally challenging, particularly in terms of the outcome they expected and achieved. This suggested that without societal efforts to create a more supportive environment for the LGBTQ community, communication strategies seeking accommodation were still relatively ineffective in today’s China.

Discussion
The present study answers the call of Aiello et al. (2013) and Chávez (2013) to explore queer politics and produce theory outside the Western context. Our analysis of Chinese gay man’s coming-out stories shows that their decision to come out, disclosure strategies, and communication outcomes are all clearly influenced by the Chinese culture. Marriage and children are at the center of the confrontation between gay men and their families, peers, and homowives. Furthermore, the type of interpersonal relationship between a co-cultural member and a dominant group member has a significant influence on the communication approaches and strategies used by the co-cultural member.

Marriage and coming out
Marriage with a heterosexual partner is usually not a central theme in the coming out of gay men in the West (Gray, 2009; Rasmussen, 2004). However, marriage was a recurring theme in almost all the coming-out stories written by Chinese gay men in the current study. Many gay men stated that the Chinese culture’s emphasis on heterosexual marriage and children was the primary reason they stayed in the closet because violating such a cultural expectation is unthinkable. Paradoxically, it is precisely the same cultural pressure that urges many of them to come out. As they reach their 20s and 30s, these gay men face enormous pressure to enter heterosexual marriages. Some find the prospect of living a life full of lies and pretenses unacceptable and make the final decision to come out.

The marriage theme is also prominent in the actual coming-out communication between gay men and their parents. In coming out to parents, the primary source of their parents’ resistance and rejection comes from the realization that their sons will never get married and give them grandchildren. Interestingly, the negotiation between gay men and their parents about how the family will receive the gay son is also centered on marriage. In several instances, the parents tolerated their sons’ sexual orientation on the condition that the latter would conform to the cultural norms of marrying the opposite sex and having children. In one story, the parents required their son to have a façade marriage and have a child through surrogacy. In another story, the parents demanded that their son find a girlfriend and bring her to social and family functions so that he would appear normal in front of all their relatives and friends. This type of compromise clearly indicates that homosexuality is still regarded as inferior and abnormal in Chinese society. Elders in a
family often attempt to hide a gay child’s homosexuality from the outside world in order to save the family’s face. In other words, these gay men do not actually change their parents’ views about homosexuality.

Similarly, in coming out to their heterosexual female partners such as girlfriends and homowives, marriage is at the center of the communication. Negotiating the terms of the marriage is the primary goal of coming out to one’s homowife. Interestingly, three of the four gay men who came out to their homowives wanted to keep the marriage instead of seeking a divorce. The narrators never explicitly explained their reasons for such decisions, but it is likely that these gay men wanted to preserve the appearance of a normal heterosexual marriage in compliance with Chinese cultural norms. Marriage is a less prominent theme in the coming-out communication between gay men and their peers. In a few stories, however, the narrators described how their close male friends tried to bring them back to the culturally accepted path of heterosexual marriage before finally accepting their homosexuality. Overall, in the context of China’s highly collectivist culture influenced by Confucianism, marriage is an obligation for the sake of filial piety and the continuation of the family name (Hinsch, 1990; Tan, 2011). This stands in sharp contrast to the highly individualistic culture in Western countries where marriage is more about personal choice, fulfillment, and pursuit of individual happiness (Glenn, 1996).

**Interpersonal relationships and co-cultural communication**

Another major finding of the current study is that co-cultural members’ communication with dominant group members is strongly influenced by the interpersonal relationship between the two as dictated by Chinese culture and tradition. Power difference is at the center of co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998a). Based on the assumption that society creates a hierarchy that privileges certain groups over other groups, co-cultural theory examines how co-cultural group members negotiate their cultural differences in communicating with dominant group members. Our study adds to this line of research by suggesting that co-cultural group members’ communication strategies are influenced not only by such a hierarchy, but also by the interpersonal relationships they have with the dominant group members.

Chinese gay men’s coming-out strategies are largely decided by the relationship they have with their audience, namely parents, peers, and wives, and the social expectations about the proper relationship between a son and his parents, a man and his peers, and a husband and his wife. The traditional Chinese culture creates a high power distance family structure in which children are expected to be dutiful and submissive. The primary duty of a child, especially a son, is to get married, produce offspring and carry on the family name (Hinsch, 1990; Tan, 2011). How one’s duty to parents and the family was negotiated during the coming out process has been frequently discussed in studies conducted in Confucian cultural contexts (e.g., Tan, 2011; Wang et al., 2009), but little Western-based work on the coming out process has directly discussed the concept of duty or family obligations. Chinese gay men’s powerlessness as sons in a typical father–son relationship adds to their vulnerability as gay men. Coming out to one’s parents is often a bottom-up communication. In stark contrast to the results of western-based research, Chinese gay men’s stories about coming out highlighted a universal feeling of guilt to the family. Gay men often apologize to their parents for not being able
to get married or give them grandchildren. Even though they eventually come out assertively to their parents, begging or demanding their acceptance or tolerance, such a moment is often preceded by an extended period in which they indirectly prepare the parents by dropping hints, educating them about homosexuality, and first talking to less authoritative family members such as siblings and cousins.

Coming out to one’s peers, such as friends, classmates, co-workers, and acquaintances follows a different set of social expectations and rules. Peers are one’s equals and are expected to treat each other with respect. As a result, gay men often adopt a direct or indirect way to assert their identity in coming out to their peers and expect their peers to accept and accommodate their sexual orientation and identity. Compared with coming out to parents, gay men felt no need to apologize for their unfulfilled family obligations in coming out to peers.

Finally, even though gay men are typically considered a muted group in society, they are still the dominant figures in a traditional Chinese marriage. Their communication with their homowives usually demonstrates the characteristics of top-down communication. In coming out to their homowives, gay men adopted a variety of approaches from aggressive separation, to nonassertive assimilation, to something between the two extremes.

**Practical implications**

By examining the coming-out stories of gay men in China and their sufferings and struggles as illustrated in these stories, the current study sheds light on the special challenges facing gay men in today’s China. Culture is a primary source of the society’s misunderstanding, prejudice, and rejection of gay men. Gay rights are a matter of human rights (Chávez, 2013). While culture is hard to change, the formal recognition of gay rights and legalization of gay marriage could be important steps in the right direction (Liu & Lu, 2005). As many of the coming-out stories examined in this study suggest, knowledge is the key to full acceptance of homosexuality, and the Chinese population, especially the older population, has very limited and biased knowledge about homosexuality. One crucial step that the government could take would be to lift the ban on the portrayal of homosexuality in traditional news and entertainment media, such as TV and movies. Furthermore, advocacy groups could launch public awareness campaigns to increase public understanding of homosexuality and gay-related issues. The essay contest reported in this study is an example of such an effort. In publishing coming-out stories on their own Website and partnering with popular Web portals such as 163.com, PFLAG China has reached hundreds of thousands of Internet users to teach them about the plights, struggles, and triumphs of gay men in China.

In conclusion, we reiterate the need for more sophisticated and nuanced examination of gay men’s coming-out communication in non-Western contexts. Our study investigates the culture-specific communicative practices used by gay men in China and adds a new relational dimension to co-cultural theory. The results indicate that Chinese gay men’s coming-out experiences can best be understood within the country’s distinctive social relation patterns. Practically, understanding and overcoming the cultural barriers Chinese gay men face may be the first step in creating a more favorable climate for the legalization of gay rights in China.
Note

1. *Homowife* is the literal translation of the Chinese word *tongqi* (*tong*—homo, *qi*—wife), This term has been commonly used by Chinese and Western journalists and researchers to refer to *tongqi* (e.g. Burger, 2012).

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