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Queering Singlehood in Mainland China

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Abstract

This study was triggered by a 2015 documentary film directed by Sophia Luvara, *Inside the Chinese Closet*, which depicts the plight of two homosexual individuals in present-day Mainland China. Upon further reading into the film text, the discourse of the protagonists' sexual orientation is downplayed; rather, the issues of their singlehood seem to be more of a concern, and pervasive. The paper first discusses singlehood in relation to traditional Chinese culture. There is no doubt that Confucian philosophy and 'face' are correlated with the fact that the family-kinship in China has a pervasive influence on the public perception of singlehood. Yet, as the self-combed women have demonstrated, singlehood is not consistently problematized by the Chinese culture. Thereafter, the discussions move into the discourse of contemporary China, suggesting that state-backed media have been encouraging marriage and stigmatizing those who do not adhere. Unmarried women are not the only victims, though they seem to experience the stigmatization more often than men. Chinese bachelors, too, fall prey to stigmatization. In recent years, there also seems to be a continual normalization of homosexuality due to gay consumerism and the increase of the legalization of same-sex marriage. At the end of the day, be it for heterosexuals or homosexuals, marriage seems to be an important end point to singlehood. At last, the paper questions the need to look at singlehood as the binary opposition to marriage.

Contributors' Notes

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Introduction

This study was triggered by a 2015 documentary film directed by Sophia Luvara, *Inside the Chinese Closet*, which depicts the plight of two homosexual individuals in present-day Mainland China. The film opens with a scene depicting a heterosexual couple taking wedding photos. The groom looks smart in a tailored-made suit, and the bride wears a beautiful, white flora gown. It is a bright and sunny day, suggesting that the couple is not only celebrating their union, but also embracing their love for each other openly. Set in cosmopolitan Shanghai, the film features two protagonists, Andy and Cherry, both homosexual.

Andy describes himself as a gay bear man, and is popular in the bear scene. He has a stable and well-respected job as an architect, and enjoys a high quality of living, as reflected in his carefully decorated apartment, and his frequent visits to night spots with his group of gay friends. Andy has come out to his father, who is a civil servant, about his sexuality. Yet, throughout the entire film, Andy's father is instructing and guiding him to find a lesbian woman to marry. In other words, Andy should enter a fake marriage. Despite being 'fake', fake marriages are legitimate, and the union between homosexuals of the opposite sexes is legally binding. What constitutes to this falsehood is that the union, in itself, is a show put up specifically for direct family members and relatives. Hoping to avoid the disappointment of his father, Andy meets up with a few lesbians, but there has been little progress. Towards the end of the film, it becomes clear that he has been desperate looking for a wife to please his

parents, and, in a self-reflexive moment, admits that he is pathetic.

The only scene in the film in which both Andy and Cherry are seen together is set in a convention on 'fake marriage'. The host welcomes fellow homosexuals to this 4th annual convention, and explains the convention's two main purposes. First, the event is for gay men and lesbian women to get to know each other better, in the hope that they could each find a partner of the opposite sex and, eventually, enter a fake marriage. Second, it is for individuals who have gone through the process of fake marriages to share their stories and optimism. Cherry is not seeking a partner in the convention but, instead, is there to share her personal experience, since she already is in a fake union with a gay man. Her parents had been urging her to procreate or to buy a child from the black market, so that the relatives would stop gossiping about her childless situation.

In the film, Cherry shares her experience of her first homosexual relationship with a fellow classmate in high school. As she was deemed as a trouble-maker, Cherry was suspended from school and, eventually, had to restart the academic year, on the basis that she would keep a distance from her classmate. This incident made big news in her village and everyone, including her parents, became aware of it. Even after her marriage, Cherry had been feeding information about homosexuality to her parents, in hope that her parents will eventually understand that she is not the only person with such 'behavior'.

The film is not without its limitations. Andy is portrayed to be lacking agency and is a relatively weak character

compared to Cherry. Both Andy and Cherry's situations are not representative of the gay community. Nevertheless, the film does trigger the discourse of singlehood in relation to homosexuality. During the first viewing, the film seems to be depicting the challenges and difficulties faced by homosexuals in Mainland China. However, upon further reading into the film text, the discourse of the protagonists' sexual orientation is downplayed; and, rather, the issues of their singlehood seem to be more of a concern, and pervasive. This leads to two key questions. First, is traditional Chinese culture the key reason for this degradation of singlehood in Mainland China? Second, has singlehood become less 'proper' than being homosexual in Mainland China? Through a series of theoretical analysis, this paper seeks to address the above questions in an attempt to discuss and situate singlehood in Mainland China within the queer realm.

Problematizing Singlehood in Traditional Chinese Culture

As Lin and Ho (2009) point out, Chinese culture has predominantly been influenced by Confucian philosophy, which puts an over-emphasis on patriarchal beliefs and values. In this connection, subordination and obedience to men are expected from Chinese women. For instance, the 'Three Obedience and Four Virtues' specifies three practices and four good virtues by which a Chinese woman should abide. 'Three obedience' refers to a woman obeying to her father prior to marriage; to her husband after being married to him; and to her sons when in widowhood. 'Four virtues' refers to morality, proper speech, modest manner

and diligent work that a good Chinese woman should master in feudal society (He 2015, 14; Gao 2000, 31). In short, the social and cultural expectations for women were plain and simple - to marry, take care of the family, and obey all males within the family unit.

The idea of 'face' also plays a significant part for the Chinese. There are two kinds of 'faces' in Chinese culture: the 'moral face' representing the integrity of one's moral character, and the 'social face' indicating one's social prestige. Both play a starring role in the interaction with other people, but, overall, the 'moral face' is over and above the 'social face' (Hu 1944). Chinese people have a fear of losing the 'face' because, if that unfortunate event takes place, it also signifies 'a condemnation by the group for immoral or socially disagreeable behavior'. The 'face' serves the function of 'keeping up the consciousness of moral boundaries, maintains moral values, and expresses the force of social sanctions'. In Chinese societies, it also upholds the heteronormative norms in society, and singlehood would become the object of ridicule or be subject to public disgrace. In Chinese culture, women in their twenties are considered to be at the prime of their lives. People would describe women who fail to get married when they age (over 30 in most cases) as 'Old like Yellowed Pearls' (Lin and Baker 2017, 80).

Confucian philosophy and 'face', as mentioned above, have much correlation with the fact that the family-kinship in China has a pervasive influence on the public perception of singlehood (Yip 2013, 66). The emphasis upon family and kinship exerts intense pressure on both men and women, though more so on women, and it is in this spirit that being

single is put under pressure. In traditional Chinese societies, a person is not considered a 'full person' unless and until s/he is placed in the context of family and social relationships (Wu 2010, 27; Wu 1997, 132). As Hsu (1953) notes, before a person can be anyone else, s/he is, at first, a son or daughter of his/her parents. Since family is perceived as the most fundamental social institution, what comes after this is the critical ideals of filial piety.

One reason why being single in China still remains problematic is that there is the prescribed role for one to be a filial son/daughter, which compels single people to show respect and love to their parents and elderly in prescribed ways. In this regard, being a good filial son means getting married and having children, so that the family bloodline can carry on. At the same time, the motivation for marrying is increased by the material factor that material property is usually given to sons when they get married (Kong 2010, 160).

Yet, singlehood is not consistently problematized by the Chinese culture. From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, self-combed women came into existence, working in the thriving silk-reeling industry in Shunde, Guangdong. Since their overall income was higher than that of male workers, these self-combed women were able to enjoy financial independence and decided not to get married that early. However, in the 1930s and 1940s, mostly due to the silk reeling factories having shut down, those unemployed crossed the ocean and worked in south-eastern Asian countries like Singapore and Malaysia (Li 2015). With working overseas being a common practice, more women from rural areas in China followed that

path, and sent home a large part of their income to support their family.

Stockard (1989), in her *Daughters of the Canton Delta*, called these self-combed women 'sworn spinsters'. She concluded that they chose to be single for two reasons. First, they rejected the obligations attached to marriage, which include getting along with the mother-in-law, supporting the new family unit financially, and rearing children. Second, they wanted to adhere to the lifestyle of being single, on the account of not wanting to establish relationships with men and of not accepting their future husbands' having a concubine. Traditionally speaking, it was only when a woman got married that she was considered an adult. A common practice for a Cantonese woman when she gets married is to twist her hair together in a plait. A self-combed woman regulates her hair in the same way, thus experiencing a rite of passage that signified and presented her being a real adult at last.

Singlehood in Contemporary China

In contemporary China, women over the age of 27 are now already disparagingly called 'leftover women'. Leta Hong Fincher's book *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (2014) sheds light on leftover women in China more clearly. 'Leftover women' is a degrading term coined by the All-China Women's Federation (an organization designed in the first place to seemingly empower Chinese women) to describe unmarried women over 27. Fincher's central thesis is plain and clear: state-backed media have been deployed to encourage young Chinese women to get married. In this process, unmarried

Chinese women, and sometimes men, are threatened and stigmatized, should they have no intention to find a spouse. Fincher puts down *The Resurgence of Gender Inequality* in her book's subtitle, probably to underscore how women are excluded from property rights.

For over three score years, the Communist Party has endeavored to spearhead the development of women's rights. 'Women hold up half the sky', as Mao Zedong fervidly proclaimed. However, we have now ironically observed how married women fail to claim property rights with the context of contemporary China, thus leading to this resurgence of gender inequality. Throughout Fincher's book, she points her accusing finger to the Chinese government itself—saying the government should bear direct responsibility for its fast-growing gender wealth gaps.

In 2011, the Xinhua News column '*Do Leftover Women Really Deserve Our Sympathy?*', shared also by the All China Women's Federation, claims that 'The main reason many girls become 'leftover women' is that their standards for a partner are too high ... As long as girls are not too picky, finding a partner should be as easy as blowing away a speck of dust' (Fincher 2014, 20). By blaming the victim through attaching social stigma to unmarried women in their mid to late twenties, government-run newspapers and government agencies have gone all out to promote this left-over-women ideology. Thus, unmarried Chinese women, in particular the educated ones, are in fear of not being wanted when they are no longer young. Government-run agencies have tried to downplay the educational success enjoyed by women. In the same

article, it says, 'Girls with an average or ugly appearance will find it difficult to marry into a rich family', which is why 'these kinds of girls hope to further their education in order to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is, they do not realize that as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A. or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellowed pearls'.

Of course, unmarried women are not the only victims, though they seem to experience the stigmatization more than men. Chinese bachelors, too, fall prey to stigmatization. The People's Daily, the official Communist Party newspaper, writes that, if those millions of single men failed to find wives, they would very likely take part in 'rioting, stealing and gang fighting' (Fincher 2014, 11). Fincher also demonstrates how the state colludes with the matchmaking and the real estate industries. The marriage propaganda not only tells women that they should marry, but they also tell men that if they do not buy a flat, they will fail to find wives. The dramatic rise in housing prices since 1998 has propelled the state to step in, with the aim of maintaining the skyrocketing prices while, at the same time, maintaining middle-class demand for home ownership. Knowing that, within the context of China, a man believes it is a must to own a house in order to accommodate his wife or future mother-in-law, the matchmaking industry is reaping profits from media reports about bachelors having to buy houses (Fincher 2014, 50).

Apart from government-run newspapers, the promotion of such ideology also comes with a series of ideological measures, such as 'education, media campaigns to promote marriage, and

government-sponsored 'matchmaking' (Fincher 2014, 26). Of these, a shocking one is to use science as a meta-narrative. Female patients have been duped by licensed medical professionals into believing that if they do not conceive before 30, their babies will likely be born with defects. All the fears for becoming leftover women/ men have penetrated the minds of the unmarried so much so that we see why single women engage in matchmakings and/or renting a fake boyfriend. In 2012, Local Women's Federation branches arranged matchmaking activities for 'highly educated, high quality' women in Pinghu, Zhejiang Province. Since 2011, various divisions of the Shanghai government have collaborated to organize mass matchmaking events for educated women and men. Almost 40,000 young women and men registered for the 2013 and 2012 fairs, more than 80 percent of whom had undergraduate degrees or higher, according to the official Xinhua News Agency.

Websites and applications have surfaced to help singles solve the problem of parental or family pressures. For Chinese, the traditional Lunar New Year is the most popular holiday. During this holiday, it is almost a requirement for Chinese living outside their parents' home due to education or work to return home to reunite and spend time with their families. For married couples, it is common for the wife to return to the husband's home (Young 1999, 171). For those single men and women who have yet to succeed in matchmaking, there are rental websites like *89yn.com* and *20py.com*, where they can find pretend partners ready to be rented and the services they can provide. The rental websites detail the partners' age, height, and occupation, and the prices can

range from 60 Chinese yuan per hour to 1,500 Chinese yuan per day. To prevent both parties from crossing the line, some would even sign a 'green lease' — which is designed to ensure both parties do not violate the rules and to forbid the male pretend partner from sleeping with the woman in the same room (Lo 2017).

Downplaying Homosexuality in Contemporary China

Tracing back, in the late 1980s, queer activism came to the fore, succeeding the gay liberation movement of the 1970s (Brown 2016, 74). AIDS, which was known as a 'gay disease' at the time, emerged in the 1980s (Ostergard and Tubin 2004, 106). This, alongside Ronald Reagan denying LGBT people's political success at the federal level, fueled the LGBT movement. The case of *Bowers vs. Hardwick* in 1986 implicitly told LGBT people that they were inferior to heterosexuals. Since then, more radical politics challenging heteronormativity have arisen. They employ new performative tactics and Foucauldian understandings of sexuality and identity to challenge and deconstruct the categorizations of sexual identity (gay and straight). Queer activists maintain that queer has the potential to create new forms of intimate relationships and to reject the categories of sex, gender, sexual orientation and the likes used by the mainstream LGBT movement (Bernstein and Taylor 2013, 12–13).

In recent years, there seemed to have been a continual normalization of homosexuality. In this world-system influenced by capitalism, consumerism contributes to this normalization process. With the rise of gay rights movement in global cities, pink money

has become a thriving industry in many parts of the Western world. As noted by Brooks and Wee (2014, 133), the pink dollar 'is about lifestyle, companionship and a sense of community'. In order to cater for the hybridity and heterogeneity in various kinds of populations, in particular homosexuals attracted to the cities, global city policy agendas play a significant role.

Florida (2012, xi) notes that there is a close link between diversity and creativity, saying the more open-minded the places are, the more economic advantages they can gain. Thus, creativity necessitates diversity. There is also an interrelationship between Neoliberalism and the transference of risk from the state to the individual (Brooks and Wee 2014, 139–141). Although the purchasing power of gay people forms a lucrative business, from which the state wishes to profit, the state does not want to be perceived as publicly encouraging the gay consumers at the same time. Thus, knowing that the state is able to prosecute them on a legal basis, yet is reluctant to do so for economic reasons, the gay community has no option but to trust the state, which means when pursuing a gay lifestyle, active gay men are, in fact, at risk of prosecution. Well aware that they are at risk, leaders in the gay community usually develop soft-power capital like networking to gain empowerment, without being isolated from the mainstream population.

Despite the trend of normalization, it would be naïve to think that homosexuality is gaining greater acceptance due to consumerism. Rather, I argue that the normalization is represented by an increased tolerance for the community. Walters and Curran (1996) investigate different treatments of

same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples, showing that when entering retail stores, heterosexual couples were assisted by the staff members in significantly shorter time than homosexual couples who often end up not being assisted. The normalization process is further reinforced with the rise of countries legalizing same-sex marriage, such as the U.S. in June 2015, and Taiwan being the most recent case in May 2017. In November 2017, more than 60% of Australians voted in favor of same-sex marriage, suggesting the possibility of its legitimation in the near future.

At the end of the day, be it for heterosexuals or homosexuals, marriage seems to be an important end point to singlehood. This explains the continual fight to legalize same-sex marriage in many countries today, including Mainland China. However, the perception of homosexuality is rather different in Mainland China, making it even harder for same-sex marriage to eventually take root. Traditionally, homosexuality is not known as a form of identity, but merely a kind of undesirable behavior, informed mainly by power (Chou 2008, 30). Hooliganism as a crime was deleted in 1997, and homosexuality as a mental illness was removed in 2001, thus alleviating social discrimination and stigmatization of homosexuality in China (Zang 2011, 42). According to Kong (2010), being gay in China is commonly perceived to be a family issue, and homosexuality is deemed to be a form of liberation instead of perversion.

As Chinese gay men have to deal with the social expectations and norms found in a neo-Confucian family setting, they face a situation different from the 'coming out' model of Western cultural

practice. As a whole, gay identity in China has once been subordinated under various social institutions, such as the family, the work unit and the state. But then, slowly and gradually, it has shifted towards a new understanding of homosexuality in terms of the idea of active self-fashioning, within the context of globalization, neo-liberalism, cosmopolitanism and consumerism (Kong 2010, 150). With the manifest social transformations on gay lives in contemporary China, there came changes in attitudes towards gay people. Perhaps the greatest difference between the younger generation and the older generation is the rise of individuality, which ties into the notion of cultural citizenship. Many of the younger gay men in China now consider coming out not as a negative experience, but as a way through which to confirm his individuality (Chou 2000, 252).

Singlehood and Marriage – a Necessary Opposition?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines single (adjective) as 'unmarried or not involved in a stable sexual relationship'. From this definition, one can say that it is not necessary to always relate singlehood to marriage. Someone who is not single may also be in a stable, long-term loving and sexually active relationship. Marriage, in this case, is merely an administrative process to legally unite two people together as a family unit. Taylor (2012, 30–31) has summarized a few attributes associated with singlehood. First, singlehood does not possess fixed, essential, and enduring nature. Second, singlehood is a relational category, which means it is constructed in relation to marriage. If we agree that marriage is not a

homogeneous category but a heterogeneous one, we too shall acknowledge that singlehood can never be pinned down merely in an essentialist way. Third, singlehood can be categorized as to whether one is widowed, divorced, or never married, indicating that it is a concept that should be placed in the context of shifts along one's life course. Fourth, hierarchy exists in singlehood. Very often, for example, older singles who have never been married are on the lowest rung of that hierarchical structure.

As Thornton et al (2007) conclude, being single is not just a relationship but involves a huge variety of intimate relationships, including 'living with parents, in a dormitory, with housemates, or alone'. Klinenberg (2012) and Jamieson and Simpson (2013) examine how living alone contributes to the identity formation of the 'singleton'. Klinenberg's book concludes that singles, to many people's surprise, tend to be socially active, have stable relationships with friends and/or partners, and possess strong community ties. Jamieson and Simpson look into the way living solo can affect one's experiences of the sense of identity, association of home, and experiences of family life in the context of globalization and consumer culture.

'Single but not available' is becoming a popular phrase amongst the younger generation. The reasons behind are manifold, but, for me, they might include the following: (1) the person does not crave for a romantic relationship at the moment or permanently (asexual); (2) the person just broke up with his/her partner and is still in the bitter phase; (3) the person has a target and is carrying a torch for him/ her, but, for some reason,

the person does not profess. All the three categories demonstrate that, even if a person is single, s/he can still be psychologically (pre)occupied. Singlehood is often considered a transitory stage through which a single person moves on the way to marriage. Lahad (2012) studies singlehood in terms of *time* and *liminality*. The author covers the sociology of waiting – how do single women feel when they are waiting for ‘the one’? What are the implications and uncertainties of prolonged waiting? How does liminal status find its place in the social system? Yet, we may also consider another scenario: marriage itself is the transitory stage while singlehood is the final stage. Or, suffice it to say, maybe there is no final stage in the first place but the fact that different relationships are sanctioned by social constructions to varying degrees, so that a few of which are valued much more by us.

In order to debunk the binary opposition of single/married, there is also a need to examine an in-between category: cohabitation, which is considered ‘a new relationship status to the mix’ (Thornton et al. 2007, 76) and shares some middle ground with both singlehood and marriage. Cohabitation is not a novelty. However, it is only in recent decades that cohabitation has been considered a valid choice in Western societies aside from legal marriage amongst couples (Thornton, Axinn and Xie 2007, 79). Cohabitation and marriage share plenty of similarities, including co-residence, companionship, and a sexual relationship (Brown 2017, 114; Thornton et al. 2007, 80). In some respects, however, cohabitation is distinctively different from marriage. Although both cohabiting and married couples often expect their partners to have no sexual intimacy with others, it is found that

sexual exclusivity is substantially higher in marital relationships (Laumann 2000, 192). Also, rates of separation among cohabiters are nearly five times as high as the ones of those who are married.

Another striking difference goes to self-definition. Both marriage and cohabitation should be considered self-defined statuses, yet marriage is marked with self-expression and presentations commonly associated with millennium-old rituals and wedding ceremonies under the authority and guidance of government and/or church, which are elements that cohabitation lacks (Thornton, Axinn and Xie 2007, 73). Cohabitation is also noticeably different from staying single. These differences, such as those about co-residence and sexual relationships, can well be found in the differences between being single and marriage. However, cohabitation – a relationship that involves partnership – demonstrates how ‘the boundary between cohabitation and being single can also be relatively fuzzy and arbitrary’ (Thornton et al. 2007, 80). Some couples enter cohabiting relationships without the thoughts of ever marrying their partners. Instead, they consider cohabitation a viable alternative to marriage when it comes to greater freedom and flexibility (Wiersma 1983, 25).

On the account of the strong institutionalized nature of marriage, which involves specific roles and behavior to which one must conform, and involving the intervention of the state, many start to regard cohabitation as an approach to keep relationships personal, and be able to terminate them with ease if needed (Lodder and Zeleznikow 2010, 58; Steen and Price 1988, 47). That said, these couples do

not often envision cohabitation as a transient phase. Instead, it is envisioned as a felicitous long-term relationship next to legal marriage (Ganong and Coleman 2017, 67).

Conclusion

Foucault's (1977) insights in *Discipline and Punish* indicate that our internalization of social categories and expectations of 'proper' behavior make the intervention of authorities or repressive agencies (such as the police) relatively rare. The term 'Queer Theory' was used for the purpose of transgressing and transcending the fine

distinctions in the various terminologies of gender and sexuality (De Lauretis 1991, v). Queer theories examine people within different socio-cultural contexts who faced repressions for their pervasions towards the norm – the phallogentric heterosexual society (Peake 2016, 92). Chinese culture plays a crucial role in the construction of the Chinese self, and the importance of marriage, as opposed to singlehood. The documentary film, *Inside the Chinese Closet*, has allowed for an enhanced discussion of how homosexuality seems to have been downplayed to give rise to the queer discourse of singlehood.

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