NEGOTIATING WITH THE HETERONORMATIVE MARRIAGE INSTITUTION IN MAINLAND CHINA: HOW HOMOSEXUALS EMPLOY DISCOURSE IN NEGOTIATION

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Abstract- Living in a heteronormative society, homosexuals in China face many challenges. Among the challenges, marriage poses itself a top concern for the majority of homosexuals, in that the sociocultural factors cultivate it into an almost mandatory obligation. This paper reports a qualitative study of male and female homosexuals' negotiation with their parents in contemporary Mainland China. The study explores how discourse functions as a strategy by gays and lesbians when negotiating heteronormative marriage with their parents. In the current study, 10 homosexuals in Mainland China participated in interviews, including five gays and five lesbians. Integrating both negotiation and discourse theory, this study was based on analysis of discourse. Major activities these homosexuals adopted included assertion of a homosexual life, construction of a flexible, and struggling with the process by being stuck in the current situation. Two major discourses these homosexuals employed as strategies to negotiate with their parents were a discourse of normality of homosexuality and a discourse of rewriting filial piety.

Keywords- Homosexuality, Marriage, Negotiation, Critical Discourse Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Living in a heteronormative society, homosexuals in China have to struggle with many issues. Among these issues, marriage poses itself a top concern for the majority of homosexuals, in that the heterosexual marriage institution is evoked as a central way to construct and maintain the hegemonic status of heteronormativity (Lynch & Maree, 2013). It is estimated that there are more than 21 million gays and 12 million lesbians in China, and more than 90% of these Chinese homosexuals finally get married or determine to marry. Such marriage is the biggest difference between homosexuals in China and those in Western countries (Liu et al., 2015). Unlike Western cultures that conceive marriage as a personal choice, the sociocultural situation in China establishes marriage as an almost mandatory obligation for every Chinese. Herein, the heteronormative marriage becomes an issue that the majority of Chinese homosexuals cannot avoid. In China, parents would be the most representative and direct actors of the institution of marriage with and for whom homosexuals primarily negotiate and are responsible on the issue of marriage. Conflicts ensuing from arguments between homosexuals and their parents on this issue lead to estrangement between homosexuals and their parents or even some homosexuals' suicide, which deteriorate both sides' social well-being severely. In this sense, how homosexuals negotiate the marriage issue with their parents becomes critical and important for studying. Anchoring a discursive perspective, the current research tries to integrate negotiation and discourse theory to analyze how discourse functions as a strategy by homosexuals when they negotiate the marriage issue with their parents. Qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews with 10 homosexuals, including five gays and five lesbians were utilized for analysis.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although marriage is not a mandatory duty to carry on in any culture, it is closely associated with people's well-being. Research in this aspect has indicated that marriage or intimate relationship exerts an impact on individuals, especially on their well-being, which to some extent justifies the importance of studying on marriage.

Previous research has demonstrated that marriage is positively associated with people's physical and psychological well-being (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015). Homosexuals who did get married generally report less psychological distress and more well-being (Clark et al., 2015; Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010). Meyer (2003) proposed a minority stress process model in homosexual and bisexual people. He argues that mental disorders usually prevail at a higher level among homosexuals or bisexuals than that among heterosexuals. This higher prevalence of mental disorder is because of what Meyer (2003) called minority stress. Consistent with Meyer's theory, research has found that homosexuals frequently report less social support for their intimate relationships compared with their heterosexual siblings. Moreover, internalized homophobia is an important factor that accounts for homosexuals' relationship quality, physical and psychological health, and satisfaction with life. The higher degree of the internalized homophobia, the more negative impact it will exert on

these aspects (Doyle & Molix, 2015). Literature documents various reasons that why homosexuals form heteronormative marriages. Some homosexuals want to use heterosexual marriage as a cover and shield for their true sexuality that is condemned, stigmatized, and ostracized by the heteronormative discourses in their cultures. For some homosexuals, they did not realize their homosexual identity even they felt attracted to the same gender before their got married (Duffey, 2006). Except for avoiding the social stigma, religious intolerance for homosexuality usually motivates religious homosexuals who are the disciples of that religion to form heterosexual marriages and stay married (Yip, 2008). Different from the most cited reason for homosexuals to form heterosexual marriage in Western countries, the most cited reason for homosexuals in China to get married is showing filial piety to their parents (Li, 2009).

By either argumentation or negotiation, homosexuals used different tactics to "manipulate" their way in by exerting their influence on the target in order to change the target's attitude, beliefs, or behaviors (Raven, 1992). Their tactics could be divided into soft-power and hard-power based strategies. Raven (1992) has proposed 14 power bases, building on previous five and six power bases elaborated by the research done by French and him (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965). These 14 power bases are classifiable into two types, namely hard and soft power. The former type refers to power bases that are coercive, intimidating, and direct, whereas the latter one counts as non-coercive, considerate, and subtler (Raven, 1992). In the Western world, the most common method adopted by the majority of homosexuals is to form marriages with heterosexual partners. This is a non-traditional form of marriage named Mixed-Orientation Marriage (MOM) that consists of one spouse identified as homosexual or bisexual whereas the other spouse is heterosexual (Tornello & Patterson, 2012). Some homosexuals would disclose their homosexual identity to their partners before their marriage, whereas others would conceal it (Schwartz, 2012).

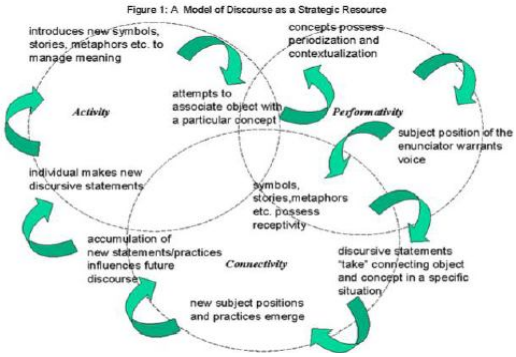
For Chinese homosexuals, many homosexuals would choose to conceal their homosexual identity and to get married with heterosexuals to show their filial piety to their parents, and reproduce the next generation. Another method that has been rarely addressed is a relatively new approach that has recently appeared in China, and it is called marriage of convenience. It is a kind of fake marriage practiced by a gay and lesbian pretending to be a couple mainly for the social, familial, and reproductive purposes. Homosexuals engaged in this kind of relationship usually maintain a normal relationship as friends (Liu, 2013). A minority of homosexuals would take extreme ways as threatening their parents to commit suicide to let their parents give in, and some really did and lost their lives. Distancing themselves away from their families by living and working in another city would be a very common choice that many homosexuals in China choose to use (Chou, 2001).

Current studies still have some limitations in need of addressing. First, a lack of study on gender difference during the negotiation limits our understanding the possible role that gender plays in this process; Second, power flows among family members have been mostly uncharted, so the understanding of important dynamics may not be possible; Third, a lack of cross-cultural comparisons among homosexuals of different socio-cultural backgrounds limits our knowledge about the way that exterior factors shape and influence individuals' negotiations between their homosexuality and the marriage institution.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study primarily builds on discourse theory incorporating critical ideas of soft and hard power strategies in terms of negotiation theory. According to Foucault (1978), social practices should count as a discursive construction, and the discourse constructs the event itself. The discourse determines, restricts, and allows what can be done and what cannot. Discursive practices accepted by actors become normative structure that maintains both power relationships and actors' positions relative to one and another. In this regard, discursive practices may lead to various forms of repression and oppression, but they count as normal by participants in this discourse (Mangion, 2011). These accepted practices count as appropriate actions by actors who wield power. Truths stand in each discourse via permitting these accepted practices by the powerful, and these truths closely connect to hegemony based on Foucault's (1980) understanding.

With the purpose of analyzing events from a discursive angle, a model that explains how discourse works as a strategic resource proposed by Hardy, Palmer, and Phillips (2000) will be employed to conduct the discourse analysis (figure 1).



The model contains three discursive circuits according to Hardy et al. (2000), and they are activity,

performativity, as well as connectivity. In the activity circuit, individuals try to introduce new statements which that align objects to specific concepts. These activities include introduction of metaphors, symbols, stories etc. However, these discursive activities must engage other relevant actors. That is to say, they have to intersect with the performativity circuit or else these discursive statements would remain words and talk until they are received by other actors. It occurs when these discursive activities are grounded in a context or period where related concepts possess meaning; when the voice is warranted by the enunciator who occupies the subject position; and when these statement are accepted and resonate with relevant actors. The circuits of activity and performativity together create the circuit of connectivity where concepts connect with particular objects successfully. This means that these new discursive statements are received by other actors, who thus begin to take subject positions and bring new discursive practices that are taken-for-granted rhetoric and practices (Hardy et al., 2000).

IV. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to recite various discourses used by homosexuals to negotiate with their parents on the marriage issue, reveal unbalanced power relationships, and explore how these discourses functioned as strategies. The field work happened in Shandong, China, from March to April 2017. Data were collected through semi-structured formal interviews and informal interviews. Interviewees were recruited via the introductions from friends. In total, 10 interviewees who came out to their parents were recruited, and their age ranged between 27 to 32 years, among whom, 5 were gays and 5 were lesbians. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Putonghua was the language adopted in this fieldwork.

V. FINDINGS

All of the respondents tried to introduce new discursive statements by normalizing homosexuality whether they were under pressure to form a hereronormative marriage or not. However, they initiated different activities to make their new statements received and accepted by their parents, results of this process were not uniform and they varied mainly based on to what extent parents accepted this issue.

A. Assertion of a Homosexual life

Even though all respondents came out of the closet, at least to their parents, only a couple of them firmly asserted to live a homosexual life with an unambiguous homosexual identity, decision not to get married with heterosexuals, and pursuit of their own intimate relationship. These respondents usually planned the whole coming-out process exhaustively by subtly and gradually revealing homosexuality-related books, brochures, or TV programs to their parents a few months before they came out. However, not many of the respondents had prepared before they came out, and the majority of the respondents just came out suddenly and abruptly when they faced a parental push to get married by their parents.

Even though quarrels with parents were generally unavoidable, particularly at starters, they employed many arguments to persuade their parents, and these arguments primarily revolved around filial piety, reproducing offspring, and the face issue. Wei (aged 29) frequently persuaded his mother by explaining filial piety in this way: I do think Confucianism should be promoted, but I do not think the filial piety proposed by Confucius still makes sense nowadays. The so-called Confucian filial piety is just a tool employed by the ruling class to make the public more easily to be controlled. However, time has changed, and I do think that there should be a boundary between parents and their children however intimate they are, and no part should cross this line. Parents and their children just love and support each other in our daily life, but we should never try to control and make each other do what we really want in the name of love. They frequently instilled the point that homosexuals were normal as heterosexuals with their parents. Qiu (aged 39) came out to his mother in this way: I was born this way, and this is not something that I can choose, just like you were born as heterosexual. I naturally like men just like you naturally like men. We can be successful, we can live a meaningful life, and we can be loved just as you heterosexuals do. We are not freaks, and I am still your son, whom you can still love and who love you. Fierce confrontations in this regard frequently happened between homosexuals and their parents. Although both parties hurt seriously and felt stressed, these straightforward and hard-power based negotiating attempts of normalizing homosexuality carried out by homosexuals did allow them to live a homosexual life that other homosexuals could not dream of.

B. Construction of a Flexible Life

Some of the interviewees constructed a flexible life, namely they tried to compromise their homosexual identity with their parents' expectations or requirements. In terms of marriage, these homosexuals not necessarily came out to their parents, but they surely tried to make their homosexual needs satisfied. Some interviewees dared not to reveal their identity to their parents for fear of rejection by their parents or their parents' health would deteriorate. However, they could not marry heterosexuals and form socially accepted heteronormative marriages,

which would make them painful and depressed. Usually under this circumstance, many homosexuals would consider nominal marriage. This is a marriage that usually formed by a gay and lesbian for their convenience. Moreover, usually family and social pressure would be the primary reason for their doing this. Feng (27-year-old woman) said: I definitely cannot come out to my parents, or else they would jump off from the building. They value their faces more than my happiness. Comparing me with others' children is what they keep doing through their lifetime. Finding a gay and marrying him would be the best strategy for me, since I could enjoy my personal life and I could comfort my parents. A gay interviewee, Xiao (aged 31), who formed this kind of nominal marriage as well, stated that this kind of marriage helped him to not only satisfy his parents' expectations, but also enable him to keep a homosexual identity. He and his lesbian wife kept an open relationship during their daily life, but they accompanied each other to visit one's parents when the need arose. As Xiao stated: They (his parents) still think that my marriage is a symbol of my filial piety to them, because that was what they did when they were young, and that was what their parents and grandparents did. However, I can never tell them that always abide by parents' opinions and do whatever they expect is true filial piety, since they were under-educated and rejected modern culture. All I could do is to make them satisfied considering their age and health status, and meanwhile try to instill modern culture in them little by little. Once they witness how unhappy I am by sacrificing my happiness to their expectations and face, they will feel sorry for that and I am sure their heart will begin to thaw, as all parents love their children deep in their hearts.

Interviewees suggested that nominal marriage, however, was not without problems. The majority of interviewees indicated that this kind of marriage was like a cycling of lies, which meant that you had always use one lie to cover another. More importantly, this would bring more burden and pressure than being single, since the incoordination between partners and more requirements from parents could all weigh people involved down. However, this was a makeshift that is considered and adopted by some homosexuals to reconstruct a modern sense of filial piety to persuade their parents gradually. It was still worth to be noticed that compared with male interviewees, female interviewees considered the nominal marriage more like a show and they tended to show less willingness and determination for maintaining it and giving having children with their nominal spouses after marriage.

C. Struggling to Maintain Homosexual Identity

Although coming out to one's parents or choosing a flexible life might seem plausible solutions to the marriage issue, still, some of the interviewees struggled in negotiation with their parents in about marriage. On one hand, they dared not to come out to their parents, or their homosexual identity was not accepted by their parents. On the other hand, they did not want to marry heterosexuals nor form a nominal marriage with other homosexuals to lie to their parents, which would trigger a series of problems, new lies, and their sense of guilty.

Yang (aged 27) came out to her father irrationally and impulsively. Quarrels never stopped from then, with her father keeping pushing her to go to blind dating while she kept refusing to do so. She stated: He just thinks that a woman's life purpose is becoming some man's wife and raising children for that man. He values his face so much, and he always wants me to marry a good man to earn glory for this family. Now he knows that I am a lesbian, although this shocks his whole world down, he arranges more blind dates for me. He never considers my feeling and need, now, this is even the least thing he has to consider. All of his mind, he thinks how to marry me to a man whoever that is, as long as he is a man.

Same with Yang's case, Lu (24-year-old woman) came out to her parents, but her parents did not accept this and they tried to threaten her by cutting off their financial support to her. Some interviewees had not come out to their parents yet, and they struggled with what step they should take next. Coming out to their parents would definitely not be a good choice, since some reported that they could not undertake the prospective outcomes of coming out, be either their parents' irrational reaction or their sense of guilty by shifting this burden to their parents. However, marrying heterosexuals or homosexuals was not a wise choice either. For marrying the former would make them feel guilty and they could not live and have sex with them, whereas for marrying the latter, they thought more problems would be waiting for them, which would be even more complicated than marrying the former. For interviewees who struggled with what they should do next, they were usually under greater mental pressure than the previous two groups of people. Being stuck in the negotiating process without taking any more moves, these homosexuals brought the negotiation to a stalemate. Both their parents' needs and expectations were unsatisfied under this circumstance. Life seemed to be a dead end with no viable choices for them and choices that they were faced with were full of possible outcomes and responsibility that they did not want to face.

D. Sociocultural Context

The study of how actors' discursive actions received and accepted by other relevant actors cannot realize without taking the context or period into consideration. Only when the discursive activity is grounded in a certain period and context could relevant concepts have meaning (Hardy, Palmer, &

Phillips, 2000). Influenced by Western society's modernity, the trend of what Giddens (1992) called detraditionalization has swept its impact on China. The detraditionalization thesis is also referred to as individualization, which attaches a focus to the decline of the traditional family customs such as life-long marriage, domestic labor division based on gender, and so on. Meanwhile, intimacy is gradually emancipated from the manacles of social norms and obligations, and what Giddens (1992) called plastic sexuality emerged. It is decentered sexuality that frees couples' from reproduction needs. The social and economic change at this stage enables homosexuals to migrate more easily, have more choices of lifestyles, and pursue a wider social network (Li, Holroyd, & Lau, 2010). The Tongzhi community in China has been developing and wielding its impact on the civil society through online and offline activities and campaigns, and various NGOs that serve for homosexuals and their families begin to emerge and flourish. These efforts enable homosexuals and their families to understand and communicate with this community more profoundly and frequently. Nonetheless, particular dominant discourses of sexuality in China still remain solid and hegemonic. First, knowledge is still structured in gender-binary and dualistic categories, which aims for distinction and classification. Second, the state's political policies in recent years have strengthened the discourse of homosexuality is abnormal in recent years. For example, the Ministry of Culture and the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television recently worked on its inspection and censorship to ban the display of homosexuality in the media, especially in TV dramas, films, and books (Li et al., 2010). Thirdly, Characteristics of traditional Chinese culture that influence Chinese personalities, traditional philosophies such as Confucianism adhered by Chinese, as well as filial piety are three major critical respects that cause conflicts between homosexuals and the heteronormative society on marital issue

Briefly, the current sociocultural context has not lifted the ban on homosexuality even though some progress has obtained in legal and medical areas.

E. Discourse as a Strategy

One of the strategies that interviewees adopted is constructing a discourse of the normality of homosexuality. They introduced scientific and legal references such as the depathologization of homosexuality in other cultures, well-known doctors' remarks supporting that homosexuality was not a mental disorder, legalization of the same-sex marriage in other countries, and that being homosexual is inborn instead of choice. Power inequality is inherent in these discourses, and these discourses further entail an unbalanced power status between actors and receivers. References from these areas represent authoritative knowledge, which are often taken-for-granted and seldom challenged by their receivers. Homosexuals relied on these discourses to reconstruct a new image of homosexuality that is normal, inborn, and not shameful. However, these discourses did not work alone, except for the inherent unbalanced power relationship maintained. The socio-cultural context of decriminalization and depathologization of homosexuality, and the increasing visibility of Tongzhi community have made these discourses more easily received by parents. Additionally, acquaintance with other parents whose children are also gay helped these parents to find empathy, stronger persuasion from these peers, and knowledge of how to weather this process.

Another way homosexuals employed is rewriting a filial piety discourse. Unlike old traditional cultural, based on Confucianism, which promotes familism and obedience to one's parents, some homosexuals begin to rewrite the discourse of filial piety that works more favorably to their situations. They stressed that one's individual desire was vital and needed to be valued as well. Blindly conforming to parents' requirements and expectations without noticing what one really wanted was not filial piety, and it was just a kind of blind following. They persuaded their parents that marriage and procreation were not the only goals in one's life. Especially in modern society, where marriage is more a personal choice instead of a cultural imperative, and the public welfare institution for caring elders becomes more and more mature and thus they would not have to rely on their offspring to take care of them when they got old. Moreover, soft-power strategy that based on the referral power source was employed by homosexuals to make their parents feel guilty and give up pushing them in terms of marriage. They usually told their parents that the reason they got married and lived this really unhappy life was all for their sake. In this juncture, they described their nominal marriage as a sacrifice of their personal happiness to arouse their parents' sympathy. In addition, homosexuals proposed that blind obedience to parents' orders was bad for both sides, since they considered that true filial piety was loving and respecting their parents while maintaining a boundary between them, because one's life was one's own business. Besides, their parents should focus more on their own life instead of always attaching focus to children's life. Via rewriting the filial piety discourse, homosexuals attempted to turn their parents' opinions on filial piety into the way that was favorable to them.

These new discourses appealed to some of the interviewees' parents. Herein new concepts were linked with objects meaningfully. New practices emerged as this connectivity arose. First, some parents gradually accepted their children's homosexual identity and stopped pushing them to get married or prevented them from pursuing their own life. Some even joined the Tongzhi community with their

Children and campaigned for homosexuals in Mainland. Besides, even though some parents still felt reluctant to accept the truth and make concessions, they could not successfully argue over their children nor could they endure to see the painfulness and pressure their children faced, therefore they passively accepted their children's identity without showing too much support or opposition. Nevertheless, some interviewees' negotiation with their parents fell into stalemate and they faced a seemingly dead end. Nominal marriage was not a makeshift for them, as marriage was still an imperative topic that they had to face and negotiate with their children.

DISCUSSION

Interviewees in this study showed the use of various discourses to negotiate with their parents on the marriage issue. Major activities these homosexuals adopted include assertion of a homosexual life with a steadfast position with few concession to their parents, construction of a flexible life that balanced their needs and parental pressure, and struggling with the process by being stuck in the current situation without taking further step to negotiate with their parents. Although these activities all caused both sides' pain and pressure, interviewees who did not take any move tended to struggle most compared with other interviewees. Gender differences arose in terms of gays and lesbians' attitude towards nominal marriage. Gay interviewees tended to take a serious attitude towards nominal marriage and one of the reasons they got married was because they wanted to have children. In contrast, lesbian interviewees tended to treat nominal marriage more like a fake show and they did not intend to stay in this relationship long enough, let alone giving birth to a child with the male homosexual spouses. This was traceable to traditional Chinese cultural expectation for men to continue the family bloodline.

Two major discourses these homosexuals employed as strategies to negotiate with their parents are a discourse of normality of homosexuality and a discourse of rewriting filial piety. Against a backdrop of contemporary Chinese society, these discourses resonated with homosexuals' parents and they were gradually by some of the parents. For parents who accepted these new discourses, they changed their attitude and took up new causes, whether willingly or not, the new discourse introduced by homosexuals were connected by some parents who could finally link the new concepts with objects.

CONCLUSION

This paper used homosexuals' negotiation with their parents on the marriage issue as an example to illustrate how discourse functions as a strategy to negotiation based on the three discursive circuits model. These discourses generally build on different social power in light of negotiating strategy.

To conclude, this paper has several contributions. First, this paper contributes to literature on both negotiation and discourse. Second, the study researched into how a relatively suppressed and marginalized group in the Mainland negotiated with the major social value, which shall shed light on how social minorities negotiate with their majority counterparts. Third, marriage is not only a problem that homosexuals face, adults in China nowadays have to face it and the conflict between them and their parents becomes more and more visible. Therefore, the current research highlights some intergenerational negotiation tactics that may contribute to resolution of intergenerational conflict and improvement of intergenerational relationship.

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