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Stretched Kinship:

Parental Rejection and Acceptance of Queer Youth in Chinese Families

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Abstract

Kinship has been the primary concern among young queer people in today's China and other parts of Asia under the strong and ongoing familism, who often find it challenging to come out and negotiate their sexuality with their parental family. This paper adopts the concept of *stretched kinship* to critically analyze the digital videos released by PFLAG China (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays in China) from 2015 to 2020, focusing on the experiences of the parents in their responses to young people's coming out. It both extends and challenges the concept of stretched kinship by turning the spotlight from queer youth to their parents—a topic often overlooked in queer Asian and Chinese studies—to examine how Chinese parents reject and accept their queer child contextualized in the rapid and ongoing social change in twenty-first-century China and Asia.

Keywords

Queer Youth, Coming Out, Stretched Kinship, PFLAG China, Parent-Youth Relationship, Parental Rejection and Acceptance, Kinship and Family

Kinship studies entered sociology and anthropology in the late 1940s through the pioneering work of Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1949] 1969) and David Schneider (1968, 1984) who reframed kinship from biological ties to systems of social relations, turning kinship into a subject of

social inquiry. However, the interest of social and cultural scholars has gradually faded since the late twentieth century, and kinship research has become a less trodden path in English-language scholarship in the past few decades (Furstenberg, 2020). That said, there is one noticeable exception: gay and lesbian kinship studies. In the 1990s, Kath Weston showed how gay and lesbian people had moved out from the natal home to build their own chosen families and peer groups ([1991] 1997), pushing the boundary of kinship studies from conjugal and consanguine families to voluntary social organizations of kinship-like bonding beyond legal and biological kin formed through marriage and reproduction (see Furstenberg et al., 2020).

This development echoed a surge of interest on gay and lesbian kinships in health, psychology, social work, youth studies, and family studies. An important part of the existent scholarship is on how queer youth—teenagers and young adults—come out to their parents and negotiate their sexuality with the family and how they build and find support among peer social groups. Parental reactions to coming out, on the other hand, have also been widely researched in psychology and family studies. Apoorva Ghosh (2020b) recently reviewed existing studies conducted mostly in Anglo-European countries on parental responses to young queer people's coming out, showing the complexity of the process from initial parental reactions to long-term attitude change that involves various forms and degrees of rejection and acceptance of queer youth. His observation parallels previous empirical studies that focused on the psychological identity transformation of queer people and their parents in the process of coming out (see Chrisler, 2017 for a summary) as well as emergent comparative studies on parental responses between the East and the West (Ghosh, 2020a; Wei, 2021) that have highlighted both the connections and the differences between the two.

Studies on queer kinships in Chinese societies first emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century and have developed in anthropology, cultural studies, and interpretive sociology

to account for traditional Confucianist family values and cultures that remain imperative in today's China and parts of Asia (Brainer, 2019; Chou, 2000; Liu & Ding, 2005; Wei, 2020). Familism and parental authority, the two pillars of the highly hierarchical Confucianist family order and social order, have structured and sustained the struggles and sufferings of queer youth in the compulsory heteronormative productions of kinship. Under the pressure of unconditional filial obedience and unquestionable parental authority to continue the family through marriage and reproduction, young gay and lesbian people often face enormous difficulties to negotiate their sexuality with the family. Most of them have to stay in the closet, and those who come out often face great uncertainties in terms of how their parents react and respond to it.

Further, China's imposition of the one-child policy from 1979 to 2015 has made many Chinese people the only child in the family. They have to carry the expectation for marriage and reproduction all by themselves without any siblings to cushion the tensions and conflicts with their parents in the negotiations of kinship and sexuality. The parents, on the other hand, often put high hopes on the single child in the family. This marks a structural difference not only between current Chinese and Western understandings and practices of kinship, but also between the typical family structure in mainland China, the focus of this paper, and that in other ethnic Chinese societies and diaspora communities. In addition, the rapid economic growth and social change in China in recent decades have completely changed the underlying kinship structure—a point to which I shall return shortly—shifting how family connections are maintained and negotiated between the young generations and their parents.

It is against this context that the current paper sets out to examine parental responses to young people's coming out in Chinese families—a long-overdue topic as previous queer Chinese and Asian studies often talked about kinship from the perspective of queer people and seldom put the parents in the center. This paper takes an interpretive approach to

critically analyze the videos released by PFLAG China (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays in China), a non-profit organization founded by gay activist Ah-Qiang/Hu Zhijun in 2008 (TalkIn, 2019) and modeled on its counterpart in the United States that first emerged in the 1980s to connect the families and friends of gay and lesbian people (Murray, 2012). As shown in the analysis below, parental reactions in Chinese families often stretch the process of coming out and kinship negotiation into a *long* and *intense* battle. The parents, not unlike the queer youth, have often gone through the coming out as a traumatic life-changing experience followed by prolonged emotional stress and years of struggle, self-education, and networking with other parents to understand transgressive sexualities. Meanwhile, their individual and collective agency, which is shaped by and responsive to China's changing social conditions, has often shown through their experiences in rejecting and accepting their queer child that can be critically considered to understand the changing kinship structure in today's China.

Adopting the conceptual framework of "stretched kinship" (see below), this paper focuses on how Chinese parents reject and accept their children who challenge traditional familism and parental authority when they come out as gay/lesbian or *tongzhi*, a local slang term describing same-sex attracted men and sometimes women (Chou, 2000, 2001; Tang & Qu, 2008). While the theory of stretched kinship was developed through the perspective of queer youth, this paper turns to another side of the stretched queer kinship structure, namely the parents in queer people's families of origin, to offer an extension and a necessary revision to the stretched kinship concept in understanding the changing kinship structure in the twenty-first century. In what follows, I first map out the theory of stretched kinship and its current inadequacy in addressing parental responses to young people's coming out in Chinese families, followed by close examinations of the videos released by PFLAG China between

2015 and 2020 to make sense of parental rejection and acceptance of young queer people in today's China.

Stretched Kinship: Questions of Mobilities and The Impossible Home

Stretched kinship is a concept that I have developed (Wei, 2020) as a metaphor to describe the long-distance kinship structure and the long-term separation between young queer people and their parental families, where the physical and geographical distance often intensifies the mental and emotional detachment as queer youth hide their sexual preference from the family. The concept of stretch kinship is established on a critique against the classic and influential “coming out as coming home” strategy (Chou, 2000, 2001), which refers to a process that one brings home a same-sex partner as a “good friend” who will then regularly and frequently stop by and join in quotidian family activities from recreation to daily chores. Gradually, this “good friend” will be accepted as a family member, which often leads to the silent acceptance of the same-sex relationship by the family even without a conspicuous coming out. This non-confrontational strategy was understood as more suitable to Chinese cultures and other Asian societies, as it brings transgressive desires and sexualities into the register of the family and effectively avoids challenging the parental authority and the deeply ingrained familism that may result in family conflicts and rejection.

This, however, no longer works in today's China. “Coming out as coming home” is a time-consuming process and young people have to live with or very close to their parents to carry it out. The recent decades have witnessed a significant increase in Chinese people's mobilities, meaning it has become increasingly common for young people to leave home and move to another place to pursue education and employment for a better future. Supported by their parents and driven by a pervasive desire for upward social mobility in China's strong

and ongoing economic development, young generations are eager to move across the country or across the world for better opportunities. The commonplace experiences in internal or international migration, combined with the aspiration for vertical social class mobilization through relentless self-investment and self-development, have eliminated the time and space required for “coming out as coming home” to work. When young people routinely separate from their parents and families of origin, “home” has become an impossible physical and mental space to “come out” into (Wei, 2020, pp. 27–33; see also Luo, 2020, 2021a, 2021b on China’s internal queer migrants).

A *stretched kinship* structure has therefore come into being. First, the kinship tie between young people and their parental family has been stretched by the long distance and the prolonged separation (“stretching it”). Second, as coming out is still not an option for many, they have to carefully hide their sexual selves from their families of origin during both the separation and family reunions, creating an ongoing mental and emotional detachment from the family (“hiding it”). Third, stretched kinship never remains in a static state of being, nor is it confined in the isolated moments of separation or reunion. Instead, it needs constant negotiations and re-negotiations, and balance and re-balance, as the family starts to keenly expect a heterosexual marriage when their child—often the only child—moves out of home and comes of age. This means that tensions will gradually build up in the stretched kinship connection, forming a precarious balance when queer people carefully plan their next move and come up with potential solutions to address the conflicts between their sexuality and their family. They have to constantly work on the stretched kinship tie and keep “kneading” it as if they were stretching a flour dough in the kitchen to make it elastic and resilient without breaking it—where the metaphor of “stretched kinship” was first developed (Wei, 2020, pp. 33–41, 152–54).

Fourth, stretched kinship delineates the commonplace stretched feelings among young queer people, when kinship is often a predominant concern that puts them under enormous pressures facing the compulsory Confucianist familism and the strong hierarchical parental authority that mandate a heterosexual and reproductive marriage to continue the family line. This results in a *kinship of unease* where it is not only the kinship tie but also young people themselves who often feel “stretched.” The prevalent stressed and stretched feelings also lead to a *filial panic* under the time constraints facing them—internal or international migration for education and employment is a time-consuming process, and young people will soon reach the expected age of marriage when they graduate from college and start their career. They often find themselves running against time when their family gradually loses patience and increasingly demands a heteronormative marriage, while they still lack sufficient social, cultural, and economic capital to deal with the challenges and complexities in continued stretched kinship negotiations. They feel the urge to find a solution and change the situation (see below), although their options are often limited. This process of “stretching it, hiding it, kneading it, feeling it, and urging it” has constituted a stretched kinship structure underlined by the prevalent and development-induced geographical, cultural, generational, and social mobilities in China and many parts of capitalist Asia.

This stretched kinship structure not only functions in young people’s *home-leaving* and *home-coming* processes during the separation and family reunions, but further extends to the larger collateral family and to their *home-making* efforts to build their own family locally and globally. First, even some people have come out to their parents, Chinese parents are often reluctant to disclose that they have a queer child (again, the only child) to the extended family such as the grandparents or family friends and relatives. This essentially creates another layer of stretched kinship, meaning that the parents are hiding it for the child and thus creating another gap of mental and emotional detachment in the collateral family (“stretching

it further”). Moreover, it is common for queer people to stay in the closet for heterosexual marriage, or for a gay couple and a lesbian couple to arrange a fake cooperative marriage who pretend and get married as two heterosexual couples (see Engebretsen, 2014, pp. 104–23; Ho, 2010, p. 39; Ji et al., 2021, p. 538; Kam, 2012, pp. 84–86; Wei, 2020, pp. 40–41). These practices are essentially “hiding it” and “faking it” to establish another stretched kinship connection that involves both their own and the in-law’s families, where the kinship connection is stretched to a dangerously intense status; if one part broke down, the whole chain of fake marriages would collapse. Meanwhile, some middle-class and higher-income queer couples can now afford an overseas marriage or migrating to another country (“moving it”) for more social tolerance and legal recognition of same-sex partnerships—a process that entails and enables another type of queer mobility and queer home-making that needs to be stretched to foreign soil. All these practices will further stretch the kinship connections with the parental and original family.

Overall, the concept of stretched kinship offers a subtle yet accurate delineation of the lived experience of queer Chinese people in their day-to-day life—a useful metaphor and an analytical concept that address and deal with the intricate process of negotiating one’s non-conforming sexuality with the parental family, often with various uncertainties and possibilities involved. The underlying practices also present a practical strategy for queer youth, insomuch as they can take the opportunity of mobility and separation to build connections with other queer people to learn their experiences (social capital), acquire and accumulate relevant knowledge and resources (cultural capital), and build up their financial reserve (economic capital) that will put them in a better and more secure position in kinship negotiation (Wei, 2020, pp. 97–103, 152–4). The flexibility and elasticity of the “stretched” connections have created some leeway for them to maneuver through a very difficult journey. However, the concept of stretched kinship is almost exclusively developed from the

perspectives of queer youth and has largely missed another side of the stretched kinship structure, namely the parents, which leaves a gap to fill. That, at any rate, is my point of departure in this paper.

In what follows, I examine three videos produced by PFLAG China and its members that focus on the predominant concern of queer kinship negotiations, i.e. how Chinese parents respond to their child's coming out and eventually come to terms with the latter's sexuality. These videos include: (1) a short video *Coming Home (Huijia)* released before the Chinese New Year in 2015, which went viral on social media and soon attracted over 100 million views and international media attention (see BBC, 2015); (2) a video series *Elderly Chinese Talking about LGBT (Zhongguo Laoren Liao LGBT)* released in 2020, especially a "special episode" focusing on the parents of queer youth, for which the producer visited 18 different cities in China in 2019 to interview the elderly about their attitudes towards sexual minorities; (3) a video documentary *Out in Chongqing (Shancheng Ai)* released in 2016 that focuses on the "rainbow parents" in the local PFLAG network in the city of Chongqing. Overall, I have chosen these videos because they have directly captured the experiences of the parents of queer youth. With references to other media materials (e.g. TV talk shows featuring members of PFLAG China), my analysis explores the parents' experience of rejecting and accepting a queer youth in their family, and whether the concept of stretched kinship functions as a useful analytical tool to understand their reactions and experiences in the negotiation of young people's sexuality.

Home-Leaving/Home-Coming: Tensions and Undercurrents in a Precarious Balance

Coming Home starts with the voiceover of Fang Chao, a self-identified gay man who left home and moved to another city for tertiary education at the age of 18. With the first scene

set in an apparent university campus, he talks about how his excellent test scores got him into his dream school and how he has been a proud son in the eyes of his parents—but yet he has been pretending and playing the role of an obedient child in the family, hinting on his non-conforming sexuality that deviates from traditional familism that will eventually confront his parents. As discussed above, the large increase in Chinese people's mobilities and the rising urban middle classes in the recent decade present both a condition and a consequence that further drives today's parents to send their child away from home for better educational and occupational attainment. The home-leaving process for migration and separation often marks the beginning of the stretched kinship connection, when young people come of age and come to terms with their sexualities away from the family.

However, from the parents' perspective, their closeness and intimacy with their only child are also disrupted and stretched by young people's aspiration for mobilities and their own expectation for the young generation's social migration through geographical relocation. The longing and yearning for the child's return—often once a year during the Lunar New Year—has become a structural force sustaining the stretched yet resilient kinship that connects the family and the queer youth across time and space. As shown in the second scene of *Coming Home*, the parents' expectation for the return of the child often becomes a major celebratory event of the year, where family reunions temporarily bring the child back to the parents. The underlying tension derived from the closeted sexuality, on the other hand, is not necessarily relaxed by the physical reunion. On the contrary, the home-coming process for reunion often intensifies the tension and the pressure facing the queer youth, insomuch as Chinese parents often expect their children to start dating when they come of age to bring back a (heterosexual) partner to the family, which is central to the Confucianist understanding of kinship that focuses heavily on marriage and reproduction. The marriage of the child is

commonly understood as partially a responsibility of the parents in China and many Asian societies to fulfill their parental obligation and for the child to be recognized as a full adult.

That means, from the point of home-leaving, the parents' focus and expectation for the child have turned from academic performance and college admission to the anticipated (heterosexual) dating and marriage—thus to the deeply private and often disturbing issue of sexuality for queer youth who struggle to come out. As portrayed in *Coming Home*, the parents and other family members often routinely probe into the child's relationship status, which often becomes the focus of New Year family reunions in both parental and extended families—or what I have described as an “annual interrogation” when young queer people have to repeatedly make up excuses for not dating (a heterosexual partner) while hiding their sexuality from the parents, relatives, and family friends (Wei, 2020, p. 35). The kinship connection is hence further stretched over time from the unfilled gap between the child's sexual orientation and the family's expectation, while young people have to keep “hiding it” year after year when their family gradually loses patience.

But this is also where stretched kinship has its role to play in the parents' experience. While Chinese families often avoid talking openly and directly about issues like sex and sexuality, many parents may have felt that their children are somewhat “different” from others and may already quietly suspect that there might be something “wrong” with their sons and daughters. Although the concept of homosexuality may not appear straightaway in their mind as the first explanation of their child's difference and deviance from the social norm and cultural ideal at the expected age of dating and marriage, the slow increase of queer people's social visibility may indeed make them wonder as there have been more discussions of homosexuality on mass media and the Internet. In this sense, there exists another layer of “stretched kinship” that has been overlooked in the original development of the concept: the parents may have guessed it already when the child is still hiding it from the family and

struggling to come to terms with the parents. The stretched mental and emotional detachment often continues in the family as both sides would remain silent around the sensitive topic of sexuality to avoid confrontation. The tensions and the undercurrents are hence still building and growing in a precarious balance through the stretched long-distance kinship and prolonged separation, where both sides are guessing and biding their time.

In other cases, a diligent child may have been planning the coming out for years and gradually sharing information of non-traditional sexualities with the parents (or at least one of them) to test their extent of acceptance and prepare for the eventual revelation. As shown in a talk show featuring PFLAG China on partially state-owned Phoenix TV (2013), a young gay man Zhang Lingxuan had been planning and working through his coming out for eight years, although he was forced to come out to his mother (who was already suspecting) after the fifth year due to unexpected circumstances. This marks another type of the stretched experience in the dynamics of queer kinship that both the parents and the child are to various degrees knowingly or intuitively probing and testing each other—the parents are trying to understand how and why their child is different, often without thinking or talking about homosexuality initially, while the child also tends to avoid the topic directly but instead shares carefully selected information and stories of queer people to leave a positive impression. This may stretch to a prolonged process for years where the parents and the child gradually test each other without touching the core issue of sexuality, both trying to avoid the “one-way street” of coming out that often leaves no place to return—until “hiding it” no longer works.

That is to say, from the parents’ perspective in addition to that of the queer youth, stretched kinship also refers to a process of guessing, testing, probing, and biding the time from both sides of the family, which is further complicated and stretched by the increased mobilities of young people in pursuit of upward social and cultural migrations via internal and/or international relocations. The distance and separation created by young people’s

mobilities often make the process even longer and harder. This argument adds another layer of stretched experiences for both the parents and the children to the “stretching it, hiding it, kneading it, feeling it, and urging it” process in the original concept of stretched kinship. As shown in *Coming Home* and other PFLAG videos, the tensions and undercurrents on the side of the parents who have to constantly guess and probe into their child’s private life are often as intense as that of the queer youth themselves who have to hide their sexual selves while making plans for kinship negotiations.

However, the parents’ reaction to the child’s coming out may not be positive at all, even after years of speculation and the latter’s long-term preparation. Despite this rather time-consuming process where both sides test each other’s patience in a stretched “equilibrium,” so to speak, the balance will break as soon as the child comes out and the equilibrium will collapse under the reactions of the often confused, enraged, and/or disappointed parents. In *Coming Home*, Fang Chao’s mother cannot accept his homosexuality and blames him for the “shame” he brings to the family that betrays the “gift of life and upbringing” bestowed on him by his parents, while his father kicks him out right away and tells him not to come home. Even as the only child, he is disowned by his parents and cast away from the family for two years, as the parents cannot cope with their anger and disappointment and need time to work through their emotions and struggles.

In other videos produced and released by PFLAG China, parents frequently talk about the initial shock and enormous emotional “torture” they went through after the child’s coming out, even some of them had already sensed the “difference” of their child long before the disclosure. The overall kinship structure has (temporarily) collapsed as a direct result of the child’s coming out and the parents’ immediate reaction, until the parents gradually come around (as in *Coming Home*) and decide to work with their child to cope with the latter’s sexuality that deviates from their own knowledge, life experience, expectations, and sense of

normality and morality. This often marks the beginning of a new process—which again often takes years as shown in various PFLAG videos—that starts to establish a new and different form of stretched kinship when the parents begin to come to terms with their child’s sexuality but also increasingly worry about the difficulties and uncertainties facing their queer child and their family in a country like China. This is discussed below through other digital videos from PFLAG China to further question and develop the concept of stretched kinship through the parents’ experiences.

Parental Panic: Stretched Parents in the Kinship of Unease

The original concept of stretched kinship focuses on young queer people’s *filial panic* in the kinship of unease when they are running against time as their parents gradually lose patience (Wei, 2020, p. 38). But, once they come out, the issue is often extended and stretched to a *parental panic* when their parents struggle to understand the issue of homosexuality. Facing a low-tolerance society with insufficient and limited state support, legal recognition, and public knowledge of gender and sexual diversity, the parents and the elder generations are often confused and shocked by the child’s coming out, insomuch as homosexuality is an unfamiliar and distanced concept in their perception that often belongs to the remote Others and “cannot happen to *our* child.” After the initial shock, *panic* often ensues as the parents realize that this is no longer “other people’s problem” yet have very little knowledge and life experience to deal with it.

A new stretched kinship structure starts to come into being when the shocked and panicked parents initially enter a phase of denial or disbelief and refuse to acknowledge or accept the child’s coming out, and then refuse to disclose it to other family members and friends, essentially “walking into the child’s closet” and hiding it for and with the child from

the wider and extended family and social circles. This experience is accounted for by the parents of queer youth in the video and talk show examined above, and also evident in *Elderly Chinese Talking about LGBT: The Parents Special* in which 15 parents of gay and lesbian youth from various parts of China talk about how they reacted and responded to their child's coming out as well as their journey to understand and eventually accept their son or daughter. Here, parental panic manifests at several imbricated levels that constitute a stretched experience of the parents in rejecting and accepting their queer child.

First, as briefly discussed above, the parents in the video commonly believed that homosexuality was other people's problem that would never happen in their family, until their own child came out and left them in shock. The video opens with a mother remarking that "I won't discriminate other kids who are homosexual, but I always feel sad that my own child is homosexual." This strongly echoes both anecdotal evidence and empirical research that, in today's Chinese societies, people may be open to non-conforming sexuality as long as it is not in their own family (see Yeo & Chu 2018). Here, parental panic clearly derives from a mindset of "otherness" and a lack of understanding of the prevalence of sexual diversity, which partially owes to the still limited social visibility and public perception of queer people and cultures in China, especially among the elderly. This kind of parental panic often sets the tone for their initial rejection of the coming out. In some cases, disclosure essentially has no effects because the parents have little knowledge and awareness of homosexuality and refuse to take it seriously.

Indeed, in this and other videos from PFLAG China, several parents reveal that their child has come out to them more than once, after they brushed off the initial coming out and refused to believe that their child is attracted to the same sex. In this video, two parents from different families and different cities also thought that homosexuality was "other countries' problem" (*guowai de shiqing*) that did not exist in China, and one of them initially believed

that her child was simply mimicking the people in the West to “catch the trend,” despite a long and rich history of diverse gendered and sexual practices in China and many parts of Asia (Hinsch, 1990; Xiaomingxiong, [1984] 1997). Many parents in this video have made it clear that they did not use the word “homosexuality” in their days in the past and knew little about it when their child first came out. Albeit not a focus of this paper, it is interesting to note that elderly Chinese parents seem to intuitively associate homosexuality with modernity and Western influence—and then to social progression once they have joined PFLAG China and started to learn about gay rights and marriage equality in the West and now in Taiwan. I will return to this point later in the paper.

Second, the parents’ self-confessed lack of knowledge often comes hand-in-hand with concerns about social and moral pressure facing both their child and themselves. In the video, the parents (both mother and father) of a young man from Sichuan have talked extensively about their deep anxiety of losing face (*mei mianzi*) as homosexuality is still considered indecent and immoral, especially among their social peers (i.e. the elder generations). Their panic lies in the real and assumed low social acceptance of the child and the family, and in the video they have tried anxiously to justify their son as an equally good member of society (“same as others”) by counting his social achievements including getting into a prestigious university. Here, stretched kinship is no longer only about what happens within the family; rather, it so often extends to the social domain where private matters (sexuality) have to be justified by one’s socio-cultural values, most noticeably educational credentials as a form of cultural capital.

The latter, cultural capital, has become a significant indicator of a “gay meritocracy” where sexual transgression is more affordable for socially advantaged queer people whose social class privilege helps protect their privacy to maintain a possible queer life in a country like China (Wei, 2020, pp. 111–15). Here, parents often worry about how their child can

survive and thrive while still being accepted as a worthy member of society through the means of cultural and other forms of capital. In all the videos and the aforementioned talk show, educational credentials are frequently cited by the parents, the TV host, and the queer youth themselves, subtly yet conspicuously suggesting that they are worthy of acceptance in a culture that highly values education and in an economy that heavily depends on a large and educated labor force for China's continued growth and great dream of revival. In other words, the social legitimacy and worthiness of queer youth are justifiable through their educational and economic values that are expected to protect and compensate for their sexual transgression—a common narrative adopted by the parents that fits the normative and dominant Chinese social values. When social tolerance is still low, the “merits” of queer youth have become a mode for acceptance and social survival. For the panicked parents, the mechanism of social integration (without challenging the underlying heteronormative social institution) has become a means to ease the panic and pressure, who find themselves struggling to accept homosexuality when the family is subject to social pressure and scrutiny.

These elements of parental panic help reveal how stretched kinship is also a kinship of unease for the parents: the initial coming out of the child often puts them in a difficult spot, which may extend to a prolonged battle with their son or daughter. Although a few parents in the video recalled that it only took them “a few days” or “a week” to come around, it is also common for the parents to struggle for years to come to terms with the child's sexuality. In this video, a mother from Anhui talks at length about her five-year battle to accept her son as she thought homosexuals were perverts. She took him to seek medical advice, locked him at home, followed him to school every day, stopped him from hanging out with other boys, almost pushed him to suicide, and almost took her own life—it was a painful experience that deeply hurt her and her child, until she found connections with other parents through PFLAG China and started to learn about homosexuality to accept her son. In another video, *Out in*

Chongqing (discussed below), several parents refer to the case of Auntie Liu who rejected and battled her lesbian daughter for eight years until she finally accepted her. This is known in the local PFLAG circle as a landmark Eight-Year War of Resistance (*banian kangzhan*), referring to China's eight-year defensive war against Japanese invasion during World War II, which indicates how difficult it was for the parents who went through such stretched and prolonged ordeals facing their child's coming out.

This is precisely why I argue that the concept of stretched kinship should be and must be extended for the analysis of the parents' experience, which is often overlooked and still under-researched in queer Chinese and Asian studies. While coming out is encouraged in PFLAG China's video campaigns, the act of coming out may lead to an even more stretched experience for both the parents and the child, in addition to the "hiding it/kneading it" process where young people struggle to negotiate their sexuality with the family and the "guessing it" process where both sides bide the time and remain silent to avoid confrontation. This is also why many young people are reluctant to come out: even though their parents may eventually accept them, they do not want to put their parents through such a long and torturous ordeal, a cardinal sin against filial piety. They face the dilemma that coming out may hurt the parents, while staying in the closet may hurt themselves. As a father says in the video, "there is no such thing as a painless coming out" and "the parents will get hurt," although honesty may be better for the family in the long run. This is another layer of stretched kinship that coming out means putting the parents in distress and subjecting the family to social stigma and scrutiny, which is against Confucianist familism and the fundamental value of filial piety. That said, one should not underestimate the (eventual) willingness of the parents to work to accept their child, often through the help of peer support networks such as PFLAG China in the form of "alternative families"—another kind of stretched kinship for the parents of queer youth.

Alternative Families: Extending Parental Support through the PFLAG Network

In the original concept of stretched kinship, alternative families refer to social groups and organizations established by and for queer people themselves—often young urban migrants who come to larger cities and regional economic centers for education and employment, and who often need peer support to acquire and secure a sense of “family” and community that they cannot find at home as they are hiding their sexuality from the family. This concept deviates from Kath Weston’s idea of “chosen family” ([1991] 1997), in the sense that many young queer people in today’s China are driven into internal/international migrations by circumstances (not by choice) to pursue opportunities not available in their hometown, who then end up in kinship-like social groups that offer them care and support. This, again, has overlooked the “alternative families” of the parents who are also driven into peer support groups in stretched kinship negotiations, such as PFLAG China that has several regional and provincial chapters across many parts of the country.

The video documentary *Out in Chongqing* focuses on a group of parents from the local PFLAG network of Chongqing in China’s southwest hinterland. The video intercuts between the accounts of painful stories of their child’s coming out and their participation in a national PFLAG convention for parents and queer children. The camera has captured some emotional moments, when the parents meet up to share stories in the regional group meeting and at the national convention with their children, where love and acceptance of the youth are warmly encouraged and celebrated. The video then turns to their collective advocacy for same-sex civil union and marriage legislation. Here, in the family-like network of PFLAG China, emotions and advocacy are enacted through a dual process of “confessing” (sharing the painful past) and “daydreaming” (imagining a positive future of marriage equality), not unlike the alternative families of queer youth who also connect the traumatic past with a promising and forward-dawning future beyond the liminal present—from where a sense of

belonging comes into being for the hopeless and futureless queer youth facing the often unsustainable queer love and uncertain queer future (Wei, 2020, pp. 45–53).

In stretched kinship, alternative families are understood as a stretched form of *home-making* and *space-making*, insomuch as family-like support and the sense of belonging can only be found in such social groups established outside the family. For the parents, alternative families often come from the panic that drives them to seek peer support from other people with similar experiences to figure out what to do. In the video, several parents (including the aforementioned Auntie Liu) not only share their painful past but also account their struggles when they first came to PFLAG, until they realized that they were not alone but in a “family” of parents facing the same kind of panic. Many of them have in turn become volunteers to help others and advocate for the love and support of queer people. Their “love advocacy,” to borrow a term from Kendal Broad’s work on the PFLAG organization in America in the 1990s, makes possible a “gentle motivation work” through the emotional mobilization of “love” to advocate for “acceptance” instead of outright activism (2011, pp. 408–10). The emotional work through confessing and daydreaming, as seen in this video, is highly effective in turning the tensions and stretched feelings from the painful past into mutual support among the parents, which then becomes an emotionally motivated work to advocate for a better (queer) future.

However, their love-motivated and love-oriented advocacy as shown in the video still has its limits. Their call for the government to legalize same-sex marriage, commendable as it is, has overlooked the fact that the same process in the West and in Taiwan is built upon decades of informed public discussions and debates in an effective public sphere with active civil participation—something China does not have and the state is reluctant to encourage and cultivate. Despite the effort from a small number of lawmakers and scholars (including prominent Chinese sexologist Li Yinhe) to legalize same-sex marriage, the most recent one in

2020, it is questionable whether the process of legislation is the best way to achieve sexual equality when it still lacks social support and public consensus. Previous census data have indicated a very low social acceptance of homosexuality (Hu, 2016; Xie & Peng, 2018), while current Chinese laws lack basic protections against sexuality-based discrimination in education and employment—similar legal protections already existed in Taiwan through the *Gender Equity Education Act* (2004) and the revised *Act of Gender Equality in Employment* (2008) long before its 2019 gay marriage legislation (Wei, 2022b). It would be a “great leap forward”—both in a good sense and in the negative historical connotation of this term—in today’s China to push directly for same-sex marriage when it lacks social foundations and necessary preconditions.

This argument further reveals the deep panic of the anxious parents that I have outlined above: marriage and the continuation of the family are still important in the Confucianist familism and social order. In both *Out in Chongqing* and *Elderly Chinese Talking about LGBT*, many parents hope China can follow a number of Western countries as well as Taiwan to legalize gay marriage, so their children will have an equal chance to spend their life with a same-sex partner. If China’s compulsory developmentalism has put young generations in a relentless pursuit of mobility for education and employment, then the compulsory familism has also driven the parents into a continued cultural fascination with marriage. They have “naturally” assumed that the happiness of the child is hinged upon and contingent on the latter’s ability to find a partner and get married, and their own happiness still largely relies on having a grandchild, as one parent enviously remarks in the video when she points out that another parent of a lesbian couple already has a grandson. This hardwired logic is deeply rooted in the Confucianist understanding of the family and society, trapping the parents in the same kind of compulsory familism and the soft violence of the family that led to queer people’s initial struggles and the stretched feelings of kinship in the first place.

Although the parents mean well and only wish the best for their children, as clearly shown in the video through their emphasis on “love and acceptance,” they should caution that the pressure for their sons and daughters to marry a same-sex partner can be as strong and oppressive as their initial push for them to marry the opposite sex. Their motivation is understandable and justifiable, but this should not turn into another kind of pressure for the already stretched queer youth and the parents themselves. Finding a same-sex partner and maintaining a long-term relationship is still a major challenge facing many queer people in China, as their same-sex partners often have to break up with them to marry the opposite sex under the still strong and ongoing social and family pressure. This mismatch between the unsustainable queer love and the relentless improvement of people’s other life conditions in today’s China is a stubborn issue that needs deeper social changes to resolve (Wei, 2020, p. 139). Also, most parents in this and other videos remain silent about the issue of reproduction (e.g. through surrogacy or sperm donation), which is arguably a more complicated question that needs more advanced knowledge (cultural capital) and financial resources (economic capital) to mitigate.

This is why I argue to focus on the power of active imagination in the stretched and alternative families of the parents through the emotion-charged motivational work—framing it as “daydreaming” is to call into attention the power of collective efforts in envisioning a better and brighter future that in turn feed into actions and advocacy, although their current goal to legalize same-sex marriage may be hard to achieve as it still lacks proper social grounding. This is not to discount or brush off the value of their work through PFLAG China, but to shed further light on the plight and ordeal facing the parents of queer youth who want their children to be accepted with equal respect and understanding from the wider public. Here, the power of alternative families lies in its efficiency and effectiveness to bring together the emotionally stressed and stretched parents into an intimate and alternative family

and network, which helps them deal with the common challenges in the stretched kinship of unease and extend their love and support through “confessing” and “daydreaming” that turn negative emotions into positive actions through their gentle motivational work.

In other words, as shown in *Out in Chongqing* and other videos, PFLAG China has helped them build a collective family and made possible a very special “queer space” not for queer people but for their parents—an invaluable home-making and space-making process that frees and relocates the stretched kinship of unease from single, individual families to an alternative and collective “kinship at ease” in regional and national PFLAG networks. This has become an important way for the parents to extend their knowledge and support when their own generations often lack relevant experience and understanding of sexuality issues. It also helps prevent more tragedies and reduce the tension and stress in the long trek from rejection to acceptance after the already prolonged and exhausting process of “hiding it” and “guessing it” in stretched kinship negotiations. In the current age of increased mobilities among the young generations where “home” has often become an impossible physical and mental space to come out into, alternative and collective families have become a necessity for both the parents and the queer youth to negotiate and come to terms with non-conforming sexualities.

Final Remarks

This paper, by closely examining three digital videos from PFLAG China and relevant media material on TV, shows how stretched kinship sustains and structures the parents’ experiences in rejecting and accepting a queer child and demonstrates both the power and the relevance of stretched kinship as an analytical tool to understand their reactions to young people’s coming out in negotiating family and sexuality. Extending and challenging the original concept, this

paper turns “stretched kinship” toward another direction to scrutinize the parents’ experiences from “guessing and probing” and parental panic to alternative families and a collective “kinship at ease” through the network of PFLAG China. From the parents’ perspective, stretched kinship also works and functions across the intermingled process of home-leaving, home-coming, and (alternative) home-making that has been the leitmotif of queer people’s lived experience of mobility since the turn of the twenty-first century.

This paper thus presents a necessary revision and addition to queer studies, kinship theories, China studies, and sociologies of family and sexualities by proposing and reframing the theory of stretched kinship for parental analyses. This reframing is crucial when the very concept of stretched kinship has been adopted to understand young queer people’s kinship negotiations in Western societies (e.g. Boyd & Wei, 2022), and when the issue of queer kinship has caught resurged academic interests both in the West and in other ethnic Chinese societies such as Taiwan, as discussed earlier in this paper (see Chrisler, 2017; Furstenberg, 2020; Furstenberg et al., 2020; van Bergen et al., 2021; Wei, 2021). The current study hence contributes to the recent developments in our understandings of gender and sexuality, kinship and family, and issues of mobilities and immobilities. The redeveloped theory of stretched kinship also offers practical insights for queer youth who intend to come out as well as the parents who are working to accept their child to consider the issues in this paper and plan their strategies accordingly.

Further, while I have criticized the social class inequalities and the heavy reliance of the parents and the queer youth on educational credentials to justify the inclusion of queer people as worthy members of society, we should pay attention to how the privilege of better educated queer youth may have overshadowed the less educated and other disadvantaged queer people in the study of today’s China and Asia (Wei 2020, 2022a). Looking toward the future, I should also note that the recent change to the “three-child policy” in China may start

to reshape the function and structure of family and kinship for the generations to come. These ongoing social transformations have left the door wide open for further scrutiny and critical considerations of the possibilities in coming out, kinship negotiation, and practices of gender and sexual diversity. This paper, I hope, has been able to shed light on the changing kinship structure and relevant social conditions for other researchers to further test and develop the stretched kinship concept in other queer/non-queer and national/transnational contexts in the coming decades of the twenty-first century.

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“John Wei’s meticulously researched and rigorously argued new book sets a new standard for queer Chinese studies. Bringing together a dazzling array of ethnographic materials, films, and digital media, Wei proposes the concept of stretched kinship to show us how questions of sexuality are always questions of mobilities as queer migrants become ineluctably entangled with China’s compulsory familism and developmentalism.”

—**Petrus Liu**, Boston University

In *Queer Chinese Cultures and Mobilities*, John Wei brings light to the germination and movements of queer cultures and social practices in today’s China and Sinophone Asia. While many scholars attribute China’s emergent queer cultures to the neoliberal turn and the global political landscape, Wei refuses to take these assumptions for granted. He finds that the values and pitfalls of the development-induced mobilities and post-development syndromes have conjointly structured and sustained people’s ongoing longings and sufferings under the dual pressure of compulsory familism and compulsory development.

While young gay men are increasingly mobilized in their decision-making to pursue sociocultural and socioeconomic capital to afford a queer life, the ubiquitous and compulsory mobilities have significantly reshaped and redefined today’s queer kinship structure, transnational cultural network, and social stratification in China and capitalist Asia. With *Queer Chinese Cultures and Mobilities*, Wei interrogates the meanings and functions of mobilities at the forefront of China’s internal transformation and international expansion for its great dream of revival, when gender and sexuality have become increasingly mobilized with geographical, cultural, and social class migrations and mobilizations beyond traditional and conventional frameworks, categories, and boundaries.