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## Rainbow parents and the familial model of *tongzhi* (LGBT) activism in contemporary China

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### ABSTRACT

An increasingly large number of Chinese straight parents joined an activist grassroots organization to advocate for gay rights in the public sphere during the last decade. They went through a multistage process of moral self-transformation and strategically employed the cultural capital of parenthood in the context of the rising neo-familism to engage the general public and negotiate with the state authority. Their advocacy work has resulted to an emergent familial model of LGBT activism in mainland China featuring the close collaboration between parents and gay children, the centrality of family relations instead of sexuality, the incorporation of LGBT activism into the neo-familism discourse and practice, and the shift from oppositional identity politics in the queer population to cooperative civic engagement with the society at large.

The contentious relationship between Chinese LGBT individuals (*tongzhi* in local terms) and their families of origin has been widely documented in academic research and media reports. But in recent years an increasing number of straight parents in mainland China have stood up to openly support their LGBT children and have participated in local *tongzhi* activism, primarily through the grassroots organization “Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays” (hereafter referred to as PFLAG China). Self-identified as “rainbow parents” (*caihong fumu*),<sup>1</sup> they have empowered themselves by promoting equal rights for their gay children through their

advocacy work. The rise of rainbow parents has arguably been one of the most noticeable and meaningful new development in the Chinese civic life during the last decade or so.

Drawing research data from in-depth interviews and participant observation with rainbow parents as well as secondary literature, we discover that many Chinese rainbow parents go through a multistage process of moral self-transformation—a coming out just as important and uneasy as that of their queer children. The parental self-transformation is enabled by, among other favorable social conditions, the rise of neo-familism (Yan 2016, 2018, 2021) that has been the leading trend of family changes during the last two decades. These rainbow parents utilize the cultural capital of parenthood and the values of neo-familism to negotiate with the authoritarian state and they have made impressive progress in promoting the common good of diversity and tolerance. Consequently, a familial model of queer sexuality and politics is emerging which will likely reshape the *tongzhi* movement in China in important ways and bring the significance of intergenerational cooperation to the foreground in global queer movement as well as kinship studies.

### **The family of origin in LGBT movement and neo-familism in China**

As “family outlaws” (Calhoun 2000, 132), LGBT individuals had always had uneasy relationships with their (presumably) heterosexual families of origin. As a result of physical violence and a lack of support from family members, it was often with negative emotions that they would discuss their families of origin (D’Augelli and Patterson 2001). Yet, unlike the flourishing research on LGBT partnership and parenthood which is often under the umbrella of the family of choice (Weston 1991; for good overviews, see Biblarz and Savci 2010; Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013), LGBT relations with their families of origin remain on the sideline.

Some efforts have been made to bring the family of origin back to central stage in queer studies, focusing on the context, process, and impact of the family response to the sexual disclosure by LGBT individuals (Herdt and Koff 2000; Murray 2010). Studies on family acceptance often place the act of an individual’s coming-out as a central event that triggers family change, including the mobilization of the parents to participate in LGBT advocacy movements (Murray 2010). Such studies examine the parents’ initial reactions to their children’s coming-out (Bertone and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2014), their strategies of normalizing queer sexuality in their family life and/or normalizing themselves as moral parents (Fields 2001), the framing strategies of PFLAG US in relation to both the LGBT movement and its counter-movements (Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004;

Broad 2011), and the stages in which the parent activists build individual moral lives (Johnson and Best 2012).

While coming-out remains pivotal in studies of families of origin, a more intersectional approach to this issue provincializes the Anglophone Western queer experiences and knowledge production. It is within this paradigmatic shift that the study of contemporary Chinese LGBT identity formation and politics has emerged and evolved. The contentious relationship between Chinese *tongzhi* and their heterosexist and patriarchal families is commonplace in scholarly research and media coverage throughout all Chinese societies (e.g., Engebretsen 2014 for mainland China; Kong 2011 for Hong Kong; and Brainer 2019 for Taiwan). The core of filial piety, arguably the most important virtue in Confucian ethics, is to ensure the continuity of the family name and bloodline by producing male offspring. To meet the familial and social expectations of a normal life, Chinese *tongzhi* of marrying age are pressured to enter heterosexual marriages, which very often result in individual stresses, conjugal conflicts, and family tragedies (Zheng 2015; Zhou and Hu 2020). Many argue that the major social pressures faced by *tongzhi* are due to familial rejection and regulation from parents and relatives rather than by state oppression or religious fundamentalism, as is the case in other societies (Chou 2001, 34; Li 1998).

Because of the central importance of the family, Wah-Shan Chou (2001) problematizes Western notions of coming-out and suggests “coming-home” as a more effective strategy for *tongzhi* individuals and activism. Even though Chou’s approach was later criticized for depriving homosexual subjects of any speaking power or visible position within the Chinese family (Liu and Ding 2005), the use of tacit strategies in coming-home, based on the compartmentalization of the heteronormative family life and the private if not hidden same-sex intimate practices and community socialization, is commonly found in ethnographic works on Chinese lesbian and gay communities (Li 1998; Engebretsen 2014). If the strategy of coming-home can be read as an overall surrender to the patriarchal family, a “coming-with” strategy, manifested by *xinghun* (nominal message)—a heterosexual marriage arrangement that is widely practiced by lesbians and gay men in urban China (Choi and Luo 2016), has recently been proposed to bring more agency into the picture (Huang and Brouwer 2018).

Whereas the Western concept of coming-out refers primarily to the queer person standing up for her/his sexual identity and facing society as an autonomous and independent individual, Chou’s notion of coming-home depicts the person embracing her/his family of origin, without openly revealing his/her unconventional sexuality, and integrating the sexual self with his/her social and family relationships. Regardless of the

criticism it has received, Chou's most valuable insight, in our opinion, lies in his observation that in Chinese culture "the family-kinship system rather than personal sexual desire is counted as the basis of what a person is" (2001, 33), which is still firmly situated in the cultural construction of the Chinese personhood today (Yan 2017).

What Chou and his critiques missed is that the Chinese family institution and practices of family life have both undergone radical changes during the previous several decades in response to the social transformations at the macro level (see, e.g., Jankowiak and Moore 2017; Davis 2014; Whyte 2005), resulting to the rise of neo-familism in the early 21st century that, while still upholds the family as the foundation of individual identity, has made the creation of a family-based identity more flexible and the family of origin a possible resource of support instead of an oppressive obstacle for LGBT youth.

As Yunxiang Yan (2016, 2018, 2021) elaborate in recent works, Chinese neo-familism differs from traditional familism at both an ideological and a practical level. The neo-familism discourse, which consists of three distinct varieties, emphasizes family solidarity and intergenerational dependency as well as the ethical value of self-sacrifice for the family group. The popular discourse among ordinary people highlights the family as the only reliable resource in difficulties in the increasingly competitive and precarious social environment. The intellectual discourse renders neo-familism a cultural capital to reach modernity via the Chinese way as well as part of the Confucian revival movement. In the official discourse, the Chinese state has embraced the reinterpreted familism as a component of patriotism and has also made the family a site of governance through new family policies.

Neo-familism as a social practice, while more influential in cities and rural areas where patrilineal organization was less developed and radical family reform was carried out under Maoism, is characterized by the following features. First and foremost, the focus of family life has shifted at both the spiritual and material levels from glorifying one's ancestors to enabling the youngest generations; consequently, the continuity of the descent line has lost its spiritual significance and the core value of filial piety no longer demands self-sacrifice by the junior generations. Second, the patrilineal principles of Chinese kinship, which had already been undermined to a great degree in previous decades, and the newly surging centrality of children have led to bilateral arrangements in post-marital co-residence and child-naming practices, leading to diverse ways of forming one's own family. Third, intergenerational dependence and solidarity have gained a new saliency in both the pragmatic and emotional aspects of family life, so much so that a new intergenerational identity is in the making. The identity ties parents and adult children together as a unified

whole, known as “*qinzi yiti*” (the integrated oneness of parents and children) in Chinese family discourse (Liu 2016; Yan 2021). The fourth feature of present-day neo-familism is the “intimate turn” in family life since the late 1990s. An increasing number of people across generational and gender lines assert that *qinqing* (familial emotions) are the most important value in one’s life, and expressions of intimacy through communications, gifts, and shared leisure activities have gained popularity among both urban and rural families. With the redefinition of the traditional virtue of filial piety, the development of intergenerational intimacy is especially noteworthy (Evans 2008). Lastly, there are tensions between individual interests and family interests in the new patterns of family life because neo-familism recognizes the value of the individual while also emphasizing the priority of family interests, a paradoxical development that is replete with tensions but also new possibilities.

Under neo-familism, the conventional family script has disintegrated, and a variety of new family scripts are in the making. Chinese individuals must mobilize whatever resources available to them and improvise their family life creatively, flexibly, and persistently on an ad hoc basis. Indeed, how people improvise neo-familism is the key to understanding the seemingly endless variations of household formation, the creative reinterpretation of structural principles, a re-thinking of family values such as filial piety, and, for the present study, the rise of rainbow parents.

### **Collaborative research and a mixed-method approach to PFLAG China**

The parents’ journey to rainbow parenthood and its broader social impacts constitute the focus of the collaborative research. A phenomenological approach was utilized to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience (Marshall and Rossman 2016). Qualitative interview therefore became the primary method for this research. Over the years, Wei has interviewed more than thirty PFLAG staff and participant rainbow parents nationwide. Carrying out fieldwork on rainbow parents in Shanghai in June–July and Guangzhou in December 2019, Yan conducted another round of in-depth interviews with fifteen rainbow parents and two founders of PFLAG China. Pseudonyms are used except for a few well-known PFLAG parents who deliberately want the publicity.

Participant observation constitutes another key element of our mixed-method approach. As an academy-based LGBT activist, Wei has been associated with PFLAG China since 2008 and has served as a board member of PFLAG China since 2018. He has participated in numerous

PFLAG events including national and regional meetings, workshops, and local social activities through which he has collected rich ethnographic data on rainbow parents. From the perspective of kinship studies and the positionality of sexual majority, Yan also participated in a few LGBT activities including two events featuring rainbow parents during his field trip to China in 2019.

Most rainbow parents are retired urbanites in their 50s, many of whom had formerly worked as teachers, clerks, business owners, skilled workers, or government employees. However, some are also rural-urban migrants who relocated to the cities to live with their young professional adult children. Overall, rainbow parents are better-educated and have an above-average economic standing. Despite more fathers are seen to take part in PFLAG events in recent years, rainbow parents are mostly mothers of LGBT adult children (Wei 2015a). The participants of our research generally represent these demographic characteristics of PFLAG parents.

### The road to rainbow parenthood

In November 2005, Ms. Wu Youjian, who is a retired magazine editor and had calmly accepted her son's coming-out at home, joined her gay son on a live television program, a bold act that instantly made her the first parent publicly supporting the *tongzhi* cause. Being fondly called Mom Wu in *tongzhi* communities and widely known through social media, she proactively promoted *tongzhi* visibility and rights through her writings on social media. Inspired by the model and strategies of PFLAG in the United States (Murray 2010), Mom Wu and the gay activist Hu Zhijun, plus a rather reluctant friend, established PFLAG China in Guangzhou on June 28, 2008, which would have grown from a three-person group into a national organization with more than 7,000 volunteers and tens of thousands of members in the subsequent decade.

Unlike Mom Wu's unique story, most parents have gone through four critical steps in their self-transformation into proud rainbow parents. It begins with the initial and depressive stage, commonly known among these parents as "*rugui*" (entering the closet). Once their son/daughter reveals his/her homosexuality, nearly all parents enter a painful psychological state consisting of shock, anger, grief, disbelief, and self-blame. These parents then must work their way back to a balanced moral state. Some parents confront their adult children with the existing dominant familial ethics and even disciplinary actions; at least one of the rainbow parents we interviewed confessed that he was so angry at his lesbian daughter that he even demanded her to commit suicide. Yet, most of them did everything they could to learn about homosexuality, to

understand the sexual orientation of their children, to go over in their mind the social bias and life challenges that their children have to face, and to overcome negative feelings by way of their unconditional love of children and their determination to help.

Ms. Mei was one of the most high-profiled rainbow mothers, appearing in many media reports. She told Yan during an interview:

When I felt I was at the bottom of a dark well, I suddenly realized that my son must have endured longer and even harsher pain. I felt I had to do something to help him. I therefore quit my job and moved to Shanghai to live with him so that I could help protect him. Then, before I realized it, I had become the most well-known rainbow parent in Shanghai, helping many gay children and parents alike. (Personal Interview, July 2019)

Such reflections about doing something to help their children appeared in almost all our interviews. In an unusual case, Mom Teng faced such overwhelming despair after her daughter admitted to her in a letter that she had tried to kill herself by slicing her wrists. The bleeding somehow reminded Mom Teng that she had never told her daughter the password for her savings account. She immediately jumped up and went to the hospital to seek help. Recalling this experience with embarrassment, she told Yan that while lying in her hospital bed she swore that she would never again let anything stand between her and her daughter, and since then she has been a diehard rainbow mom.

The second stage on the road to rainbow parenthood typically starts with a parent's attempt to reach out to share their feelings with a relative and to gain moral support from family members. In our interviews many rainbow parents call this *"jiating chugui"* (familial coming-out). Indeed, understanding and support from a dear and close family member is centrally important to heal the emotional wounds. Mom Meigui recalled that when she told her ninety-year-old mother about her son's coming-out:

My mother was calm and just told me that I should do everything I could to love him [the gay son]. As my mother already accepted it, I knew there would be no problem with my elder brother or sister because Mom is highly respected in the larger family. (Personal interview by Wei, December 2018)

The understanding attitude of Ms. Meigui's mother was by no means exceptional; many grandparents turn out to have few difficulties accepting the homosexuality of their grandchildren. Similarly, many parents reported that once they had reached out to their siblings or other relatives, they were surprised at the level of their understanding and support. Mom Lanlan recalled that she was in tears when her elder sister comforted her by saying: "No worries, your son remains my same ideal nephew. When he marries his boyfriend, I will be the first one to



congratulate you and offer a generous gift.” The key is, Mom Lanlan was quick to add: “A parent must be steadfastly supportive of her child and make it obvious to others, and then others will be supportive. That is the meaning of a family.”

The third stage is receiving help and education from other rainbow parents and PFLAG volunteers. It commonly occurs several weeks or months after the initial stage of “coming out of the closet.” Parents are typically encouraged by their queer children to reach out to the local chapters of PFLAG and to participate in its advocacy activities. Ms. Guo thanked her son for bringing her to a new journey of rainbow parenthood.

My son was very thoughtful and helped to pave the road for me. He took me on a sightseeing trip to Hong Kong, and, before I realized it, we were in the middle of a Pride Parade. I met so many really good kids and some very kind parents. My son then introduced me to some PFLAG China social events. I felt their work was very meaningful and so I decided to join forces with them. (Personal Interview by Yan, July 2019)

The most important revelation that parents achieve from their participation in PFLAG events is to learn that homosexuality is not pathetic or perverted; rather, different sexual orientations are all natural. As veteran parents share their personal stories at PFLAG meetings, they condemn the stigmatism attached to the word *tongxinglian* (the Chinese translation of homosexual or homosexuality) and instead using it as a common term in conversation. The discursive adoption of this word, at least at the PFLAG events, shows that these parents have accomplished a sense of self-identification and have developed their own self-esteem as parents of homosexual children.

Surrounded by people with similar moral experiences and encouraged by the supportive mission of such meetings, parents can talk freely about their gay children and related issues. These personal stories often generate huge spiritual energy in the space and create a strong emotional resonance with the audience. They are particularly moved by the sincerity and openness of the rainbow parents, who share their own past painful moral breakdown, the uneasy process of coming-out, and the rewarding experience of participating in PFLAG work, fighting side-by-side with their children and other youth for the rights and equality of homosexual people. In the end these parents are incorporated into a new moral community, which not only helps them deal with their internal grief but also to fight back external social biases and injustice against sexual minorities.

The fourth and final stage is marked by one or more social (as opposed to familial) coming-out events when these parents return to their respective social circles with their new identities as proud rainbow parents. This typically occurs at a banquet with members of the extended

family group or close friends, or at ritualized meetings. For example, Mom and Dad Meigui invited two other couples who were good friends on a trip and one evening formally sat their friends down, “just like in a classroom or at a company meeting,” to announce their son’s homosexuality and to share their experience as rainbow parents. “We told them our friendship would be compromised if they did not accept what we are doing,” said Dad Meigui. It is noteworthy that they also used the opportunity of their social coming-out to raise funds for their advocacy work at PFLAG.

The first three stages can be regarded as necessary preconditions, with the social coming-out standing out as a sufficient condition for the final moral transformation of rainbow parents. This is because that rainbow parents do not exist as self-contained and autonomous individuals, and their identities and their inner moral selves are defined in terms of their ethical-affective-pragmatic relations with other people in the extended family and their close-knit social networks, as is the case of others in Chinese culture (Yan 2017). Rainbow parents do not feel complete in personhood until their new identities and moral selves fit comfortably into their social circles. Therefore, after going through the above-mentioned three stages of moral transformation, rainbow parents feel compelled to share their new identities, their new understandings of homosexuality (albeit from a heteronormative perspective), and their new experience of activism with as many people in their social circles as possible.

It should be noted that this four-stage model of self-transformation is by no means linear and sequential. Rainbow parents might move back-and-forth between the stages before they finally overcome the psychological, moral and social obstacles to stand out. In recent years a few individuals went directly to seek help from active rainbow parents, skipping the first two stages. Some other parents, however, might never reach the stage of social coming-out. They restrict their participation in *tongzhi* activism to online activities and do not venture out of the inner circle of local rainbow parents because they do not want their situation to be known in their respective social circles. Ms. Mei, the leader of a group of rainbow parents in Shanghai, told Yan that there were many more such “shadow rainbow parents” than open parents. With further prompting, she estimated, “at least ten times more.”

What these parents have undergone is a process of moral breakdown and moral reintegration, wherein they have had to confront their previous moral dispositions, engage in their personal ethical work to adjust to new values, to build a new identity as a supportive straight parent of a gay child, and finally to engage their extended family and social circles in the larger society. As many rainbow parents recalled, ultimately it was the parental drive of doing whatever it would take to help their child or

children achieve happiness that made such a painful moral transformation possible. This parental drive is known as parental heart (*fumuxin*).

Chinese culture aims at perpetuating the parent-child relationship throughout one's life and beyond (in terms of ancestor worship). Parental duties and self-sacrifice do not stop at any point in the life course of their adult children, and they even continue to apply to that of their grandchildren. Therefore, good parents should be willing to do anything on behalf of their children regardless of the cost to their own self-interest, and that is what parental heart means. Advocating on behalf of *tongzhi* rights is thus nothing more than a logical extension of the parental heart. Speaking at the 2018 PFLAG national meeting, a rainbow mother excited the audience with the following powerful statement:

What is the most important thing? It is my son's happiness! It does not matter if I gain face or lose face. It does not matter if I carry on or stop the family bloodline. Just let them all go to hell!. (Wei's Field Notes, December 2018)

As indicated above, while promoting the centrality of children in family life, values of neo-familism disregard the spiritual supremacy of one's ancestors and the moral obligation of descent continuity for a given patrilineal group, and consequently to a great degree this is the key reason why Chinese parents accept the homosexuality of their children (Brainer 2019). As a result, filial piety is redefined as a more emotional and psychological condition in the parent-child relationship, with an emphasis on the happiness of the children (Yan 2016), which compels the parents to further help their gay children. The practices of neo-familism in a flexible household configuration and in the bilateral formation of an extended family group open new possibilities for unconventional family-life arrangements, such as parents living together with an adult child with her/his same-sex partner. Equally important, the intimate turn of family life that features intergenerational communications helps to first pave the way for gay children to come-out to their parents and then enables the parents to overcome their moral breakdown and experience the stage of familial coming-out. Outside the family, parents enjoy the understanding and support from the relatives and social peers, who accept and practice similar values of neo-familism and prioritize the happiness of their gay children instead of the collective wellbeing of patrilineal kinship organization.

The desire or pressure to come out to one's parents can be attributed to the smaller family size due to the Chinese one-child policy and the general pattern of a prolonged transition to adulthood (Raymo et al. 2015), which in turn constitute and are constitutive of the recent intimate turn in Chinese family life (Brainer 2019). Similar dynamics of

intergenerational intimacy work on the side of the parents as well. One of the unexpected rewards that rainbow parents often report is strengthened intergenerational bonding and family-life solidarity, which motivates many queer children, who initially run away from parental pressure through migration, to return to their parents. Mom Meigui reflected that after she became a rainbow parent, her son put down his self-protective shield and completely opened to her:

The parent-children relationship is completely different from before. There is nothing we cannot talk about now... .. Another thing, he was always so sensitive to my entering his room (because he might be reading or watching some gay-related materials). He would immediately jump up and yell at me. Nowadays whenever I come to his room, even with some noise, he always sleeps deeply. He has put down all his self-protective shields. (Personal interview by Wei, December 2018)

The making of rainbow parenthood is essentially an intergenerational collaborative project that starts with the gay children's coming-out and continues by way of the constant presence of the gay children during their parents' painful process from entering the closet to their social coming-out (Wei 2015a). When the project is carried out together by both the parents and their adult children, intergenerational dependence and solidarity are reinforced and strengthened. Indeed, during our interviews rainbow parents always proudly shared their close relationship with their gay children and their harmonious family life. Such claims are supported by some basic facts. Eight of the fifteen rainbow parents interviewed by Yan live in a stem family with their gay child and her/his same-sex partner, and all fifteen parents referred to their child's partner as their other son/daughter or daughter-in-law/son-in-law and they were eager to show us family photos. Three rainbow mothers regularly went out with the young couple on weekend family trips, and all fifteen reported receiving gifts from their children for Mother's Day or Father's Day. In this connection, the rise of rainbow parents demonstrates a core value in the emerging neo-familism and a widely shared cultural ideal in Chinese society, which is why rainbow parents are both proud of themselves and admired by others of a similar persuasion.

Although neo-familism has emerged as a leading trend in family change during the last two decades, there are many parents who still uphold conventional familism and believe in the supremacy of descent continuity, the patrilineal structure of the household configuration, and other traditional and conservative values. It would be unthinkable for these parents to accept their gay children, much less embrace *tongzhi* activism. It is also noteworthy that neo-familism does not automatically result in rainbow parenthood. There are numerous parents who practice neo-familism in some aspects of their family life, such as the downward

flow of family resources to children or a flexible household configuration due to domestic migration (Yan 2016, 2018), but still, they cannot accept that their child is gay or lesbian. But neo-familism allows the parents to think out of the box of traditional familism and Confucian ethics, equipping them with new values that prioritize the happiness of their child instead of that of their ancestors and providing them with emotional and moral space that links them with their child.

The ideology and practice of neo-familism directly enable rainbow parents to continue their belief in intergenerational solidarity and family happiness but at the same time to improvise real-life situations with a new approach, that is, to come-out together with their gay children and to rework homosexuality into the mainstream discourse of love, marriage and family life. This resonance or harmony with the ongoing trend of neo-familism also enables rainbow parents to carry out their advocacy work in the society at large.

### Rainbow parents in social action

With respect to *tongzhi* activism, rainbow parents work on two fronts. First, they play the important role of understanding and supportive parents within the *tongzhi* communities, providing various sorts of help to LGBT individuals who suffer from parental objection, interference, and oppression in their respective families. Rainbow parents share their personal experiences of moral transformation at informal and formal LGBT gatherings. As indicated above, many parents at the initial stage of self-disclosure are brought to these activities by their gay children and receive their first eye-opening education and moral support from other rainbow parents who take the stage to share their personal stories.

During the past ten years, rainbow parents have developed a set of strategies and personal skills to help both fellow parents and their gay children at *tongzhi* gatherings and other events. In addition to open speeches and talent shows (i.e., to demonstrate parental pride and confidence through various art performances) designed for the entire group, rainbow parents also host talking circles of small groups and one-on-one soul-searching conversations with other individuals. Such events have been held in different cities and regions by local PFLAG chapters. There is also a national annual convention held in June of each year. In June 2019, for example, more than 1,200 LGBTs and their parents gathered on a three-day cruise, and some rainbow parents were also accompanied by relatives. Wei took his seventy-five-year-old father to this memorable trip. Even though he never attended any PFLAG event before, the exposure to so many LGBTs and their supporting family members during the trip could still be transformative to the father's understanding of homosexuality, as well as the life and works of his own son. Even more dramatic, at

least fifty “uninformed” parents were brought to the trip by their *tongzhi* children. As the current director of PFLAG Hu Zhijun joked in his speech at the convention, these clueless parents were passed to PFLAG for comfort and help once they got on the ship.

Rainbow parents also carried out their work through the PFLAG telephone hotline and their own WeChat online groups. These encounters are particularly useful to answer questions and provide advice on parent-child relations and coming-out within the family. Rainbow parents in Shanghai has formed four WeChat groups, with membership ranging from more than one-hundred to five hundred people, which is the official limit set state regulation. In addition to the exchange of information and moral support, such groups formed through social media have also been quite successful in fund-raising during the last several years.

On the second front of their activism, rainbow parents engage the general public and the agencies of the Chinese state to promote an understanding of homosexuality and other *tongzhi* issues and to advocate diversity and equal rights on behalf of their gay children. Their positionality as sexual majority works out even better on this front than working inside the *tongzhi* communities because they are advocating the *tongzhi* cause primarily from the perspective of heterosexual neo-familism, and thus they can better relate to the sexual majority and have their voice heard by the potentially empathic public. Rainbow parents have carried out their advocacy work in universities, public parks, and private and state-owned enterprises in the form of public lectures, story-sharing, roundtable discussions, and artistic performances for fund-raising campaigns. Several rainbow parents have been featured in documentary films, TV programs, and many news media reports.

Rainbow parents’ activist work is particularly meaningful for *tongzhi* activism in Chinese society because it aims at the general public and thus overcomes the limitations of preaching to the choir inside the *tongzhi* communities. On May 20, 2017, a group of eleven rainbow mothers marched to the famous *xiangqinjiao* (“match-making corner”), located in People’s Park in downtown Shanghai. They also displayed the detailed information of their children like other parents do, except for the visible sign that they are seeking a boyfriend for their son or girlfriend for daughter. This unusual acting searching same sex partner for their adult children quickly caught the attention of other parents on the spot. Some yelled at rainbow parents: “Homosexual behavior is wrong. It is against Chinese values.” Then rainbow parents rebutted with calm yet firm counterarguments that homosexuality is a natural tendency formed before birth and that their gay children should have equal rights to have a family and to achieve happiness. The two groups of contending parents exchanged arguments and accusations for nearly an hour until the local

police showed up. On the grounds that their actions constituted a “campaign event” without the required advance registration with the police department, the eleven rainbow parents were expelled from the park. But by that point they already presented their advocacy work in this special public space that honors the heterosexual values of family life, engaged in debate with their critiques, and gained empathy and understanding from some heterosexual parents and young onlookers. Their parental love and bravery were widely praised in many online discussions and reported by some mainstream media outlets (Personal Interviews by Yan, June 2019).

In retrospect, some of our interviewees commented that if the eleven rainbow mothers had informed the local police department in advance, their activist work at the match-making corner might have been tolerated because they had done similar work in other public settings and they had always let the authorities know in advance that their events were promoting family harmony and they had not encountered any hostility from government agencies. Other rainbow parents dismissed this view as too naïve, but they also agreed that parents do have certain privileges in dealing with government agencies because, as they put it, many government officials and police are also parents and some of them might have encountered similar issues at home or in their own social circles. A good example in this connection is the case of the 2017 open letter.

The state-sponsored China Netcasting Services Association (CNSA) issued guidelines in June 2017 that banned homosexuality and other “abnormal sexual behavior” from online media to clean up “vulgar” and “unpatriotic” content on the Internet. Like the above-mentioned well-planned activism in the Shanghai park, three rainbow mothers paid a visit to the Chinese State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television, which is responsible for the CNSA guidelines. On behalf of PFLAG volunteers, these mothers delivered an open letter to the authority, in which they demanded that the discriminatory statements against homosexuality be removed from the guidelines. The open letter was then widely circulated through Chinese social media, in which rainbow parents expressed their shock, sadness, and anger about the CNSA guidelines and then declared: “As parents, we have the responsibility to stand up and protect our children from harm.” By highlighting their parental love and responsibility, normalizing homosexuality as a natural and given condition at birth, and emphasizing that their gay children are family-loving, thriving, and good citizens (Rofel 2007), these rainbow parents disavowed the oppressive state in terms of the familial discourse.

On both fronts of their advocacy work, the strength and power of rainbow parents are derived from the moral authority and cultural capital of parenthood in Chinese family culture and society at large. It is also



noteworthy that many rainbow parents are retirees from the public sector. Their past work experience equips them with intimate knowledge on government policies when they negotiate with the state authorities or engage the general public on behalf of their queer children. They used their career contributions to cast themselves as righteous good citizens, and they embody neo-familism by thinking and acting in terms of family harmony and familial contribution to the society at large. Their arguments can hardly be rejected by the state authorities because the state has been actively promoting filial piety and family solidarity as part of its official discourse on a harmonious society (Yan 2021).

During Yan's interviews with rainbow parents, many reflected that participating in *tongzhi* activism had brought new meanings to their life and they appreciated the new opportunities for personal growth in the dual sense of becoming better parents and doing something for the common good. Mom Xiaoyang, who is one of the parent volunteers answering the rainbow hot line of PFLAG China, recounted her personal growth in detail and was grateful to her son for opening the door to social activism: "I just found the true self inside me; now I am doing this [i.e., rainbow parent activism] for myself as well as other people." They also formed a strong sense of belonging to the moral community of rainbow parents. In a rather dramatic case, the rainbow mother of a bisexual daughter felt loss again after her daughter announced her decision to marry a straight man. The mother reached out to the leader of local rainbow parent group: "What am I going to do now. May I still be a rainbow parent and continue to participate in our group activities?!"

Many parents became active volunteers for PFLAG after participating in one or two activist events. Thereafter, the committed parents were encouraged to undergo the necessary training and to access the resources made available by the national headquarters to establish local branches to advance PFLAG advocacy work and to recruit more parents. These highly devoted and publicly self-identified rainbow parents have also developed their own networks with many other fellow parents who have joined *tongzhi* activism but do not wish to go completely public with their true identities (i.e., shadow rainbow parents). Rainbow parents constitute PFLAG's most valuable and unique source of human capital and have played the key role in helping more than 400,000 families during the past ten years (PFLAG 2020).

Hu recalled that he desperately tried to go beyond the dominant model of hiding *tongzhi* activism under the cloak of the public health campaign for HIV/AIDS prevention (Wei 2015b). Through the early work of PFLAG he gradually learned that the family of origin could be turned into a powerful alliance if the two generations could work together. As Hu stated several times during an interview with Yan, "The



parent-child relationship is the key for the development of the *tongzhi* movement in China.” Under his leadership, cultivating parent-child relations through rainbow parents became a major PGLEG strategy, and rainbow parents have also functioned as a protective umbrella for PFLAG.

This has been particularly important in recent years because the Chinese state has further tightened up its control over civil society organizations (CSOs) through new laws and regulations (Spires 2019). It is against the background of such an unfriendly social environment that, PFLAG has grown into a *de facto* national organization, with thirteen full-time employees in its headquarters and seventy-seven local chapters/working groups all over the country. Given that the Chinese state has long been particularly hostile toward cross-regional alliance of CSOs and banned the formation of national organization (Lee and Zhang 2013), PFLAG’s very existence, therefore, is an unusual achievement, and its impressive growth also demonstrates the success of the rainbow parents in finding their own space and voice in *tongzhi* activism.

While emphasizing the unique and irreplaceable importance of rainbow parents to *tongzhi* activism, There were some potential problems caused by the heterosexual positionality of straight parents and the moral authority of parents in Chinese family culture. One of them is that once rainbow parents gained the respect and love of LGBT youth, they began to insert the all-familiar parental expectations of a perfect family life into their advocacy work, such as pushing their gay children and other LGBT youth in the community to marry (i.e., finding a life-time partner and forming a *de facto* marriage) and to have children through assisted reproductive technology (Wei forthcoming). In other words, rainbow parents recognize the difference caused by sexual orientation but their expectations of gay relationship in family life are consistent with that for the heterosexual majority. To resist the “normalizing” push from rainbow parents, PFLAG has made several efforts to make sure its *tongzhi* activism would not be redirected by over-protective rainbow parents.

Regarding the mobilization strategies PFLAG adopted, it also faces criticisms from the increasingly diversified Chinese *tongzhi* communities (Wei 2015a). They mainly focus on homonormativity PFLAG promotes that give preference to certain personal images, lifestyles, sexual practices, relationships and beliefs over the rest of the *tongzhi* community. While the leadership of PFLAG starts to respond to such criticisms, it is unrealistic to expect heterosexual rainbow parents not to normalize their homosexual children in parental activism by emphasizing the natural origins of homosexuality and the image of filial, productive, and successful homosexual children. Given the changing political climate in recent China, PFLAG has to extend its homonormative approach as it negotiates with the state. A significant change took place as PFLAG changed its official

organization name in March 2021. While continuing to be known as PFLAG within the Chinese *tongzhi* communities, the organization promotes its new name of *chuse huoban*, which means “outstanding partner” in Mandarin. The PFLAG leadership hopes that the new organization name, despite its obviously homonormative connotation (Duggan 2002), will help the organization negotiate legal registration with the state.<sup>2</sup>

### A familial model of tongzhi activism in the making

After paying a visit to PFLAG China, a senior American LGBT activist commented:

Parents in PFLAG US often remain backstage in their support of the LGBT movement. By contrast, PFLAG China occupies a more central position in the landscape of the Chinese LGBT movement. By taking part in LGBT advocacy activities, these PFLAG China parents are in the spotlight, and they have become stars with a powerful appeal. (Personal Conversation with Wei, March 2014)

The American commentator got it right to the point. With similar responses and actions like their counterpart in the US, Chinese rainbow parents have created their own way to advocate diversity and queer rights in both the private and public spheres, which focuses on the social implications of family harmony instead of the politics of individual sexuality. At least for the kind of LGBT movement that PFLAG China is carrying out and promoting (which has been impressively successful given the political environment), rainbow parents have contributed to the making of a familial model of *tongzhi* activism at three levels.

At the individual level, the familial model empowers the *tongzhi* adult child to confirm and hold up her/his sexuality in the open while continuing and even strengthening an intimate relationship with parents. It also enables the parents to keep intact the major aspects of heterosexual familism (intergenerational relationships, solidarity of the family group, marriage prospects, childbearing, and old-age security for their gay children), while accepting the homosexuality of their children within the heterosexual family and its social circles. The familial model may very likely provide a feasible solution to both Chinese queers and their parents because they act together as a family, keep their relational personhood intact, and encompass the issue of homosexuality within the boundaries of neo-familism.

At the level of family life, this model allows different sexual orientations, lifestyles, and identity politics to coexist within the same household, creating a new kind of diversity. Intriguingly, rainbow parents and their gay children can quickly adapt to this new family organization and cope with it in almost the same way as do the prevailing heterosexual family

and kinship systems. The familial model also addresses the issue of procreation, such as mobilizing the help of relatives or pulling together family resources to seek an overseas surrogate. The emphasis on intergenerational solidarity, support, and collaboration resonates well with the values of neo-familism and seems to be the most effective way to gain an understanding of other members in one's kinship and social networks, albeit still, in some cases, encountering challenges.

This brings us to the societal level, where the familial model of coming-out paves the way for rainbow parents to forge alliances with other rainbow parents in collective actions and to form their own organization of local PFLAG chapters throughout the country. Many rainbow parents have reported on the rewarding experience of personal growth because, probably for the first time in their lives, they relate to other people in the *tongzhi* movement by way of shared perceptions of what constitutes good parenthood, a good family, and a good society, all of which are derived from the basic idea of neo-familism that prioritizes the happiness of one's children and/or grandchildren. Because this new sociality and its expressions in collective action capitalize on parenthood and the family, it also resonates well with Chinese culture and minimizes the hostility of the Chinese state (Chen 2010). At this historical juncture, when the state is tightly controlling most NGOs and repressing other forms of societal forces, the familial model of *tongzhi* activism by the rainbow parents has created a new space for civil society—albeit narrowly defined and politically moderate, bridging the familial with the social and using the familial to define itself vis-à-vis the state's hostility to civil society.

## Concluding notes

We have examined how rainbow parents complete their self-transformation in an uneasy four-stage process and emerged as active participants in Chinese *tongzhi* (LGBT) movement through their organization PFLAG China. While recognizing several contributing social factors at the macro level, including the global flow of information, the influence of international LGBT movement, the diversification of moral landscape and the individualization of society in China, we highlighted the trend of neo-familism as the direct enabling factor of the rainbow parent phenomenon. Exercising parental moral authority and employing the cultural capital of parenthood, rainbow parents seem to be in a privileged position to engage the general public and the authoritarian state; their critically important contributed to the making of a familial model of LGBT activism in PFLAG China and beyond.

Such a familial model of *tongzhi* activism presents a challenge to both the mainstream study of the family and the dominant paradigm of queer studies

by bringing the family of origin to the central stage of the LGBT movement in China. It highlights the importance of intergenerational solidarity, support, and collaboration within and beyond the family. It is based on the centrality of interpersonal relations, instead of sexuality, in the formation of Chinese personhood, which presents an alternative to the Western model of queer politics that emphasizes sexuality, individuality, and the oppositional politics of identity. It has worked out effectively in the last decade because it resonates well with Chinese family culture and, to a certain degree, can reduce the Chinese state's hostility toward LGBT movement.

Yet, we must reiterate that rainbow parents think and act in terms of the primacy of the family and the relational personhood in Chinese culture instead of the superiority of individual autonomy and choice. Fighting for equal rights and individual happiness on behalf of their gay children, while taming their homosexual desires, are two sides of the same coin of rainbow parent activism. In response to the criticism of promoting homonormativity on the one hand, and the changing political climate at present China on the other hand, the leadership of PFLAG China is trying to balance out the pros and cons of the emergent familial model of *tongzhi* activism. How far and how successful rainbow parents may help the growth of LGBT movement therefore remains to be explored in further studies.

## Notes

1. The term "rainbow parents" in the United States commonly refers to LGBTQ parents. It is noteworthy that straight parents in China also adopted this term and made it part of their new identity in public life, a clear indicator of not only sharing their gay children's identity politics but also representing the symbolic integration of personhood between the two generations.
2. While having been active for more than a decade, PFLAG China is legally registered with the government as a business organization rather than an NGO. See (Wei 2015b) for a detailed discussion on the registration challenges faced by LGBT community organizations in mainland China.

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