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The one-child policy, eldercare, and LGB Chinese: A social policy explanation for family pressure

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in China consistently report family pressure as the greatest challenge they face in their daily lives. This problem has been primarily explained by highlighting sociocultural factors. While such explanations are important to understanding family pressure, they do not easily lead to actionable policy interventions to relieve it. This article suggests a new way of looking at family pressure by positing a social policy explanation. In particular, it reveals how both the one-child policy and eldercare reforms have strong heteronormative biases which negatively and disproportionately affect LGB people and explores social policy interventions that may serve to help address them. Beyond the China case, the article seeks to open up new avenues for research into how sexuality should be better accounted for in analyses of social policies and considered in broader discussions on defamilization and welfare state reform.

Key words

Family pressure, social policy, family planning, eldercare, defamilization, China

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Of the challenges facing lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB)¹ people in China, pressure from family is widely seen as most pervasive, intense, and troubling. That LGB Chinese experience high degrees of family pressure is not entirely surprising. Despite rapid economic growth in the last two decades, China is still a largely traditional society, as much influenced by Confucianism as Communism. The family unit is viewed as central to society and all children are expected to conform to their role within it: they should be successful in school and career, marry and have children, and take care of their parents and grandparents. Pressure from family members on LGB children to conform to traditional heterosexual norms is not isolated to China nor is it necessarily worse than in other parts of the world. But we lack full and compelling explanations for why it is so prevalent and strong in any given context.

There have been surprisingly few studies that attempt to explain family pressure felt by LGB people. Insofar as they do, most offer socio-cultural explanations. For social policy scholars and practitioners, culture tells an important part of the story but offers few options to address the problem. As others have suggested, a broader social policy framework is necessary to understand the wide range and depth of problems facing LGT people worldwide (Browne *et al.*, 2011; Smith, 2005). As such, this article posits a social policy explanation, demonstrating how two unrelated and non-LGB specific policies have had a disproportionate and negative (if unintended) effect on LGB Chinese: the one-child policy and eldercare. While scholars in this journal have highlighted the pressure felt by LGB Chinese (e.g., Hu *et al.*, 2016; Chou, 2001), studies that explain the policy causes of it are rare

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(e.g., UNDP, 2016). Even then, attention is paid to only one particular policy, such as the one-child policy. No previous studies have examined the compound effect of multiple policies as I do here.

This article builds upon my decade-long research into LGB issues in China and draws on empirical findings—both in-depth interview and survey research data—which are reported in greater detail elsewhere (Hildebrandt, 2013; 2012; 2011). Rather than providing a full reiteration of these findings, this article presents a snapshot of these data, in addition to complementary work of others, to illustrate the problem of family pressure. Its primary purpose is to suggest a new way to understand the issue. In applying a social policy lens to family pressure felt by LGB people in China, and drawing upon insights from research in various fields, it offers a more comprehensive accounting of the potential causes. I also show how key social policies have a strong heteronormative bias and in doing so negatively affect sexual minorities. And while I do not empirically test the hypothesis developed here, in revealing the social policy roots of the problem of family pressure, I outline potential social policy solutions that to respond to some of the problems facing LGB Chinese.

Beyond the China case, this article seeks to open up new avenues for research into how sexuality must be better accounted for in our analysis of social policies. Feminist scholars of social policy rightly note how women shoulder a disproportionate burden in welfare provision in many contexts. As such, they have demonstrated the importance of *defamilization*—a concept that refers to social policies which allow an individual to preserve their wellbeing independent of family

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relationships (Lewis, 1992; Bambra, 2007; Saxonberg, 2013). I take a page from these scholars and suggest that policymakers need to be attentive to how sexual minorities are also uniquely effected by welfare arrangements that shift responsibilities away from states to families and thus need to be better accounted for in both analyses and policymaking. I argue that, like inequalities based on gender, defamilization could help rectify those based on sexual orientation, as well.

The article proceeds as follows: it first demonstrates the problem of the depth and pervasiveness of family pressure felt by LGB Chinese and the negative effects it can have by recapping findings from earlier research; the second section explores dominant socio-cultural explanations for family pressure; the third posits a social policy explanation for the high degree of family pressure felt by LGB Chinese, highlighting the compound effect of both the one-child policy and changes in eldercare; the fourth section explores how social policy interventions might help diminish pressure on LGB people; and finally, in sketching out avenues for future research, the conclusion highlights the need to pay attention to sexuality when discussing defamilization and welfare regime reform in social policy more broadly.

Family pressure on LGB people in China, and beyond

LGB Chinese consistently report family pressure as the greatest challenge they face in their daily lives. (Hu *et al.*, 2016; UNDP, 2016; Liu, 2013; Chow and Cheng, 2010; Engebretsen, 2009). Family pressure can include (but is not limited to) the explicit or implicit expectation to conform to traditional norms, notably opposite-sex marriage

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and procreation. Failure to do so can mean LGB people are subject to constant nagging from family members, but more seriously, it can result in being isolated and disowned. As my on-going research into Chinese LGB activists and organisations has shown, this concern has not changed much in the last decade (Hildebrandt, 2013). Research conducted in 2008, and follow-up interviews with activists in 2015, yielded strikingly similar findings: family pressure—more than social pressure, discrimination, marriage rights, HIV/AIDS and government repression—is rated as the biggest concern (see Hildebrandt, 2013; Hildebrandt, 2016). This is not to suggest that these other issues are not of concern or that the situation is seen as necessarily ‘good’, but rather that family pressure is especially ‘bad.’

Intense family pressure on LGB people is reported across the country, in both urban and rural areas, and by gay men and lesbian women alike. In Chengdu, a gay activist in 2008 noted that especially in more underdeveloped rural areas family pressure is by far the biggest concern amongst LGB Chinese. Another gay activist in Kunming noted that in general, society (especially in southern China), is ‘laid back’ but family pressure remains intensely problematic. The leader of a gay university group noted in particular for younger Chinese of that age the family pressure is almost ‘unbearable.’ Follow-up interviews in 2015 revealed that the situation has changed little. A Beijing-based lesbian activist I interviewed first in 2008 later noted in 2015 that while some issues have decreased in attention for LGB people, like HIV/AIDS, and others have become more prominent, like domestic violence, family pressure remains the single most articulated concern within the community. A prominent

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lesbian activist in Shanghai noted in 2015 that her focus remains on ‘acceptance’ because family pressure is the biggest challenge to overcome, ‘the real pressure is coming from families, not society or the government.’

There has been limited survey research into family pressure amongst LGB Chinese, but some recent work build upon this author’s findings. Two recent 2016 surveys of lesbian, gay and bisexual Chinese found that discrimination was most frequently experienced at home from their families (Hu *et al.*, 2016; UNDP, 2016). LGB people in Hong Kong also report high levels of family pressure (Wong, 2007); a report issued by the Hong Kong government notes that the pressure from LGB people’s families is far higher than that of the society generally (Legislative Council, 2007). Regional differences certainly matter when it comes to acceptance of homosexuality, and socio-cultural norms that increase or decrease family pressure on LGB Chinese. Significant gaps in economic development around the country mean that the situation is more difficult for some LGB people than others (UNDP, 2014); the family pressure on men and women in poorer provinces to get married, procreate and take care of their parents is especially high (Guo *et al.*, 2015).

Even in more liberal countries, family pressure remains a concern. A 2010 poll of LGBT youth in the US found that a plurality of respondents, nearly a third, reported that ‘non-accepting families’ was the greatest concern (HRC, 2012). Especially in more traditional, religious families, irrespective of location, LGB youths can face high feelings of isolation and pressure (Merighi and Grimes, 2000). Also, research in the US suggests that smaller, more tightly knit families can lead to higher

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pressure for LGB children as they feel the costs are too high to violate heterosexual norms (Waldner and Magruder, 1999).

Family pressure on LGB people worldwide is a concern because it can lead to social ostracism, decreased work productivity, drug abuse and suicide (Hammelman, 1993; D'Augelli *et al.*, 2001; Remafedi *et al.*, 1991). In China, LGB people report significantly higher degree of loneliness and lower self-esteem than their heterosexual counterparts (Hu *et al.*, 2016). They report that if they 'came out' they would be isolated from society, and feel as though they are not 'whole persons' (Chou, 2001). Such feelings can be attributable to the kind of exclusion that results from family pressure (Leary *et al.*, 1995). A 2009 survey conducted by one of the largest lesbian groups in China found that 48.2 percent of its 900 respondents reported even violence and abuse from their family as a consequence of their sexual orientation (or staying in the closet and not marrying) (UNDP, 2014). As evidence of the intensity of pressure, a recent survey found that nearly ten percent of LGB Chinese considered receiving gay conversion therapy to avoid family problems over their sexuality (UNDP, 2014).

Socio-cultural explanations for family pressure

Perhaps the simplest and most intuitive reason for family pressure felt by LGB people anywhere in the world is the norm of heterosexuality and correspondingly strong disapproval of homosexuality. But interestingly, while many LGB Chinese have families who either disapprove of homosexuality or do not understand it, the most common explanation given in my interviews is that their parents insist that they get

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married and have children. In this section I present socio-cultural explanations focusing on generally negative views of homosexuality, the importance of marriage, and the high cultural value placed on grandparenting. In doing so, I demonstrate how they partially illuminate our understanding of family pressure, but also show how alone they do not allow us to fully explain it.

China has a complicated history with and conflicting attitudes toward homosexuality. Before the fall of the last dynasty, there was occasional acceptance of same-sex relationships in some parts of the country, provided they did not undermine social harmony (Chou, 2001; Wong, 2007). Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, homosexuality has never been explicitly illegal, although gay men were sometimes persecuted under overly broad 'anti-hooligan' laws until 1997. Unlike societies dominated by Abrahamic religions, homosexuality is not itself treated as inherently sinful, although it is sometimes associated with negative stereotypes and moral deviance (Liu, 2013). More common an attitude is ignorance, in the truest sense, where citizens either do not know what homosexuality actually is, or do not believe it exists in China (Hildebrandt, 2011).

Increasingly, however, residents of large cosmopolitan centres are more open and accepting of homosexuality; over a quarter of citizens surveyed in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou believed that sexual minorities were deserving of legal protections (UNDP, 2014). But there are limits to such positive attitudes: even in more liberal Hong Kong, a 2007 survey found that while nearly 80 percent of respondents considered it perfectly acceptable to have gay neighbours or co-workers,

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only 40 percent thought it acceptable to have gay or lesbian family members (Legislative Council, 2007). Thus, attitudes on homosexuality alone do not explain why family pressure is so pervasive and strong.

Much of the pressure reported by LGB Chinese is attributed less to them being gay as much as to their families' desire that they marry. Gay men and lesbian women feel a certain amount of guilt toward their elderly parents, who often stay in their hometowns while they have moved to larger cities and are 'probed endlessly about their never-married son or daughter' (Engebretsen, 2009, p. 10). As evidence of the pressure to marry, an estimated 80 percent of China's gay population marry opposite-sex partners, most of whom are unaware of their true sexual identity (Liu, 2013).

The intensity of pressure placed on children to marry is in part attributable to social pressure felt by parents. With marriage comes social privilege and status, not just for the newlywed couple but also for their parents. Filial piety—the obligation of children to provide for their parents and generally respect elders in society—is central to arguments about both marriage and procreation in Chinese societies (Chow, 2006). The pressure to marry as a filial duty goes beyond China. Similar expectations contribute to stress amongst gay men and lesbian women in other Asian countries (Cho, 2009; Sinnott, 2004; CCHR, 2013). Some scholars argue that these pressures are especially high on gay men, as sons ensure continuity of the paternal line across Asia (Boellstorff, 1999; Liu, 2013; Wang and Brennan, 2009). Others note that lesbians face their own set of pressures as daughters are often expected to marry and,

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together with her husband, care of her aging parents (Sinnott, 2004; Chow and Cheng, 2010).

Although same-sex marriage is not legal, ‘traditional’ marriage (one man, one woman) has not been a consistently strong institution in China. Its function has varied from being primarily about building and maintaining kinship ties to, more recently, bonds of romantic love (Chou, 2001). Marriage laws have been continuously modified since 1949 to meet changing state policy interests (Palmer, 1995). All the while, cohabitation without marriage is increasingly common, and divorce rates are rising as the process has been made easier and cheaper (Hildebrandt, 2011). Thus, it is not just marriage, nor attitudes on homosexuality, that form the basis of a socio-cultural explanation for family pressure.

The third major source of family pressure is the desire for parents to become grandparents. There a number of reasons why grandparenting generally, and in China specifically, is valued and thus why having married heterosexual children who procreate is seen as critical. While the pressure to have grandchildren is in part about continuing one’s family lineage, more importantly, a new generation of grandchildren also means another generation of grandparents. The idea of *renqing* holds that elders have a productive role in families and grandparenting one of the most valued of these roles; the family unit is made whole, giving it a more meaningful identity. From the perspective of the family, and in keeping with cultural norms of filial piety, this ‘multi-generational family life’ under one roof is more culturally desired (Lou and Ng, 2012, p. 1039; Xu, 2001). This view extends to other countries with large Chinese

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populations and filial piety traditions (Yancura, 2013; Vakalahi *et al.*, 2008). As evidence of the importance of interdependence, Mjelde-Mossey *et al.* (2006) suggest that deviating from tradition, especially norms of taking care and living in three generation households, lead to decline in feelings of self-worth for elderly.

Being a grandparent also has a high social value. The role is highly anticipated for the ‘social power’ traditionally associated with it; *not* being a grandparent can mean a loss of social networks, and decreased value to both family and society alike. While it offers relatively high social and often economic status for both men (grandfathers) and women (grandmothers) (Tsui *et al.*, 1996), for women it is one of the few institutionalized and guaranteed ways to gain social power; when female elders do not ascend to the role of grandmother they lose this important opportunity and are further marginalized (Mjelde-Mossey, 2007; Lou, 2007). It is likely for this reason that my interviewees mentioned particularly strong pressure from their mothers to have children.

While the status of grandparents is high in China and other Confucian societies, research suggests it is waning, along with piety more generally (Liu *et al.*, 2015; Zhan *et al.*, 2006; Mjelde-Mossey, 2007; Chow, 2006). This does not mean, however, that the desire to become a grandparent in China has decreased. Having a large family, grandparenting, and multigenerational living is also seen as critical to ensure care as citizens age (Sanders and Sun, 2006; Chen and Liu, 2012).² This is best understood by examining the social policy context in the next section.

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A social policy explanation for family pressure

The socio-cultural dynamics discussed above offer a compelling, but incomplete, explanation for family pressure. In this section, I posit a social policy explanation, focusing on two policy areas: family planning and eldercare. Despite disastrous periods for human development during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, China under Mao Zedong still saw improved health care and lower infant mortality, resulting in rapid population growth. As Mao's rule came to an end, party leaders concluded that this population growth was unsustainable, particularly given the state's efforts to reform the economy. Thus from 1978 a new family planning policy, known as the 'one-child policy', was put into effect. The policy helped the government control what it saw as unchecked population growth, stopping nearly 400 million births: official figures place the fertility rate between 1.5 and 1.6, while unofficial data estimates it is closer to 1.4 (Chang, 2015).

Despite achieving its goal of controlling population growth, the policy has not been without controversy and critique, especially from outside China. Cultural norms that prioritize boys over girls have contributed to skewed sex ratios. International media has reported some of the more disturbing effects: sex selective abortions, abandoned new born baby girls, female infanticide. Increasing scholarly attention has been paid to the 'latent' effects of the policy. It has recreated China into a country dominated by one-child families and children without siblings: government estimates suggest at least 64 percent of the Chinese population are part of 'one-child families', with over 200 million children without siblings.³ Scholars have examined how the

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policy affects family dynamics and gender relations (Festini and de Martino, 2004; Chen, 1985) and changed the behaviour of single children creating less conscientious ‘little emperors’ (Cameron *et al.*, 2013). But while much has been made about how this new generation of single children are perhaps more spoiled—with two parents, and four grandparents doting on the one child—there has been inadequate focus on how they also face an inordinate amount of pressure to fulfil their familial duties.

The one-child policy is essentially a ‘one-chance’ policy. Without a ‘spare’ this sole heir is expected do it all: excel in school, secure a high-paying prestigious career, but also get married and continue the family line (Attane, 2002). For heterosexual single children born under the one-child policy the pressure to conform is great. How about for *homosexual* single children? While some scholars have suggested that having siblings can improve the coming out process of LGB people, and increase levels of family support (Strommen, 1989; Mallon, 2000), we still know little about the effect of being an only child on LGB people generally. As such, scholars have called for more research into how having siblings (or *not*) affects LGB people (Wisniewski *et al.*, 2010; Heatherington and Lavner, 2008; Valentine *et al.*, 2003). Similarly, there is no systematic research on the life of only children who identify as LGB in China; two recent UNDP reports have suggested linkages between the one-child policy and family pressure (2016; 2014).

However, logic dictates, all else equal, where heterosexuality remains the preferred norm, gay men and lesbian women who are only children will experience higher levels of family pressure. The policy context exacerbates what is already a

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stressful situation on children born under the one-child policy where there is even greater family pressure to conform. But social policies do not operate in isolation. Like the one-child policy, the Chinese government's policies on eldercare also have a disproportionately negative effect on LGB single children. When these two policy areas are viewed together, and situated within the broader socio-cultural context, the high level of family pressure felt by LGB Chinese is better understood. As the one child policy was launched, the state also instituted significant economic reforms including the elimination of 'cradle to grave' guarantees: all welfare institutions, including those for eldercare, were cut from .58 percent of the GDP in 1979 to .19 percent in 1997 (Zhan *et al.*, 2006).

In part because of the one-child policy, China is becoming very old, very quickly: projections show that by 2050 China will have 400 million citizens 65 years or older, and 150 million 80 or older (Zeng, 2012). Not surprisingly, the government continues to struggle to care for its aging population (Zhan *et al.*, 2008). In the last decade, the state has attempted to expand support beyond its initial policy of minimal care only to society's most vulnerable, those with 'three no's': no income, children, or relatives (Dai, 2014).

But China suffers, in part, from a capacity problem: it has half as many long term care beds per 1,000 older people compared to most developed countries (Feng *et al.*, 2012). Although the state has issued policies that seek to increase this number, developing a more robust eldercare system has been stalled by the fact that responsibility for implementation is placed in the hands of local governments, without

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adequate resources or the ability to raise revenues to do so (Gao, 2014). Moreover, there are clear regional inequities in eldercare provision; coverage is especially weak in inland rural areas when compared to coastal urban centres (Lu *et al.*, 2015; Liu *et al.*, 2015). The market could fill some of these gaps, but the difficult regulatory environment has stunted private sector growth in eldercare provision (Feng *et al.*, 2012). Even where these options exist, individual citizens struggle to cover the cost themselves in part because state retirement pension schemes are virtually non-existent and the small number of former state-enterprise employees who did have pension schemes have seen the value dwindle (Attane, 2002). Moreover, many of those who have the means are reluctant to take advantage of institutional or community care, due to stigma and reputational concerns associated with them and being separated from their family (Liu *et al.*, 2015).

In recognition of these problems, the 13th Five Year Plan (2016-2020) suggests that 80 percent of eldercare in the country be covered by families, with 15 percent in ‘community care’ and just five percent in institutional care (Liu *et al.*, 2015). The Chinese government leans heavily on social-cultural norms of filial piety in transferring responsibility for eldercare to the family (Lou *et al.*, 2012). The duties of children to attend to the needs of their parents is codified in a new law, the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Elderly People further lays out (Wong, 2013), which builds upon Article 49 of China’s 1982 constitution: ‘parents have the duty to rear and educate their minor children, and *children who have come of age have the duty to support and assist their parents*’ [emphasis added].⁴

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Whether filial piety is on the decline or a ‘sticky’ institution might not actually matter: the assumptions that it *is* strong allow states to shift responsibility of eldercare to families (Martin, 1990; Salaff, 1981). Izuhara (2004) argues in the Japan case that this shift in responsibility might in turn reinforce norms of filial piety when they might otherwise be weakening. Family care for elderly is not, however, a panacea. The rising costs of living in China with no siblings to share the burden makes it incredibly onerous to care for one’s parents, which places a strain on the institution of filial piety and family solidarity more generally (Attane, 2002).

State expectations that children take primary responsibility for the care of their parents—part of a broader *re-familization* of welfare provision—also puts particularly strong pressure on LGB Chinese. For those living in rural areas of the country (which rely even more on family care), these responsibilities make it difficult to move to more cosmopolitan urban centres where LGB people can live more openly; migration can provide distance from judgmental family, and access to similarly minded individuals. In addition, because parents often expect to live with their adult children, it is difficult for LGB children to date or socialize with others in these situations. Moreover, if parents are not accepting of their child’s same-sex partner, they will lack the moral and emotional support provided by a partner to reduce stress of providing such elder care (Brody, 1985). Insofar as children can cover the financial costs of caring for their parents, they might then gain physical and emotional space to live more authentic lives. Yet, as noted above, the stigma attached to living in institutions

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might lead the parents of wealthier children to still insist on living together (Dai, 2014).

Finally, it is important to note that pressure attributable to eldercare policies are not just due to expectations that children take care of their elders. The way eldercare is provided in China—by one’s offspring—means that all Chinese, but especially LGB people, need to be especially concerned about how they will be cared for as they themselves age (Fredricksen-Golden *et al.*, 2009). In my research, interviewees frequently asked with concern ‘who will take care of us as we get older?’ Without siblings, the inability to be legally bound with a same-sex partner, and the difficulty of having children of their own, preservation of their wellbeing is in peril. In other words, as a result of both the one-child policy and eldercare provision in China, pressure is not just familial, but also *personal*.

Social policy solutions for family pressure

Due in part to the socio-cultural forces and social policies discussed in previous sections, LGB Chinese face high degrees of family pressure. In this section I examine longer- and more immediate-term social policy interventions that, like arguments for defamilization relating to women, could help ease the pressure put upon LGB people (Saxonberg, 2013; Lewis, 1992). The government just recently made a major policy intervention that should have a strong effect on sexual minorities in the country: in late 2015 Beijing announced a significant change to the one-child policy, which increased the legally allowable offspring to two (BBC, 2015). This follows an earlier

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easing of restrictions in 2013, which granted couples the right to have a second child if one of the parents was an only child him or herself. Beijing's decision to rescind the 'one-child policy' has everything to do with demographic forces and economic concerns, and certainly was not motivated by concerns over family pressure and LGB Chinese.

Still, as I first suggested in the days after the policy change was announced (Hildebrandt, 2015), the end of the one-child policy could very likely help improve the lives of LGB Chinese if for no other reason that it has played a strong role in increasing the pressure felt by them. Others have previously suggested that a two-child policy could help mitigate negative effects of an aging population and the social pressures placed upon an only child generally (Attane, 2002) and LGB children in particular (UNDP, 2014). But this repeal alone is not enough, especially given that the policy change made today will not immediately diminish pressure on the current generation of LGB Chinese.

Various solutions have been proposed to cover gaps in eldercare without shifting the burden completely to families, including increasing state investment in social security and an adequate pension system (Smith, 2005; Festini and de Martino, 2004). But contrary to positive outlooks offered just a couple years ago (Gao *et al.*, 2013) such reforms are increasingly unlikely as China's economic growth slows. China is not alone in its problems in taking care of its aging population amidst economic downturns. It could follow the lead of Japan which has adopted a long term care insurance system that splits responsibilities between the state and citizens

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themselves in what is called ‘community-based integrated care’ (Morikawa, 2014). It has been suggested that businesses and communities could be asked to donate in support of community care centres in China (Zhan *et al.*, 2008). The burden could also be shifted to employers, but occupational welfare has downsides, most notably in that it often exacerbates existing (and in China’s case large) social inequalities (Hills, 2004). There is a market for private institutionalized care of elderly, an option that wealthier Chinese families are increasingly open to (Zhan *et al.*, 2006). But this solution is limited by a family's wealth and lingering socio-cultural norms against such living arrangements. With that mind, China could look to Hong Kong for policies to incentivize multi-generational households where tax breaks and shorter waiting periods are given to families sharing housing (Chow, 2009).

Compelling the state to cover the cost of eldercare will be difficult; officials are unlikely to spend political capital and state funds to take care of an aging population, especially when socio-cultural traditions suggest this should be the domain of families anyway. Moreover, the repeal of the one-child policy will do little to improve the lives of the current generation of LGB Chinese. Thus, it is important to look to more immediate term social policy interventions. Essentially, the Chinese government needs to devise social policy solutions that help parents become grandparents even when their children are gay or lesbian. In that regard, the repeal of the one-child policy should be coupled with changes to other policies to expand alternative options for having children: in vitro fertilization (IVF) and adoption.

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Given that China had a one-child policy for 35 years in order to curb population growth, it should come as no surprise that IVF is not easy to obtain in the country. Government regulations require proof of marriage to receive IVF services, which eliminates the option for both single woman and same-sex couples, as marriage is only legal for opposite-sex couples. Moreover, state insurance does not cover the cost of IVF (Jourdan, 2015). These restrictive regulations have compelled many to go overseas for IVF treatment. But whether they are able to receive the treatments elsewhere or in China, IVF is limited to the wealthiest in society (Kuhn, 2016).

China's adoption laws have long been in flux, but remain highly restrictive. Its adoption laws have been modified to deal with real and pressing problems. For instance, in 2011 they were from tightened to fight illegal child trafficking; any adoptions that occur outside these official channels parents will not be recognized as legal guardians (Guardian, 2011). Modifications to the law in 2015 saw some relaxation to make it slightly easier to adopt abandoned children (Rajagopalan, 2015). But adoption opportunities are limited for LGB Chinese. While single parents may pursue adoption, same-sex couples cannot; singles who *do* adopt are not allowed to disclose their sexual orientation (UNDP, 2014). Greater opportunities to pursue IVF and more inclusive adoption policy that would allow singles and couples to adopt irrespective of sexual orientation or marriage status could help solve both the sociocultural impulse to become grandparents, and ensure old age support.

Finally, insofar as parental expectations that their children marry serve as a source of family pressure on LGB Chinese, same-sex couples could be given access

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to the institution of marriage. Elsewhere and in greater depth I have argued that barriers to same-sex marriage common elsewhere do not exist in China (Hildebrandt, 2011). From a cultural perspective, looking at other traditional Chinese societies like Taiwan where the newly elected prime minister ran on a platform that included supporting the legalisation of same-sex marriage, this is not beyond the scope of reality. In Vietnam, movement has been made toward legalization of same-sex marriage with the repeal of an explicit ban on them coming in late 2015 (Lewis, 2016). There have been regular equal marriage policy proposals in China's National People's Congress, although legalization is not in immediate sight. A judge in Changsha recently ruled a gay couple could not register to marry, but some believe the fact that the court chose to even hear the case is a partial victory for marriage equality (Hatton, 2016).

While the prospect for better lives of LGB Chinese might have taken a big one-step forward with the repeal of the one-child policy, recent developments in other policy areas suggest a step back: a new media law was announced in March 2016 that bans the depiction of same-sex relationships on television in a broader crackdown on what calls 'vulgar, immoral and unhealthy content' (Ellis-Peterson, 2016). This might very well be the first regressive policy to *explicitly* target LGB people in China. More broadly, when it comes to policy interventions, we must also be mindful that even positive changes made at the central level are often difficult to enforce at the local level (Shih, 2012). All of this suggests how difficult it can be to create a policy

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environment to facilitate change and respond to problems effecting the wellbeing of LGB people.

Conclusion and Avenues for Future Research

In this article I used a broad social policy framework to explain why LGB Chinese experience such high levels of family pressure. Such pressure on LGB people is not unique to China, but the particular arrangement of social policies and their interaction with socio-cultural norms is. Given the country's family planning and eldercare policies, pressure to conform and perform is high for all only children in China; the 'one chance' to raise a child to meet familial expectations, and the corresponding pressure felt by children to be that perfect only child, results in a difficult situation for all children, irrespective of sexuality. However, meeting those expectations, that include marriage (which is not allowed for same-sex couples) and procreation (for which LGB people have constrained possibilities), is especially acute for LGB Chinese. By acknowledging the role that social policies play in contributing to family pressure, and the related negative consequences of it, social policies can be improved to diminish pressure and help them lead healthier, productive, and happy lives.

Empirically testing this social policy explanation for family pressure is not easy, especially considering that we have very limited data on LGB people prior to the implementation of both policies discussed here. However, future research could test the hypothesis in one of two ways: a longer-term longitudinal study of LGB Chinese since the repeal of the one-child policy could help us understand if the

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situation has improved; in the more immediate term, a comparative study with Taiwan—which shares similar cultural attitudes on homosexuality and conformity, but does not have similar social policies—could allow scholars to isolate the social policy variable and speak with greater certainty about their effect on LGB Chinese.

Even if this link is supported by future research, it is reasonable to ask: why should the Chinese government care about family pressure experienced by LGB people? In my research, interviewees frequently noted that they were invisible to Chinese officials; one exclaimed, ‘they hardly know we even exist!’ There is no significant domestic pressure, nor apparently much political will, to make changes for the explicit benefit of LGB people. But the exclusion of people generally, and discrimination of LGB people in China specifically should be a concern given the country’s growing economic woes. There is ample and long-standing empirical evidence suggesting that social exclusion in general can drag down the economy (Roper, 1952; Teraji, 2011). Recent research suggests that discrimination and its related effects (including social and family pressure) on LGB people also creates costs for societies and negatively affects economic productivity (Badgett *et al.*, 2014; Burns, 2012; McBride and Durso, 2015).

Even more important, and applicable outside of the China context, this article has highlighted how LGB citizens are effected differently by welfare regime reforms. In positing the notion of ‘sexual citizenship’, Weeks (1998) argues that heterosexuality is deeply inculcated into social policies and the effects on those who deviate from this norm are not well understood. In explaining high levels of family

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pressure on LGB Chinese, I have also revealed how key social policies maintain a strong heteronormative bias and in doing so negatively affect sexual minorities. These insights can be extended to other declining fertility contexts to understand how social policies affect single children more broadly.

China's welfare arrangements are now strongly familized (or, to be more historically accurate, *re-familized*) with responsibilities being dependent upon kinship (see Esping-Andersen, 1999). Feminist critiques have correctly highlighted how such arrangements ignore gender (Lewis, 1992); defamilization moves away from these arrangements and lifts the disproportionate burden off of women (Bambra, 2007). I have shown in this article that disproportionate burdens are not just a matter of gender, but also a matter of sexuality. And because of the importance of these individuals in many restructured welfare regimes, ignoring sexuality comes at the peril not just of LGB people, but the health of the regime and society at large.

Notes

¹ I use the term LGB or ease and simplicity in this article while recognising that the community is diverse. I recognise that the experiences with family pressure, and the effect of the social policies discussed in this article, are not necessarily universal across the entire community. Bisexual men and women, for instance, likely face a different, more complicated set of pressures than gay men and lesbian women.

² While Friedman *et al.* (2008) counter that it makes little sense for grandparents to invest in grandchildren as they will not be around long enough to recoup the investment, the policy context in China where they have few other options would likely change this calculation.

³ <http://chinadaily.com.cn/html/feature/lifeafterloss> Accessed 18 March 2016

⁴ http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372964.htm Accessed 18 March 2016

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