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Same-sex Partners and Practices of Familial Intimacy¹

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Abstract

This paper presents the preliminary findings of interviews with adult non-partnered non-heterosexual daughters in Hong Kong and Japan, in a larger project comparing the practices of intimacy between mothers and adult heterosexual and non-heterosexual daughters in the two East Asian societies. The interviews revealed the mechanisms through which heteronormativity is enforced, even in cases where the mothers have apparently accepted the daughters' sexuality and their female partners. While the daughters' socioeconomic achievements constitute a source of pride for the mothers, they do not thoroughly compensate for the daughters' gender and sexual transgressions. Likewise, while the presence of a partner could allay the mother's worry about the daughter, her presence or status in the family is not equivalent to that of a sibling's spouse.

Keywords: LGBT family, intersectionality, gender, sexuality, queer studies

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Introduction

This paper reflects the preliminary analysis of on-going interviews with adult daughters and mothers of adult daughters, in a project exploring the practices of intimacy between mothers and daughters and their impact on kin relations and gender and familial norms. In the interviews of a small sample of adult non-heterosexual daughters we draw on for this paper, we hope to identify how adult daughters negotiate their relationship with their mothers, given their transgressions of heterosexual and gender norms, in the context of two Asian societies where the heterosexual family unit defines the parameters of mother-daughter intimacy, albeit in different ways.

The current literature on non-heterosexual daughters and their relationships with their mothers has focused primarily on the “coming-out” experience when the daughters are relatively young and the consequences of how the mother reacts to the daughter’s disclosure (Khor & Kamano, 2013; 2017). In the Asian context, a different practice of “coming out” (see Kam, 2006; Wong, 2017) coupled with strong norms of filial piety or obligations towards elderly parents make it necessary to explore the broader relationship between non-heterosexual daughters and their mothers with respect to family and gender norms. Interviews with heterosexual daughters in the same larger project have resonated with extant findings about how the bond between mother and daughter are achieved through identification, especially of motherhood and wifehood (see, for example, Evans 2008). This further raises the question of how non-heterosexual daughters relate to their mothers short of such naturalized bases of identifications, in two societies where same-sex marriage is not a reality and where raising children by same-sex parents is a rare occurrence.

We will focus on identifying patterns of actual and ideal relationships between adult daughters and their mothers, paying attention to the role of the partner in the mother-daughter relationship, and the mothers’ and daughters’ negotiation of familial and gender norms.

Description of Data

The interviews reported here constituted one part of the second stage of a larger project on the practices of intimacy between mothers and adult heterosexual and non-heterosexual daughters in the two Asian societies of Hong Kong and Japan. We conducted eight focus group interviews with non-heterosexual daughters and heterosexual daughters of two age

groups (28 – 39, and 40 – 50) in Tokyo and Hong Kong respectively, four focus group interviews with mothers of heterosexual daughters in these two age groups in Tokyo and Hong Kong, and one focus group interview with mothers of non-heterosexual daughters in Hong Kong. Each focus group consisted of four to seven participants, recruited through acquaintances who introduced us to more participants, as well as through a research company in Tokyo. We encountered difficulties recruiting mothers of non-heterosexual daughters in Tokyo at the focus group interview stage, but there are plans to conduct semi-structured interviews with non-heterosexual mothers in both Hong Kong and Tokyo.

Participants in the focus group interviews were recruited for the individual semi-structured interviews, primarily on their availability. In this paper, we discussed the findings from four semi-structured interviews with non-heterosexual adult daughters in Hong Kong and five from Japan. The interviews are still on-going, in addition to planned interviews with mothers of heterosexual daughters and those of non-heterosexual daughters. Most of the participants have semi-professional or professional occupations and have at least a bachelor's degree, which was due in large part to the way the participants were recruited. At the same time, some highly educated professional non-heterosexual daughters have come from a working-class background, allowing us to examine how class intersects with gender to impact on the daughters' practices of intimacy with their mothers. All except one of the daughters included in this paper were in a stable relationship or were living with a same-sex partner at the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted in the one of the researchers' workplace and lasted two hours on average.

Based on reflection on the focus group interviews, we derived questions for the semi-structured interviews, focusing on the participants' relationship with their mothers, including the frequency and depth of their interactions, their depiction of the current relationship and how it measures against their ideal mother-daughter relationship, and the role their partners play in the family. The semi-structured interviews also allowed flexibility to delve into issues unique to each interview participants. Participants chose their words carefully to depict the relationship with their mothers. A few participants also described in detail memorable incidents, some of which happened a long time ago, that captured a defining moment in the relationship with their mothers.

The small sample means that the findings are not to be generalized, but it is hoped that a close reading of the data would help us understand the more intricate aspects and complexity of mother-daughter relationships, in the context of the family whose heteronormative foundation is challenged by the lesbian or queer daughter. Specifically, we hope to understand how the lesbian/queer daughter (re-)constructs intimacy with or distances herself from the mother in light of their apparent “failure” in meeting gender and familial expectations.

To derive relevant insights on these issues, we identified from the interviews the following themes: mother’s expectations, especially with respect to (heterosexual) marriage and family; various ways in which the daughter relates to the mother; and the partner’s relationship with the participant’s mother and the role the partner plays in the mother-daughter relationship.

Mothers’ Expectations

Heteronormative Expectations

Almost all referred to the expectations—or pressure, indeed—of marriage and having children, even though the two might not come together. At times, it could be as direct as “I don’t know what to do if you are not even marrying (literally: not becoming a daughter-in-law) (QDJ1). Those who had experienced or are still experiencing pressure of having children commonly referred to “giving the mother a grandchild” in both Hong Kong and Japan, indicating the mother’s stake in the gendered expectations for the daughter. Some felt relieved when the expectations were met by a sibling. The pressure can lighten not only by a sibling’s conformity to marriage and family norms, but also when they violate the norms somewhat. For example, QDJK4 recognizes that her brother’s “reversing” the normative order of wedding, marriage and having children might have “loosened up her mother a bit” with respect to pressure towards her.

Generally, these are expectations that wane with the age of the daughter, but for some, perhaps those who tend to see the expectations as connected to the mother’s happiness, the unmet expectations remained a source of tension for years to come.

QDJ2 left home to work in Tokyo. After being exposed to feminism, she attempted to help her mother see things a little differently, with respect to marriage and family.

However, she was overwhelmed by the sight of her mother's joy at the birth of her grandchild – her brother's child.

“Just looking at my parents' reaction... I am feeling better now, but for a while, I felt quite shaken. They're so happy [with the grandchild]. And I can't give them this happiness. And then I wondered if it's really OK not to have children.... It was a really low time for me.” (QDJ2)

At the same time, QDJ2 also reported quite self-consciously performing the daughter's (and a woman's) role whenever she visited, accompanying her mother shopping, helping out with housework, in addition to listening to almost everyone's troubles and complaints.

In one rather unusual case, the mother suggested a traditional Japanese wedding ceremony for the daughter and her partner, arguing that if they were to be together, then they should do it “properly”². The partner's mother refused to attend, but two sisters attended. Relatives beyond the immediate families were apparently not invited, but the “wedding” was known to a wider circle of relatives and neighbors. When the daughter went back for a visit, she got comments from neighbors that it was good that she “got married”. She did not clarify, and neither did the neighbors, that it was not a heterosexual marriage. This lack of openness about the same-sex partnership coupled with actual cordial interactions with the daughter's partner and her family, despite the partner's mother's rejection of the partnership, might suggest that the mother was trying to understand and cope with the daughter's partnership within a heteronormative framework.³

Socioeconomic Achievements

Heteronormative or gender expectations are not the only expectations mothers have of their daughters. A few daughters mentioned that their academic achievements and careers have been a source of pride. The daughters' achievements might “compensate” for or at least gave them some latitude for transgressions of gender and heterosexual norms for the mother or the relatives whose questions and queries the mother has to handle.

² The two have entered an adoptive relationship – an arrangement in which the older partner would legally adopt the younger partner so that the relationship is legally protected (see Maree, 2004).

³ Daughter's partners will be taken up in greater detail in a later section.

For QDJ3, the mother's ideal daughter is one that she can be proud of – whether it is about marrying somebody working for a big corporation or having some achievements herself:

“And so, when I was a *ronin* [trying for one more year to get into an arts university], she said really horrible things to me. To my younger sister and others, she was saying things like, “don't be like your sister,” “a failure like your sister”. And then I found a job, and it happened to be a well-known company, and she got so proud. She put my picture in the living room, even when I didn't live with her. It seems that she boasted to people who visited with her.” (QDJ3)

A Hong Kong daughter recounted her mother's appreciation of her achievements this way:

“It's a great comfort to her! There're a lot of things she didn't expect... like, I could enter and finish university; I became a teacher; I financially support her and devotedly so.

After I got the driver's license, I borrowed a car and drove my family around. I drove her, and said to her, “Have you ever thought that I could drive? Last year I needed to drive to make money; if not I would not have learned to drive.” She said, “I have not. It's nice that one of you can drive!”

I took these few words to heart, I felt that it must mean a lot to her.

She seems to have never expected the things that I have achieved. Because the family economic pressure on me was rather heavy, I need to sacrifice certain things. I can get a lot of things with the money I have today; but there're also a lot of other things money can't buy. So, I need to focus on what it can't buy - which is, my mom's being proud of me.” (QDHK3)

The socioeconomic status the daughter has – as somebody who is educated—also has an impact on how the relatives view her, and hence her mother's status among the relatives.

“We [in the family] all like talking nonsense. That's what we do together. They're very willing to see me, they find my talking very funny, as nonsensical. Other than nonsense,

as I'm educated, sometimes I talk with substance and clarity. Let's say, when a relative asks me, "You are now working for Customs?" "I am working for Immigration." I would explain, "Customs deals with goods; Immigration deals with people. If you have any questions about the e-Channel, you ask Immigration Department; whereas, if you don't know how many cigarettes you may bring, you ask Customs Department." That's a bit of chitchat, and also knowledge. They regard me as brilliant... considering our financial background in this society, my mom had a daughter who could complete a university education, and become financially independent right after. Of course, the fact is I'm not really that brilliant. Maybe in a year or two, I would think about and organize my own path.

From others' perspective, "Your daughter is good!" I won't use "successful" in naming, but my mom having me for daughter is regarded as pretty nice; though it may sound corny... "She has the thought to go yum-cha with you; she gives you money; spends time and celebrates festivals with you... all these show her filial love." I wonder if that's the reason, our relatives like me a lot. Perhaps as we are Chinese." (QDHK3)

The narrative of the socioeconomic achievements is embedded in her mother's overall evaluation of her as a daughter, of others' perceived filial piety and hence her mother's "good fortune" as a mother.

In the focus group interviews, we have also encountered a daughter whose masculine appearance and lack of a male partner were becoming an issue for the relatives until she finished her PhD. The degree seems to have lifted her status and shielded her from criticisms of gender/sexual transgressions (Focus group discussion, HK1). Even in Japan today, leaving the prefecture for the metropolitan Tokyo or working in Tokyo is considered an achievement. One daughter's violation of dress code at the grandmother's funeral – donning a pair of pants instead of the black dress expected of women—was not only tolerated, but evaluated highly as a cosmopolitan practice of Tokyo people (QDJ2). At the same time, she is still treated as "half a person" (not a full adult) for not being (heterosexually) married, despite that she has been with the same partner for over 10 years.

Connected to this, it should also be mentioned that quite a few daughters mentioned the significance of economic independence themselves, and they were aware of this from a young age. For example, QDJ3 said once she was aware of her sexual orientation, she

thought that she'd need to be economically self-sufficient if her future partner would want to be a full-time homemaker. She reacted very strongly to her father who said that a woman would not be able to be self-sufficient.

Relating to the Mother

Following extant literature, when thinking about practices of intimacy (or distancing), we probed the frequency of visits or meetings, the type of interactions they have, and how much mothers and daughters share about their feelings and concerns with each other (see Jackson, Ho & Jin, 2013). However, we also noticed that the emotionality of the relationship goes beyond these indicators of intimacy; quite a few daughters described in detail certain episodes that could somehow condense or capture the relationships. The grandmother also featured prominently in a few daughters' narratives as somebody they could relate to, usually as an alternative to the mother.

Daughters in Tokyo who have moved away from their parents typically visit only once or a few times a year, but some maintain contact by SNS or phone. Hong Kong, being a smaller place, allows for more contact, usually in having meals together. However, there is big range in the type of interactions they engage in even when participating in similar activities. Meeting for a dim sum lunch or a dinner at a restaurant is a common social practice in Hong Kong. It is also a common scene in Hong Kong to see family members engaged in individual activities, like reading newspapers or even watching a drama on a smart phone, while seated at the same table for dim sum, exchanging a few words every now and then in the one- or two-hour duration of the meal. Another related point that we will take up later is that even though mothers do not generally take the daughter's stable relationship with a woman partner as an equivalent of a heterosexual relationship, some apparently see it as a positive sign that the daughter is "taken care of". The focus is shifted somewhat from merely meeting or failing to meet expectations to a consideration of companionship for the daughter.

QDHK1 would have a meal with the mother every two weeks, and considered the relationship "good". At the same time, she also said very clearly that there's no communication with the mother and that she doesn't have any sympathy for her mother's various "worries".

“She doesn’t know how to express her feelings. Yeah. So, she doesn’t. Very rarely. But even if she’s willing to share, I tend to evade. I don’t want to listen. Yeah.... [b]ecause her worries are very tiring. Firstly I’m not interested; secondly, I feel that she asks for the trouble.” (QDHK1)

Expectedly perhaps, QDHK1 also does not disclose much about her life to her mother either.

QDHK2, on the other hand, used to be close to her mother when she was young when her parents were in a poor relationship. Her being away from the home led to less conversation and sharing, to the point that she wasn’t immediately notified of her grandparents’ deaths. However, she would not say that their relationship has worsened. Still she would see her mother, but “the thing is, you don’t have much to talk about or to do. So, just sit there briefly and leave.” She said, “we are very distant”. Her explanation was that “we have been very distant over a lot of things; and, in the course of time, I have probably become indifferent. Somehow, we have all adopted this pattern of remoteness among ourselves.” (QDHK2)

A few daughters both in Hong Kong and in Japan reported being distant from the mother, either due to some childhood experience, such as a divorce when the daughter was young, or a clash of personality. For some, their not meeting the mother’s gendered heteronormative expectations apparently also contributed to or aggravated the tension in the relationship.

QDHK2 disclosed her sexuality to her mother, in an indirect sort of way, and then to her father, also vaguely. They both reacted rather strongly.

“I talked with my pa and told him that I was worried that they would not approve of the person I like. As I had not come out, my pa wasn’t clear about it; and he even demonstrated being open-minded, and said, “Ah, it doesn’t matter if that’s what you like, just be true...” things like that, and then he hanged up.

What happened was, actually, my ma was sitting next to him, she couldn’t hear what I said; but hearing what my pa said, she thought that I had come out to him. So, they

talked about it, and she divulged it! In fact, I had never expected that my ma would think so much about it; because I didn't think much when I told her about it.

Anyway, my pa had assumed that I was seeing a foreigner, because in the past, many years ago, for example, I had a friend, a Pakistani guy, who was interested in me. They have met him when they came to Britain. So he thought it might be an "acha" (a common Hong Kong term for South Asian), or a black guy. It's unimaginable to him. Then, the next night he called again, also at 3 a.m., he said, "Please don't!" He added, "Oh, gossip is a fearful thing! You will be discriminated against!" That's what my pa said."

After she introduced her girlfriend to her parents, they had a meal together and everything seemed fine. However, afterwards, the mother started nagging:

"While opposing us, she had kind of self-blame, for example she attributed, "Oh, when you were little, your hair had been cut too short; and didn't force you to wear a dress", [Chuckling] that sort of things. I mean, she had mixed up gender expression and sexuality." (QDHK2).

They maintained a relationship, but the defining moment apparently of the eventual distance thus created between them could be attributed to an episode that QD2 apparently remembered vividly. It was during the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong, and her mother was visiting with her and her then girlfriend (who is a transwoman) in England. They asked her mother to stay, but she declined.

"Er, it was during the SARS epidemic period; and after Leslie Cheung Kwok-Wing⁴ leapt to his death; we watched the news on the internet, and found it horrible. Although my ma had bought the air ticket, my ex suggested, "How about telling her not to return to Hong Kong now?" She had actually offered and said, "We would get you a new ticket later; don't go back... stay here for the time being!" However, my ma called my pa, and he said, "You come back!" [Chuckling] He's really cheeky, he added, "You come back, and you can do the cooking!" I have no idea!

⁴ A popular Hong Kong singer who was known to be gay.

Then, my ma opted to go back. I think, maybe the relationship between my ma and me was a watershed. Despite the fact that she and her husband were not in good terms, she probably felt that her real home was where he was after all.

Whereas, with me... perhaps because I was somehow married, we had become not so close; I don't know, - how shall I put it? - but I think that her final decision basically had nothing to do with money, since we had offered to get her a fresh ticket, etc.. And, while knowing well that Hong Kong was likely to become an epidemic zone, she still preferred going back. Imagine during the SARS epidemic, the whole world was watching over it in the news, it's so scary! I was actually quite disappointed about her opting to return to Hong Kong; I thought, "Oh, you still want to leave!" (QDHK2)

Regardless of the intimacy of the relationship, a certain sense of obligation could be detected from among some daughters. Indeed, those who reported not being close to, or indeed, being distant from the mother, actually expressed a strong sense of obligation towards the mother. Some also expressed compassion towards or a sense of respect for the mother, for all that she has gone through. There is a slight, but not definite, tendency that those with less economically advantaged parents take on this responsibility more strongly.

Quite a lot focused on money, and monetary exchanges and support, as indicative of care and love for the mother and others. QDHK3, in talking about her relationship with her mother, wishes that she doesn't need to give that much to her mother, and yet at the same time, she feels that that amount of money won't cover the household expenses. Both older sisters got married early and did not support the family. She feels protective of the mother, and she loves her mother. Mother seems to consult her or talk to her about almost anything, but she would disclose a lot of information about her girlfriend's family, but not her work as her mother would not understand. Her girlfriend's mother is less accepting of their relationship because she's a woman, but at the same time, she also knows that the mother cares a lot for her daughter, and would like to accept her but can't.

Similarly, QDHK4 expresses a strong sense of responsibility towards the parents, more than her younger brother who's married and just has a young child. She has studied in the UK for a few years, and feels that she cannot just leave the parents alone: "If I were to leave [Hong Kong] again, they'd be left on their own without anyone to depend on. I just cannot do it. Even though we are not living together, and there's a need for some distance,

but still, if anything happens, I can be there right away.” She also feels that it is important that her mother asks her to do things, because it shows that her mother finds her dependable and reliable:

“Well, maybe she doesn’t have anyone to count on and that’s why she calls on me. But at least on her mind, I won’t be like my unreliable brother. Even when asked, he would decline to help, and would even scold you [the mother]. So, even though I do complain at times, but I do help out. And she would also understand that even though I might grudge a bit, she’d ask me to do things for her again.” (QDHK4).

Almost verbatim to QDHK4, QDHK2 says, “Actually, sometimes, looking at the situation of Hong Kong I would wonder, “Oh, will I go abroad again”. At the same time, the same consideration would hold me back, as, after all, they’re getting old, unlike in the past when they were both working and seemed pretty well.”

After moving away from her hometown to Tokyo, QDJ4 would visit only once a year for a few days, on her own, and phone calls are also infrequent. However, she said, “I really love my mother. And I really appreciate her,” but she couldn’t quite express her feelings well. Instead, besides having helped them financially, she is also putting aside money for her parents, for the just in case.

Even though QDJ1 has gone through a period when she did not want to see her mother, she was overcome with emotions at the interview when she recounted episodes in which she felt that her mother cared for her. She remembered with fondness the time when she was still in kindergarten and got to spend time alone with her mother alone when hospitalized for surgery. When she was older and was about to land her first job, her mother took her shopping for cosmetics and put all in a cosmetic bag. She still has the bag, and is very appreciative of her mother. At the same time, even though she visits once a month, it isn’t that she really wants to go see her mother. She feels that she should.

While QDJ2 does not visit often, she reported engaging with the mother, or rather, playing the daughter role whenever she visits. She respects and looks up to her mother, and when she’s home, she’d accompany her mother shopping, do things around the house, and listens to everybody’s complaints and issues.

Ideal Relationship

QDHK4 says that she needs space: “Because I find [mother] too demanding. At times, I need my own private time and space, to see friends, or just be at home, instead of like you know that I have a day off, or weekend, and expects time with her to hike, or to do other things. It isn’t that whenever I have time, I need to give it all to her.”

More philosophically, QDHK2 said, “that’s called friendship-between-men-of-virtue-is-light-like-water”, invoking a Confucius saying. She emphasized that there is a need to keep a “friendly distance” or else they would get into unpleasant topics. Underplaying the importance of meeting up or being in touch with each other, QDHK2 also asserted that “it’s actually a very close relationship”. For her, monetary exchanges reflect “care,” but physical exchanges (contacting and meeting up) are not so important.

Rather than distance, QDHK3 says that the mother’s acceptance of her partner, her being proud of her and also not giving her pressure mark an ideal relationship: “Her acceptance of my partner; her being proud of me; her never pressuring on me; her letting me have my way - that’s the best I would expect! Moreover, she sets a very good example. So, I think it’s already very good.”

Similarly, in Japan, daughters have mentioned a good distance – not too close, not to distant—as an ideal. For examples, QDJ4 would prefer her mother to create a social network on her own, and that she herself needs to “give in” more. She sees her financial support for her parents is seen as a compensation of sort.

Not wanting to worry the mother is also mentioned by more than a few daughters. For example, QDHK4’s mother would share and talk with her, but she wouldn’t talk so much. She felt that it won’t help her and also doesn’t want her to worry or to burden her as she’s already taking care of her husband and mother:

“First of all, at times I feel that she couldn’t either, and I’d rather spare her having to worry. She’s also taking care of my dad, my grandma...”. (QDJ4).

The Partner in the Family

The lack of recognition of one's partner as a partner, equivalent to the heterosexual partners of other siblings, hurts and creates a distance in the relationship with the mother. This is all the more so when the daughter has a lot of affection for the mother.

QDJ2's partner of 10 years is not recognized in the same way as her sibling's spouse is, despite that they have been together longer. QDJ4's mother refused to attend the "wedding ceremony" organized by her partner's family, and even though there are exchanges between them and the two families – for example, the partner's family would send rice to them – the partner is a taboo topic for the mother. As QDJ4 puts it, "since our relationship is not recognized, I feel that there's this part that's being denied, and I try to open myself up more in interacting with her. It isn't that I have lost such feelings [for her]... I have to put in a lot of effort...".

Regardless of whether the mother immediately accepts the daughter's sexuality or her partner, in quite many cases the partner plays an important role mediating the relationship between the mother and the daughter, especially in more volatile relationships.

For example, QDHK4 said that her mother always asked her partner to go on a trip together, even though it hasn't materialized yet. She also felt that her mother considered the partner as family because she'd ask her to do things for her, like picking up grocery. QDHK3 reported a good relationship but not too close. However, still, the girlfriend does have a presence:

Researcher: You've mentioned that your mother needs to pamper your girlfriend... does your girlfriend play any particular role in your relationship with your mother?

QDHK4: No! Her role is being my girlfriend.

QDHK4: Say, when you go on a trip together, does she join? Does she chat with your mom alone usually?

Researcher: She won't! After all these years, there's still no breakthrough; for which my mom always has been longing. "Despite being with you for so long, she's still so shy; so polite even when coming out from the room for the toilet."

Right! Actually, all these ten years, she needs me to walk her to the toilet. “You walk with me out of the room!” My mom says, “She was already up, but as soon as she saw me coming home from outside, she rushed to the bed and would not stay in the living room.”

For QDHK2, the relationship is fine but not close. For example, if the partner were around, they would chat casually, but if she were not around, the mother and daughter would talk about deeper things.

There is a rather strong rhetoric of companionship as a justification for mother’s acceptance of a daughter’s partner. Mothers (and even fathers at times) also express concerns when the daughter falls out of relationships. It is hard to tell if the mother considers it as superior to heterosexual marriage (being in an authentic companionate relationship rather than just being with *a* man), or inferior (“short of having a husband and children, at least you have somebody with you into old age”); perhaps it is both. In either case, the focus seems to shift from merely meeting or failing to meet expectations to a consideration of companionship for the daughter.

QDHK4, for example, felt that her mother would expect her partner to take good care of her, or that she won’t worry her, or in the least won’t hurt her. And perhaps, also take care of them a bit. Her father had expressed his worry: “My daddy said, shortly after seeing my partner, that he had worried about her: “Perhaps [your partner] sees a lot of people at work, and it’s easy for her to meet other people (or develop feelings for others),” and that she might only be in a temporary relationship with her, as she can see a lot of people. Like, they’d worry about these things. Perhaps they’d worry that I would go through another breakup.”

Even when the mother does not recognize the relationship with the partner in the same way as she would her other children’s heterosexual partners, there is this feeling of lessened anxiety or worry about the daughter as they now have somebody to be by them, such as in QDJ2’s case.

There are a few examples of the parents’ fully accepting the daughter’s partner. QDJ1 has been with her partner for over 20 years, and her partner is very much integrated into the extended family life. QDJ1’s mother told her that she has had nightmares of the partner’s disappearing, leaving QDJ1 alone. For QDHK3, it was a gradual development.

Long time ago. As I recall, one time, she saw the photo stickers of me and a girl; and she reacted like, “Don’t you scare me!” And then she changed the topic of conversation; and let everything run its course.

Researcher: Anyway, she allowed you to continue bringing your girlfriend home?

QDHK3: Hmm.

Researcher: So, that was long time ago; quite a few years ago. Then, when did you bring this sensitive topic up again, and let her know that you’re dating?

QDHK3: Never! Just let it develop naturally. The closest was... “How come you gave \$100 ‘*lai-see*’ (red packet/ lucky money) to my elder sister’s husband; but only \$50 to ‘mine’?”

Researcher: You posed this question?

QDHK3: Yes. I asked my girlfriend, “How much did she give you?” “\$50.” My mom said, “I just happened to have only \$50’s.” I reacted, “You just happened? You won’t be able to make up the difference; as my elder-sister is already ahead of me... her husband wouldn’t disappear for no reasons. You better hurry up and give more to my girlfriend.” I wanted them to synchronize.

Researcher: When did you have this conversation?

QDHK3: When I was in Secondary school; I was with my current girlfriend.

Researcher: You were already able to point that out when you’re in Secondary school?

QDHK3: Yes!

Researcher: And you drew a parallel between your girlfriend and your elder-sister’s husband?

QDHK3: My elder-sister’s boyfriend. I said, “Don’t you know you’re discriminating me! Why are they different?” She said she didn’t mean to, and then she seemed to feel guilty. Although she didn’t switch the “*lai-see*” (red packet, lucky money) around, she understood that I would care about that. For example, on birthday, she gave me \$200; same for my girlfriend, no less. I would prefer her to give \$20 to me, but \$80

or \$100 to my girlfriend, and not below. “If you want to quantify this, just follow my idea.”

QDHK2 felt that it was important to disclose her sexuality with her mother, even though she wasn’t planned on doing so when she did disclose her sexual orientation, and she just kind of “blurted out”, as she put it. The mother’s reaction was not positive initially: “Oh, no! That’s not good.” However, she still felt it was important:

“Oh yes, important [to disclose my sexual orientation]! Otherwise, you are keeping secrets all the time. Actually, I feel that it was rather bad of me for not telling her about my ex’s gender identity. It’s like you’re keeping a secret from her; we normally don’t keep any secrets deliberately from each other. Yet, I don’t tell her everything; because I don’t have the time; when you don’t always see each other often, you won’t talk about everything. You just don’t have so much time to talk; but I don’t deliberately keep anything secret.”

She eventually wrote them a letter before she left home, and the father, and eventually the mother accepted it:

“Some time later, I talked with my pa on the phone, and he said, “Oh, I saw some TV programs about animals behaving like gay too. Homosexuality exists, and is natural, it’s part of nature.” So, I believed that he’s accepted it; but he didn’t tell me how my ma was feeling about it. My ma and I have never talked about it formally. Anyway, I felt that they had become softened over this issue.

And then, when I returned Hong Kong in 2000, I was single; I had split up with my first girlfriend. I started working, going on and off duty repeatedly; I wasn’t sure about my own direction. After half a year, or one year, then, one day at home—it was very interesting—my ma said to me, “Er, it doesn’t matter what your preference is...” I don’t remember her exact words, I think the message was, “Go ahead and be together with the one you like”. It means she’s giving a green light. [Chuckling]”

Even if the parents have accepted the daughter’s sexuality and her partner, her partner could create an issue in the family. Most noticeably, being invited or not invited to family functions is an issue experienced by some. QD4 related a family banquet to celebrate the 100th day of the birth of the brother’s daughter.

“Actually it led to a little quarrel among family members. A little bit of a discussion, debate. My mommy asked my younger brother if I could bring my partner. My brother in turn asked my mommy and daddy back, if I were to ask my elder sister to bring her partner, would you mind? It’s like both parties were asking if each would mind, to check first, and then in the end, they said it wouldn’t be good. And then they said that a cousin is bringing a girlfriend, and another one her boyfriend, and so it doesn’t really matter. So they asked me to bring my partner. So, there’s some miscommunication, some misunderstanding and my parents said that my brother didn’t want it, and my brother thought my parents didn’t want it. In the end, I just felt, heck with it. I wanted to bring her, but then it’s just purely that I wanted to bring her but if it were to lead to their being so uneasy with each other, then I would just not show up. Then my daddy asked me not to be like that and asked me to bring my partner [to the banquet]”. (QDJK4)

So, a very simple family gathering that involves more than the immediate family members could become a major source of tension.

However, whether the mother has accepted the partner or not, the partner can be an important mediator between the mother and the daughter. Even though the partner is a taboo subject in QDJ4’s family, as far as the mother is concerned, the partner nonetheless encourages QDJ4 to contact her mother more and express her feelings more directly to her mother. QDJ1’s mother would even talk directly to the partner at times, including about the family’s economic conditions. QDJ1 did admit that even when she felt “emotionally distant”, she felt somewhat connected to the mother through her partner.

Concluding Thoughts

One impressive finding from the interviews is that tension seems palpable, due perhaps in no small part to their gender and sexual transgressions. However, this does not necessarily mean distancing from the mother. At times, there seems to be a more deliberate effort – either on their own or with the help of the partner— to maintain or strengthen family ties. Many daughters reported that they are the ones that the mother relies on. Or, in the least, despite the tension, it seems that the mother and the daughter cannot leave each other alone.

The findings reported here also suggest further paths of analysis in the larger project. This paper focuses on the commonalities between the Hong Kong and Japanese daughters, and it is true that more commonalities emerged in the individual interviews than in the focus group discussions. Further analysis, however, should focus on identifying subtle differences not noticed in this first analysis. A focal point of analysis would be their interpretation and performance of “filial piety” and the sense of obligations vis-à-vis other siblings. Differences in the gender regimes in the two societies should also be further explored.

Second, regardless of the closeness of relationship, the daughters have expressed quite a strong sense of obligation towards the mother or the parents in general. But perhaps a slightly stronger tendency among daughters with parents who are less economically privileged. This is a point that warrants comparison with heterosexual daughters as well.

Third, quite a few Hong Kong daughters have overseas experiences and former partners overseas. The possibility of legal recognition of same-sex partnership and its impact on familial relationship should be explored.

Last, how obviously the daughters transgress gender and sexual norms should also be explored systematically, as it would impact on how the mothers might react to them, particularly in relation to how they are seen by relatives, neighbors and friends.

This paper focuses on daughters. The very fact that it has been difficult to recruit mothers of non-heterosexual daughters in Japan is suggestive of the difficulty of the circumstances. Our next set of interviews with the mothers would be most important to explore all the issues that have emerged from this current analysis.

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