When two worlds collide
Asian Christian LGBTQs coming out to parents

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Introduction

There is a bourgeoning literature on religion and queer sexuality. Most of this literature focuses on the negotiation between a Christian’s sexual and religious identities (Beagan and Hattie 2015; Comstock 1996; Ganzvoort et al. 2011; Liboro 2014; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Thumma 1991; Wilcox 2003, 2009). And even though there is a growing attention on LGBTQs from non-Western culture, studies on queer Christians have rarely prioritized them, particularly Asian. This might be due to the misperception that the number of LGBTQs remains small and insignificant among Asians, whether in the USA or worldwide. But these perceptions are not necessarily true. In the USA, according to a Gallup survey in 2012, 4.3% of Asians identified as LGBT, compared to 3.2% of white Americans who identified as LGBT. In Asia, although LGBTQ rights are still limited in most countries, a 2019 survey by The Economist found that 45% of respondents in the Asia-Pacific believed that same-sex marriage is inevitable in the region.

The lack of understanding of Asian Christian LGBTQs, both in the USA and the global society, has perpetuated stereotypes about the group and their same-sex realities. On the one hand, it is assumed that the experience of white Christian LGBTQs can be generalized to the entire Christian community and that there is no need to differentiate between the racial experience and sexual identification of different groups. On the other, when thinking about Asian Christian communities, we assume them to be “supra-homophobic,” meaning that if the LGBTQ individuals among them ever came out, they would face multiple marginalizations. But both of these assumptions need to be verified through empirical studies. Studies show that religion, sexuality, and culture do not exist in isolation; they are social categories dependent on one another for meaning (Collins 1998; Crenshaw 1989; King 2000). To understand the intersectional relationships of these categories, we need to examine how, and in what ways, culture influences the experience of Christian LGBTQs.

This chapter aims to serve two purposes. Focusing on Asian American Christian LGBTQs in the USA, its first aim is to provide descriptive information on the coming out experiences of Asian American Christian LGBTQs. Second, it systematically analyzes parental responses
towards the coming out of their child and its effects on the parent–child relationship. We will focus our investigation on one particular event, that is, coming out to parents, as highlighted by our participants and by studies (Marrow 2006) as the most difficult, yet most significant, of all coming out events. In-depth interviews with 35 Asian Christians in North America, most of whom live in the USA, are the data source for this study.

Background of the study: Confucianism, Christian faith, and coming out to parents

The term “Asian American” encompasses 43 different ethnicities and over 100 different languages and dialects (Cousins 2014). Asian Americans are from different class backgrounds, religious beliefs, and life experiences, too. While numerous differences exist among them, they are distinctive as a social group and share some similar cultural values and morals. It happened that most of our participants, who were recruited through a snowballing method, traced their roots to East Asia, that is, China, Taiwan, Korea (also Vietnam and Singapore), which share general cultural similarities deeply rooted in Confucianism. We will provide a brief discussion about Confucian values with respect to family and sexuality that might affect our participants’ coming out experience.

The influence of Confucianism on family life

Confucianism provides a distinctive set of values that define the characteristics of family and of the good life. It promotes family harmony and social solidarity over an individual’s wellbeing and defines a successful life as one that fulfills one’s obligations in a set of hierarchical relationships of which family is the center. Parents see children as reflections of themselves and they are expected to invest everything in their children (Hom 1994; Li and Orleans 2001). In return, children obey their parents and protect the family’s name over the life span. To that end, it is a duty of children, particularly sons, to get married and have children of their own blood. Same-sex relationships are clearly problematic because they not only prevent individuals from fulfilling their most important duty as children but also disrupt the Confucian order of gender norms. It is no wonder that studies show that Asian Americans are the ethnic group that is most opposed to gay marriage in California.

The influence of Christian faith

Evangelical Christianity has become immensely popular among many Asian immigrants in the USA, especially Koreans and Chinese. Many are drawn to ethnic churches as they provide a community that identifies with immigrants’ cultural heritage as well as helps keep their children from “immoral” influences of US culture (Chen 2006; Zhan 2002). Often, ethnic churches selectively teach cultural values that conform to the Christian tradition and reproduce gender and age-based hierarchies (Carnes and Yang 2004; Chong 1998; Min 2003). Studies (Chong 1998; Zhou and Bankston 1998) have found that second-generation Asian Americans who are more religious are also more likely to embrace ethnic identity and traditional values. Cultural and family values are preserved through ethnic churches, though now reinterpreted with biblical justification. Shrake (2009) shows how Korean American churches embody a synthesis of Confucian practice with fundamentalist theology when addressing the issue of homosexuality.
Coming out to parents

Disclosure to parents always poses difficult and complex issues for LGBTQs. Asian traditional values have made the already challenging coming out appear almost insurmountable. A recent survey of a large multicultural sample of LGBTQs found that Asian Americans were the least likely to be out to their parents compared to the rest of the US population (Grov et al. 2006), a result that echoed earlier studies on Asian Americans (Chan 1989; Chung and Szymanski 2006; Fong 2002).

In a “post-closet” age, when coming out is assumed to be more common and less difficult for most Americans (Seidman et al. 1999), Asian Americans continue to see coming out to parents as “the biggest personal issues” (Fong 2002). “The clash of values” between parents and their gay child results in parents disowning their child, refusing to acknowledge their child’s sexual orientation, avoiding the subject of sexual orientation altogether, or not wanting anyone to know, including family members (Kahn 1997; Leong 1996; Liu and Chan 2003). While reconciliation between parents and their child can occur over time, it is usually a long and difficult process (Chung and Szymanski 2006; Li and Orleans 2001; Yang 2007). Paradoxically, for families that reached eventual reconciliation, it was the strong Asian family values that helped to make this happen (Han 2001).

Little is known concerning the lived experience of Asian American LGBTQs who identify as Christian. Their religious commitment might make their experience different. This research is an attempt to capture their voices.

Methods

In 2015, we interviewed 35 LGBTQ individuals of Asian descent who identified as Christian and resided in the USA or Canada. Twenty-seven of them identified as gays and lesbians, four bisexual, two transgender, one pansexual, and one asexual. Ethnically, 22 were Chinese (from mainland China, Taiwan, and Singapore), 6 were Korean, 2 were Vietnamese, 2 were Filipino, and 3 were half-Asian. The majority of them were in their twenties and thirties. More than half were in a same-sex relationship, including three who were engaged and six who were married. In terms of their family’s religious affiliation, 18 participants had parents that attended conservative/evangelical and mostly ethnic churches (5 were children of pastors/missionaries), 2 had parents that attended mainline Christian churches, 8 had parents that attended Catholic churches, and 2 had parents that attended Adventist churches.

We recruited our participants through personal connections and LGBTQ online groups. We also contacted a few Asian American LGBTQ activists, and through their help, some interviewees were contacted. All the interviews were conducted either face to face or over an online video conference. The interviews lasted about 75 minutes. Each interview was semi-structured with five topics that covered family relationships, religious involvement, community, cultural/ethnic identity, and sexual experience. We recorded each interview and transcribed them. We identified common themes and used NVivo to facilitate our coding and analysis of the data.

As expected, self-reported data has both advantages and limitations. It allows participants to tell their stories freely, but it also contains bias. We should see our interviewees’ stories as a reflection of their interpretation of past events. The goal of this study was not to make an argument about their experience, but to provide a contextual and detailed description of how cultural and religious values mixed and affected LGBTQs’ coming out to their parents.
Findings

To tell or not to tell: reasons for (non-)disclosure to parents

Most of our participants came out to their parents, and they did so after college or after securing a job. Eight of them (about 23%) still had not come out to their parents—three were in their twenties, three in their thirties, and two in their forties. In contrast to the average age of coming out to parents for general Americans, which is 19 years old (Arnett 2014) or even 14 (LaSala 2010), our interviewees are obviously late bloomers. Their delay in coming out was not because they did not have a stable romantic relationship with a queer partner, neither was it because, as suggested by Troiden (1989), they were uncertain about their sexual orientation. Many had come out to friends and siblings and some had been in a committed same-sex relationship for a while.

Reasons for not coming out to parents

Our study showed that the greatest obstacle associated with not coming out to parents was the fear of bringing shame to the family. Many came out to their parents only after they had achieved certain milestones in their career. This attempt, which is quite distinctly “Asian,” is consistent with the achievement-oriented mentality of Asian culture. They hope their professional certificates or job titles will save their parents’ face in front of relatives and prevent others from seeing their parents and themselves as an “ultimate failure.” Roger, a physician, recalled that he “didn’t make any moves until I finished my training and my fellowship and I had a job . . . Then I was like 31.” Also a physician, Fred waited until he found a job in Chicago before he came out to his parents. John, a lawyer, said he kept postponing his coming out until he was admitted in law school. Upon counting, Keith, a 40-year-old MBA student, said that at least four of his Asian American gay friends were, like him, still in the closet. In his words:

In the Asian context you date the ideal, your ethnicity, makes the mom really happy. And then second tier is a different Asian ethnicity, right? And then there’s like whites, Hispanics, and blacks. So below that into the ground of hell is being gay. It doesn’t matter what ethnicity. Gay is worse than anything else. It is the ultimate dishonor and shame to a family name.

Keith’s half-joking comment was harsh, but it revealed the fear that many Asians hold in regards to coming out to their parents.

Reasons for coming out to parents

Given the high costs for coming out, the majority of our respondents (77%) were nonetheless out to their parents. Although a few were pushed out by siblings or “caught” by their parents, most had made an effort to come out to their parents. Their reasons were varied, but the most common reason was they wanted to be “authentic and true” to their sexual identity. Many decided to come out because living a lie and a split life was stressful and disheartening. Also, they did not want their parents to discover the fact through others. When the cost of keeping closeted is sufficiently high and hiding is no longer optimal, many come out to their parents.
Parental response to coming out

The responses of parents were varied, but they can be categorized into four major types.

Disapproval

Among our interviewees that have disclosed to their parents, all but three said that at least one of their parents has reacted intensively negatively upon their coming out. Many parents were greatly distressed, going back and forth from denial to anger to blaming their child, themselves, and others. Often, in pain and tears, they asked their child, as Oneida’s\textsuperscript{11} mother did, “How can you do this to me?” or Hannah’s father, “Why do you do this to me?” These questions reveal their perception that their child has selfishly chosen a lifestyle that is wrong and sinful, as most parents assumed that “same-sex attraction is a problem that a Chinese or Korean family would not have.”

Believing that their child had been led astray by Western culture, Asian parents often made many attempts to “correct” the child. Some resorted to Asian family honor, as with Hannah’s father, who pleaded with her to “make a sacrifice for the family, make a sacrifice for Cathy [her six-year-old cousin], think about her and how this affects her.” Some resort to spiritual intervention, as Lewis’s parents who performed exorcism on him, and Sue’s parents, who resort to parental authority that “we know the Bible better than you . . . and so what we think is what God thinks,” which according to Sue, “shut me back into closet.” Some resort to guilt induction, as with one respondent’s mother, who attributed her ovarian cancer to her lesbian daughter as a punishment from God.

Silence

Silence is a typical way for Asians to sustain a state of peaceful coexistence within the family, even if it is only superficial. Pastoring a large Chinese congregation in Chicago, Pastor Andy recalled how his church remained silent when one of its youth leaders came out publicly. Although church leaders discussed the issue in meetings, they remained silent in public. Andy said, “From our tradition, we prefer to keep it silent. The more you talk about it, it will snowball, and you’re opening a can of worms.” Calvin’s experience illustrated the silent treatment:

My dad didn’t say much and still hasn’t said much regarding this. The only time he has said something was when he had prostate cancer and thought he was gonna die. That was the only time when I actually heard him saying anything to me about it. He basically asked me how the guy that I was dating treated me.

In some Asian families in the USA, the silence is a result of a history of very little parent–child communication, which is due partly to the language barrier. John commented, “we never talked about our faith to each other . . . because my parents, all their spiritual vocabularies are in Mandarin and none of mine is in Mandarin.” No doubt the communication would be more awkward if it was about one’s sexuality. As Hom and Ma (1993) suggest, many Asian American LGBTQs have difficulty verbalizing their gay identity to their parents because they do not share the language and reference of their immigrant parents. Even if they speak their parents’ language, their “mother tongue” does not give them the language to express their sexuality adequately (Lim 1996).
Empathetic

The two most supportive parental responses that we gathered from our interviews were from Henry’s mother and John’s father. Henry recalled his coming out to his mother, during which his Vietnamese mother responded, “I don’t know what you mean when you say you are gay. But if you teach me, I will learn to understand.” In John’s case, he thought his conservative parents would disown him if he disclosed to them. He had planned a trip for his parents’ 30th wedding anniversary, and in his mind, “It was like the last good times that we had together and then after that I figured I’d basically come out to my parents and then, you know, that is the end of that chapter.” But, to his surprise, his father, who was a church elder, said, “I trust that whatever you do, you feel that there is where God leads you to.”

None of our participants said that their parents welcomed or affirmed their homosexuality. Not many responded like Henry’s mother. Even in John’s case, his father continued to believe that homosexuality was wrong although he respected his son’s decision. Several of our respondents’ parents showed various degrees of empathy during or after their disclosure in an effort to keep the parent–child relationship. Amy described her father replied to her coming-out email in a “very kind and accepting way.” Her father’s empathetic attitude had opened a door for both to have a conversation about her sexuality. However, Amy was aware of her father’s struggle, as she said, “Over time, it is kind of obvious that it was a big struggle for them [parents] to comprehend and deal with it.”

Acceptance

A pattern that we found in our data is that, over a period of time, many parents come around to accepting their child’s sexuality, acknowledging that being gay is not a choice neither is it a preference that can be changed or a phase that will go away. Asian culture values a son more than a daughter as a son is responsible for preserving the family name. Thus, men typically face more difficulties in gaining their parents’ acceptance towards their same-sex sexuality than women. With this in mind, we selected stories of three gays to illustrate the gradual but significant increase of parental acceptance towards their same sex attraction. Roger’s father was an example, “My father took about two years before finally meeting him [his Asian boyfriend] . . . Our parents have gotten to know each other a little bit, and we actually spent Christmas together last year.”

Fred, who recently became engaged, said although his parents were still uncertain about attending his wedding, they had progressed to discussing a topic that was more advanced than the wedding. “She [mom] is bothering me, being, ‘When are you going to have your own genetic kids?’ And no longer being, ‘When can I set you up with a date?’ . . . I can’t imagine her asking me this five years ago.”

And Lewis’s parents, who performed exorcism on him when he first came out to them, attended Lewis’s wedding, although they refused to be part of the ceremony:

They love us but they are unable to say that we are [a] married couple because they are very committed evangelicals. I think what has changed over the years that they see the humanity and the substance of our relationship, but cannot bring themselves to use the word “marriage.” Now, my parents call Henry up on his birthday and give him a present. That’s about as close as it gets.
Effects of coming out on the parent–child relationship

Closer relationship

Even though coming out created tensions in most Asian families, several participants mentioned that their relationship with their parents had eventually become closer compared to before their coming out. One example was Amy, who said that over many discussions with her parents about her thoughts and struggles, she noticed a new dynamic emerging in her family, “The first year was a bit of just kind of getting to know each other again and feeling safe again . . . then there is like the whole process of healing.” In Max’s case, the healing began from the inside. “[Before coming out] I projected my anger toward my family members. I always had anger with them. But now my attitude toward them became different. And the relationship became different, became loving.” Fred shared a similar experience, “My relationship with my parents has actually improved a lot . . . as a teenager I knew that I wouldn’t fit in with what my parents want. Because of that, I acted out.” Coming out could open a window for both the Asian parents and the LGBTQ child to process their emotions and face past conflicts, then probably to restart their interactions in a positive way.

Surprisingly, there are more fathers than mothers who reacted tolerantly when they first discovered their child’s same sex attraction. We also found that more father–child relationships were said to have grown stronger after disclosure, although many were closer to their mothers before disclosure. As in the case of John, who came out to his parents at the end of his first year in law school, “My mom was sort of shocked and she was unhappy. But my dad was very surprisingly [kind] towards me.” John did not have a good relationship with his father before he left for college. Then a year later he came out to his father. Instead of causing stress in the newly established father–son relationship, the painful but honest disclosure had brought both closer together, offering them an opportunity for dialogue. As Han (2001) finds in his study, Asian fathers are normally less involved with child-rearing, and thus when the child is in “trouble,” such as coming out, the fathers feel less responsible for it than mothers. This might explain why their handling of their child’s disclosure is generally less emotional, making them more accessible to their child during the turmoil of coming out.

Intentional separation

Some parents wanted their child to remain in the closet, at least at certain times and within their Asian communities. Yet, exactly how the line separating “coming out” from “closeted” is drawn is different in each family. Fred’s parents set the line of coming out between his immediate family in the USA and his extended family in Asia. Although he was getting married soon, his mother requested that the news be kept only within the immediate family. John’s mother wanted the line to be drawn between his friends and her friends. This was tricky as John and his parents attended the same church; most of his friends’ parents knew his parents. So, the deal was, “I would only talk [disclose] to those friends that promise to keep it from their parents.” In Hannah’s case, the line was drawn between “your life with her” and “your life with us.” When the two worlds collided, this created a “pressure zone” for all—when Hannah’s girlfriend visited her home during the previous Thanksgiving, her parents did not step into the living room where Hannah and her girlfriend were hanging out, but kept to themselves in the kitchen the whole time.
The separation of the two worlds can persist for decades. Kelly came out to her parents 25 years ago, but so far, her mother and her two siblings still have not been ready to accept her girlfriend. In Kelly’s words, “When I’m by myself my family and I are very close. But when I have a partner then three of them kind of go away. That’s sad for me and for them.” The impassable barrier was clear to Kelly: the life based on her sexuality versus the one in which she lived with her family and their expectations.

Estranged relationship

In some cases, the event of coming out caused a deterioration in the already tenuous parent–child relationship. John’s parents discovered his same-sex orientation and threatened to disown him. A few years later when he came out publicly to the ethnic church to which both his parents and he belonged, the fissures grew deeper in the family. His parents avoided engaging:

They rather just not discuss it [gay issue]. As soon as it comes up they want to change the subject. I’ve sort of orphaned myself from being emotionally dependent on my parents, wanting them to be the kind of parents that understand me and that empathize with me.

John was obviously hurt by his parents’ reaction. But he might not have known the level of humiliation that his parents experienced in their Chinese church because of his disclosure, including rumors and criticism about their parenting, their character, and their faith. Pastor Andy, who served in the Chinese church that John’s family attended, said in our interview, “Most people in the church and in the community would think that if John suppressed his same sex desire, get married, have sons and daughters, it will be an honoring thing to do.” By disclosing his sexual identity, John has, from an Asian cultural perspective, shown to the world that he and his parents have failed—moral, social, familial, personal, all at once. This would turn into one deep wound that could take years to heal.

Conclusion

Through in-depth interviews with 35 Asian Christian LGBTQs in the USA, this chapter focused on Asian parental reactions towards the coming out of their child and its effects on the parent–child relationship. Given its limited scope, the results should not be seen as representative of Asian LGBTQs in general. But they could provide a glimpse on the challenge of coming out in families from Confucian-influenced culture worldwide. There are several findings that we found to be salient.

First, contrary to the common assumption that Asian Christian LGBTQs would most likely stay in the closet, we found that a majority of our participants had come out to their parents. Yet, consistent with other studies, our participants generally indicated a strong struggle in disclosing their sexuality to their parents and had delayed as much as they could in doing that. One main reason responsible for this is their fear of bringing shame to their parents. To compensate their parents for the shattered dreams and reputation, many have waited until they were financially stable or had achieved certain milestones in their career before coming out to their parents, hoping that their achievements would make their coming out more bearable for their achievement-oriented parents.

Second, surprisingly, besides disapproving and keeping silent, the two most familiar patterns of Asian parental reactions against a family conflict such as coming out (Lee 2015), there were parents who were reaching out to their child or even accepting their
sexuality. Although none of our participants said that their parents welcomed or affirmed their homosexuality, about one-third of our participants said that, over a period of time, ranging from years to decades, one or both of their parents came around to accepting their sexuality.

Third, although coming out creates tensions in most families, as expected, several participants mentioned that their relationships with their parents had eventually become stronger and closer. Interestingly, there were more fathers than mothers who reacted in a tolerant way during or after their child’s coming out. Maybe this is because fathers’ handling of conflict is less emotional, which, ironically, due to the typical Asian father’s more distant relationship with their child, has made them more accessible than mothers to their child during the turmoil of coming out.

We also found a significant number of parents who wanted their child to remain in the closet within a certain community, especially their ethnic community. They wanted to draw a line between their child’s life based on his or her sexual identity and the one in which he or she lived with them. As long as the line was kept accordingly, the parent–child relationship seemed to work well. Also, we found that some family relationships became seriously estranged or damaged by the event of coming out.

As part of the larger discussion of religion and sexuality, this chapter aims to add the voices of the understudied population of Asian LGBTQs. Through these stories of 35 individuals, we have shown the importance of culture in explaining Christian behaviors. Given the limitation of our study, a study of a wider demographic of Asians is needed to make a more general case about the effects of cultural values on Christian LGBTQ individuals.

Notes
1 There are a few notable exceptions (Lee 2015; Tannenbaum 2013), in particular, Cheng (2013).
2 4.0% of Hispanics and 4.6% of African Americans identified as LBGT.
5 Besides Confucianism, East Asian families are also influenced by Buddhism and Taoism to various degrees. But since Confucianism is more crucial than other beliefs in defining the nature of relationships within the family, we will only focus on Confucianism.
6 The National Asian American Survey 2013 shows that 73% of Korean Americans disapproved of same-sex marriage, followed by Filipino and Vietnamese Americans. The Chinese were slightly more opposed (49%) than in favor (41%).
7 The religious identities of Asian Americans are quite varied. According to the Pew Research survey, most Koreans (61%) were Christian, about a fifth of Chinese Americans (22%) were Christians, most Filipinos were Catholic, and a plurality of Vietnamese were Buddhist. In total, 26% of Asian Americans were unaffiliated, 22% were Protestant (13% evangelical; 9% mainline), 19% were Catholic, and the rest were Buddhists, Hindus, etc.
8 According to the Pew Forum, 94% of Asian American Evangelical Christians believe that the Bible is the “Word of God,” and 52% believe that the Bible is “literal, word for word.”
9 The team included seven PhD students taking the course on Qualitative Research Methods along with the instructor for the course.
10 Kim 2004. Kim writes that, in the Korean American Christian community, coming out would be “quite literally, the ultimate failure—moral, social, and personal all at once. It would nullify everything good that I have done and would stand as the single mark upon me.”
11 As requested by Oneida Chi, we used her real name in this chapter.
References


