

“What do my emotions matter if mother is sad?”

Filial Piety and Heteronormative Obligations in *Beijing Story*

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A classic among queer works of literature written in Chinese, *Beijing Story* (original Chinese title: *Beijing Gushi* 北京故事) was one of the first Sinophone novels to openly portray homosexual relationships in modern time. The publication of the first English translation of *Beijing Story* in 2016 made the novel available to a worldwide audience. This paper sheds some light on the relationship between filial piety and heteronormativity that is portrayed in the novel – a relationship that often makes queer experiences in East Asian Sinophone spheres seemingly different from their Euro-American counterparts.

The analysis presented in this paper is based on a close reading of *Beijing Story*. In my analysis, I use concepts from queer theory and Confucian philosophy to examine the main character’s approach to the relationships in his life. I argue that while the main character’s attitude towards his own non-heterosexuality goes from complete rejection to relative self-acceptance over the course of the novel, his major life choices are ultimately determined based on perceived social obligations related to heteronormativity and filial piety.

Keywords: Beijing Story, China, queer, filial piety, literary analysis

Romance between people of the same gender exists in all parts of the world, and has existed since the dawn of human history. In the historical records of the region we now call China, homosexual relationships outside of the heterosexual marriage have been recorded in texts about court-dwellers and commoners alike throughout the dynasties, and male same-sex intimacy was relatively accepted during many historical time periods up until the 1900s (Dikötter, 1995, pp. 137-145; Hinsch, 1992, p. 16). In the modern era, however, individuals who engage in same-sex relationships in East Asian Sinophone communities often face great difficulty in simultaneously accommodating their own desire and their obligations towards their family. The strong influence of Confucian thinking, which emphasizes filial piety and continuation of the family line, makes it difficult for same-sex couples to be open about their relationships and leads many homosexual individuals to engage in heterosexual marriages despite their own personal preferences (Bie & Tang, 2016, p. 363; Zhu, 2017, p. 2).

Many of the issues faced by Chinese and other Sinophone queer individuals are brought to life in the novel *Beijing Story* – one of the first modern works of literature written in Chinese to openly portray same-sex relationships. Published as an e-novel by an anonymous writer in 1998, it gained popularity among both queer and heterosexual readers for its candid

portrayal of the relationship between the rich businessman Chen Handong and his long-term on-and-off boyfriend Lan Yu. Borrowing the words of Petrus Liu, ‘the rise of “cyber literature” [...] fundamentally altered the ways that queer people in China articulate their subterranean desires and organize their lives. All of this makes the analysis of [Beijing Story] a critical task for understanding global queer cultures’ (2016, p. 373).

Inspired by Liu’s statement, this study is a contribution to the small body of existing research on *Beijing Story* (see Chang, 2010; Chiang, 2014; Eng, 2010; Liu, 2016; Myers, 2016), as well as a contribution to the greater body of research that has emerged at the intersection of homosexuality and kinship in East Asian studies over the last two decades (see for example Berry, 2001; Chou, 2001; Engebretsen, 2014, 2017; Ho, 2011; Rofel, 1999). The essay sheds light on the interpersonal relationships portrayed in the novel in order to explore the resilience of cultural traditions in queer subject formation. Thus, the aim of this study is not only to provide an analysis of the literary work at hand, but to also contribute to deeper knowledge and understanding of contemporary queer realities in Sinophone societies. As Chris Berry describes it in his article on gay identity in Asian film, ‘these films [are] registering and expressing some of the ways in which being gay [...] is imagined both by self-identified gay men and by others. In other words, these films

do not necessarily tell us about the empirical realities of gay lives in East Asian communities, but they do tell us something of what it means to be gay in East Asian cultures' (2001, pp. 211-212). It is with a similar mindset that this study has been carried out.

In this essay, I make use of concepts from queer theory to describe sexuality and identity, and the concept of *xiao* from Confucian philosophy to describe family traditions particular to Sinophone culture. By juxtaposing my own findings with those of other scholars in the field of queer East Asian studies, I discuss the main character's balancing act between his emotions and obligations in light of empirical, real-life observations from the Sinophone queer sphere. I argue that while the main character's attitude towards his own non-heterosexuality goes from complete rejection to relative self-acceptance over the course of the novel, perceived social obligations related to heteronormativity and filial piety ultimately lead him to put aside his personal desires and resign himself to a life that fits into the mainstream model of heteronormativity. The aim of this essay is not to determine whether the events in *Beijing Story* are realistic or not; my intention is rather to link the fictional events to reality, and reveal the way in which *Beijing Story* can tell us something about the lives of queer individuals in contemporary Sinophone societies. The analysis is based on the original Chinese e-version of the novel. English translations of quotes from the novel are my own.

Identity and self-acceptance

In *Queer Women in Urban China*, Engebretsen underscores the difference between homosexual acts and homosexual identity in her portrayal of a heterosexually married woman who is engaged in a same-sex relationship, but who clearly refuses identification with the

lesbian community on the grounds that she is 'normal,' i.e. not a lesbian (2014, pp. 70-71). In a similar manner, Handong, the main character in *Beijing Story*, declares his taste for casual sex with both men and women already in the first chapter, but maintains that he is heterosexual for most of the narrative, despite his obvious same-sex attraction. His relationship with Lan Yu, a male migrant student whom he pays for a night's company (see Kong, 2012, and Rofel, 2010, for discussions on so called 'money boys,' or male sex-workers, in China), sets off a rollercoaster where Handong finds himself questioning the boundaries between sexuality, identity, physical intimacy and true emotions.

Even though Handong's feelings for Lan Yu grow stronger over time, the struggle over his own sexuality and 'normalcy' is something that haunts Handong for years. Early in the novel, when Handong has broken up with Lan Yu for the first time, he considers his own identity and the meaning of his feelings:

I was more and more starting to feel that this thing with Lan Yu was getting absurd, downright abnormal. I even started to think of a ridiculous word: 'love.' I wouldn't degenerate so far as to fall in love with a guy, would I? I knew I was normal. I just liked to play around in somewhat extreme ways. (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 6)

When Handong's feelings toward Lan Yu grow in intensity, they trigger a sense of insecurity concerning his own identity. While he has a very relaxed attitude towards mere sex between men (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 1), the use of words such as 'absurd' (*huangtang*), 'abnormal' (*lipu*), 'ridiculous' (*kexiao*), and '[to] degenerate' (*huangtangdao*) when he considers his potential feelings for Lan Yu clearly indicates a negative attitude towards love between people of the same sex, and that it is

something he is unable to identify with at this stage in the narrative.

Apart from plain fear of breaking the heterosexual norm, Handong's unwillingness to put labels on his sexuality can also be related to the fact that the focus on 'queer identity politics' and 'coming out' (concepts largely associated with queer movements in 'the West') is seen by many as much too confrontational and politicized to be compatible with so called "'authentic" Chinese values' (Ho, 2011, p. 125; see also Chou, 2001). According to Ho, 'this Western-style politics of identity does not have a huge amount of influence over the formation of elusively modern forms of gay and lesbian identities in urban China' (2011, p. 125), and according to Petrus Liu, '[t]he resistance to identity politics is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of [Beijing Story]' (2016, p. 379). Indeed, in the case of *Beijing Story*, labels such as 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual' are used sparingly, and sexuality is instead largely conveyed as a set of actions, rather than identities.

As the novel moves forward, Handong appears to, at least partly, have come to terms with the idea of being romantically engaged with another man when he describes how his relationship to Lan Yu is different from his previous homosexual experiences:

I had realized that the kind of strictly 'sexual' relationship I could have with other guys was impossible to maintain with Lan Yu. When I was with him, I helplessly tumbled into a whirlwind of emotions, and when I saw him less often, my longing for him became stronger and stronger. (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 18)

Compared to when he describes his own feelings for Lan Yu as 'absurd' (*huangtang*) in the beginning of the novel (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 6), this quote suggests that Handong

is increasingly beginning to estimate the value of his relationship based on the emotional connection between him and his partner, rather than the gender of his partner.

The process towards self-acceptance is, however, slowed down by recurring bouts of anxiety, self-questioning and a consistent inability to verbally articulate his same-sex desire even in private conversation with Lan Yu (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 15 & 18). As Petrus Liu argues, this 'internalized homophobia' is also part of the reason behind Handong's constant break-ups with Lan Yu (2016, p. 375). It is not until towards the end of the novel, when Handong ends up in jail and narrowly escapes the death penalty for major financial crimes committed within his company, that he appears to have gained a sense of self-acceptance about his sexuality: 'I didn't think about whether I was homosexual or heterosexual any longer. In the face of death, the issue faded into insignificance altogether' (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 27). Even so, the capacity for self-acceptance does not equate to the ability to verbally or physically display his own emotions to the outside world.

Family matters

Branding heterosexuality as a standard way of living and loving results in assigning a minority status to any non-heterosexual individual, which in turn may cause these individuals to become targets of prejudice and discrimination (Meyer, 2003, p. 674). For example, according to Meyer, lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals are more likely to experience mental health problems than heterosexual people because of the 'hostile and stressful environment' they may experience as minority individuals in a heteronormative society (2003, p. 674). Moreover, according to Chou Wah-Shan, the situation for queer individuals within what he calls

the 'traditional Chinese culture' differs mainly from that of those in 'the West' by the way in which the communities classify their members – with the separate individual or with the family as the core unit:

While the basic tenet of Western [lesbian/bisexual/gay] discourses is to regard the [lesbian/bisexual/gay] subject as an individual with unalienable rights, the traditional Chinese culture simply refuses to classify people into homo or hetero because individuals [...] are first and foremost members of the family and wider society [...] In this construct, the family is perceived to be the most basic and profound social institution, and xiao (filial piety) is given central value. (Chou, 2001, pp. 33-34)

Thus, Chou argues that for queer individuals in China, the primary source of anxiety lies not in oppression from the government, religious groups, or work discrimination, but in the relationship with one's family (see also Berry, 2001, p. 219, and Ho, 2011, p. 10).

The concept of xiao (filial piety) is often named as one of the main contributors to anxiety in the queer Sinophone individual (Engbretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013; Rofel, 1999), and can be traced back to the document *Xiaojing* (Canon of Filial Piety). The *Xiaojing* is one of the major influential works on family relations within Confucian philosophy that stipulates the necessity of demonstrating gratitude to your parents for bringing you into the world, and stresses the importance of carrying on the family line (Goldin, 2011, p. 35). However, at a point in history when the idea of what constitutes a family is undergoing veritable changes, the question arises whether traditional Confucian family values are still relevant in the forming of respectable members of society.

In Hu and Scott's study about the influence of traditional values on contemporary Chinese individuals, they found that '[p]atrilineal beliefs and traditional gender roles [are] being questioned' but that 'neither education nor urbanization is undermining [the adherence to] filial piety' (Hu & Scott, 2016, p. 1288). This mindset is a factor that may create problems for individuals whose lifestyle does not correspond to a traditional family life with children. It is also the major source of distress for Handong in dealing with his relationship to Lan Yu.

In *Beijing Story*, Handong's mother is the main representative of the traditional Confucian mindset, as she is the voice that constantly urges Handong to get married and build a family for himself (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 6, 15 & 20). The fact that Handong's own words also echo values related to filial piety when he discusses family values with Lan Yu ('Men have the responsibility to carry on the family bloodline!', Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 15) further indicates that his mother's major psychological influence on Handong has led him to internalize parts of the very mindset that denounces him the right to an independent choice of life partner.

Over the couple of years following their first meeting, Handong and Lan Yu develop an on-and-off relationship that forces Handong to balance his feelings for Lan Yu against his need to keep up an appearance of heterosexuality in front of his family. At one point in the novel, Handong invites Lan Yu to the New Year's celebration at Handong's family home: 'After insistent demands from my part, [Lan Yu] came home with me on New Year's Eve. It was a huge risk, but I really did empathize with him' (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 4). The use of the word 'risk' (*maoxian*) in this situation indicates two things: firstly, that the intimacy between Handong and Lan Yu is so great that Handong expects that his family members may become

suspicious if they see him and Lan Yu together. Secondly, it indicates that if his family were to notice his close relation to Lan Yu, it would entail problems for Handong regarding his relationship to the family. The event brings to mind Engebretsen's discussion on 'tacit compartmentalization' as a strategy for queer individuals to balance 'surface compliance' and personal desires in their relationship to family members: 'compartmentalization is at the heart of tacit queer strategies, as a means to uphold social stability and family harmony. The problem arises when "being [queer]" becomes an exclusive identity that traverses these fields' (2014, p. 78). By breaking the 'compartmentalized' boundaries between his life with Lan Yu and the life with his family, Handong risks breaking the balance that allows his double life to function.

As pointed out by Chou Wah-Shan, in a society where filial piety is given key importance, hurting one's parents and making them 'lose face' is the last thing a child wants to do (2001, pp. 33-34. See also Engebretsen 2014, 2017). In *Beijing Story*, Handong's close relationship to his mother is his main source of emotional support and reassurance; thus, disappointing his mother results in personal suffering in a multitude of aspects. The first time Handong's mother confronts him about his relationship to Lan Yu, Handong successfully convinces her that she is mistaken; however, he experiences profound pain from seeing her disappointed in him:

[Mother:] 'Seeing you study, do business, even become director of City Commerce, and be respected by others – it made [me] so happy. But then you go and commit such lowly acts. If people found out – how could you look them in the eye? Huh? If you have a pet, you can't bear to witness it get hurt, but letting your mother see oth-

er people look down on her son [and] cast him aside – isn't that worse for a mother than death itself? [...]' My mother cried, completely heartbroken. I felt my own tears well up too. It felt like someone had punched me. I was a grown man, but seeing my mother in such pain and wishing for her own death was more than I could endure. When I saw my mother's red, tearful eyes – Lan Yu, his love, and my own emotions – what did these things matter then! (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 27)

Handong's renouncing of his own emotions in the above quote shows that he not only suffers when he sees his mother in pain, but that he also puts his mother's feelings before his own and is ready to relinquish any of his personal desires in order to make her happy.

What matters most

Over the course of the narrative, Handong's attitude towards his own sexuality changes from complete rejection of his emotions for Lan Yu to acceptance of his own ability to love another man. Nevertheless, Handong's fear of failing to perform his filial obligations manifests itself towards the end of the novel, when he has not only failed to carry on the family name through a short-lived marriage to a female business associate, but his mother has also become firmly aware of the true nature of his relationship with Lan Yu.

In one of the rare scholarly articles available on *Beijing Story*, Chang Wenxiao links the difficulty of being openly homosexual in contemporary China to the country's history of being an agricultural society, where marriage and reproduction were literally crucial to the family's survival (2010, p. 69). Thus, Chang indicates that the negative attitude towards homosexuality in Sinophone communities may arise primarily out of negativity towards homosexual

couples' inability to produce children, rather than from other causes. In Bie and Tang's study about gay Chinese men's attitudes toward their own sexuality, respondents mention extreme feelings of guilt related to their own homosexuality, and that they see their primary filial duty as 'to get married, produce offspring and carry on the family name' regardless of their own chances of happiness in such an arrangement (Bie & Tang, 2016, p. 364). For many queer individuals, failure or reluctance to enter into marriage often brings about considerable feelings of guilt, as it indicates a failure to live up to parents' expectations (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 107; Kam, 2013, p. 77).

Similar feelings of guilt are also noticeable in *Beijing Story*, where because of his mother's discontent with his failure to marry and his relationship with Lan Yu, Handong starts to avoid his mother in fear of confronting her: 'I seldom went home. I was too afraid to face my mother. She rarely smiled [during those days]. I suppose she had already lost all hope in me' (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 26). Handong interprets his own failure at living up to his mother's expectations as an indirect act of hurting her. Thus, acting according to his mother's wishes, and thereby not hurting her, is also a way for Handong to minimize his own personal suffering. When Handong ends up in jail, his thoughts go primarily to his mother:

During that time, the only people I could think of were my mother and Lan Yu. Especially my mother. [...] My thoughts went to the single, most fundamental thing she had requested from me, and the fact that I'd been unable to give her just that. Now I had also made her witness her son going to jail. The shame was unbearable. (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., chapter 27)

Although at this stage in the novel, the most

immediate source of suffering for his mother is having to watch her son go to jail, Handong also refers to himself being unable to satisfy his mother's 'most fundamental request.' While the precise meaning of the 'request' is not specified in the text, it may be interpreted as the ability to maintain a marriage to a woman and to provide his mother with grandchildren.

Handong's struggle for relative happiness through the strategy of 'tacit compartmentalization' mentioned above (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 78) comes to an abrupt end when Lan Yu is tragically killed in a traffic accident towards the end of the novel. With his only true love dead and gone, the ultimate proof of Handong's commitment to his mother is his decision to remarry and have a child at the end of the novel. In the epilogue, Handong has married again and lives with his mother, his new wife and daughter in Vancouver, Canada:

Three years [after Lan Yu's death], I moved to Canada and bought a house in West Vancouver. I married again. I don't have the same courage as Lan Yu, to face my identity as a homosexual. Moreover, I feel like my heart was already closed shut long ago. I am incapable of really loving my young wife, but I do everything I can to be kind to her, and to take good care of her. (Beijing Tongzhi, n.d., epilogue)

In a discussion on the balancing act between accommodating one's own wishes and the wishes of one's parents as a queer subject in the Sinophone sphere, Engebretsen writes: 'It is not a given that happiness is a quality most ideally contained in and experienced by an individual. Rather, the dominant definition of happiness alludes to preexisting norms for socio-familial harmony and collective equilibrium. In this context, emerging possibilities for alternative lifeways must be negotiated

carefully and contained within dominant limits for proper and improper behavior' (2014, p. 78). The epilogue shows that even though Handong acknowledges his same-sex desire, he is not willing to display it openly, but rather chooses to maintain a lifestyle that resembles heterosexuality. The fact that he prioritizes the fulfilment of his filial obligations over his own personal preferences further proves that what Handong values most is to be a good son and to maintain a good relationship with his mother, even if it means living in a loveless marriage to a wife he will never feel emotionally attached to.

Conclusion

This essay is inspired by the notion of queer literary works as 'important cultural artifacts' that can deepen our knowledge and understanding of the 'queer global struggle' (Liu, 2016, p. 737). In this essay, I have examined the connection between same-sex relationships and filial piety in the novel *Beijing Story* by analyzing how the main character attempts to simultaneously accommodate traditional moral values and his personal desire in terms of romance. I have argued that while the main character's attitude towards his non-heterosexuality goes from complete rejection in the beginning of the novel to relative self-acceptance towards the end, his major life choices are ultimately determined based on perceived social obligations related to heteronormativity and filial piety.

The traditional family values and obligations associated with Confucian philosophy that prevent Handong from fulfilling his same-sex desire can be related to the situation of queer individuals in the contemporary Sinophone sphere. As Chou has argued, the tradition in Sinophone societies of viewing the family as the core unit as opposed to the individual, causes many non-heterosexual in-

dividuals to hide their true emotions in order to save the family's 'face' and to carry on the family line according to tradition (2001, pp. 33-34). Furthermore, Engebretsen's concept of 'tacit compartmentalization' (2014, p. 78) is also discernible in the novel, as Handong uses it as a strategy to separate his love life from his family life. Even though at the end of the novel, he has come to terms with his own sexuality, a wish to fulfil his filial duties towards his mother causes him to put aside his personal desire, and to resign himself to a life that fits into the mainstream model.

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