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AND CULTURE  
IN ASIA

# SEXUAL IDENTITY AND LESBIAN FAMILY LIFE

Lesbianism, Patriarchalism  
and the Asian Family in Taiwan

IRIS ERH-YA PAI



# Gender, Sexualities and Culture in Asia

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Iris Erh-Ya Pai

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Iris Erh-Ya Pai  
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*To Mama, Papa and Eunice*

## PREFACE

In November 2016 Taiwanese LGBT people had never been so close to marriage equality under the law. The way this was being addressed was through amending Civil Code #972 to give non-heterosexual partners legal status as a spouse; a bill that would make Taiwan the first Asian country to legalise same-sex marriage. On 8 November the first reading of three draft amendments, proposed by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the Kuomintang (KMT) and the New Power Party (NPP), were passed in the Legislative Yuan. Later, on 17 November, anti-marriage equality demonstrators, mostly Christians, dressed in white and gathered outside the Legislative Yuan, while inside the Judiciary and Organic Laws and Statutes Committee reviewed the proposals before a second and third reading. In the end, the further progress of the bill was stalled, with physical clashes breaking out within the Legislative Yuan between the DPP and the KMT. They finally agreed that two public hearings would be held on 24 (by KMT) and 28 (by DPP) November. Opponents from KMT originally demanded thirty hearings, before this was negotiated down to two. Holding public hearings is seen as a way to vent public anger from anti-marriage equality demonstrators.

The ruling DPP, which controls Taiwan's parliament and took power in 2016, was considered to be more LGBT-friendly than the KMT. In particular, president Tsai Ing-Wen had made campaign promises to realise marriage equality. There were some strong anti-gay elements in the DPP, however, who stalled the Civil Code amendments and turned to supporting civil partnerships or nothing. Now it was time to see whether Tsai and her party would keep her promise or not.

The anti-LGBT demonstrations spread false rumours and twisted the facts of the bill once Taiwan started to debate marriage equality. The opponents' argument against legalising same-sex marriage was that such a move would lead to Taiwan becoming an 'island of AIDS', somehow harming the children of heterosexual couples by steering them towards sexual perversion, or otherwise offend God. In an anti-marriage equality protest on 3 December, seven LGBT activists were hurt when they showed up with rainbow flags. What worries me most is the hate speech and homophobic sentiments against LGBT sexuality and lifestyle choices. The uniform idea 'only wife and husband, one mother and one father can form a family' has made 'family' lose its colour and diversity. The existence of non-heterosexual families, lesbian families in this book, is a solid fact that proves them wrong.

Protests against same-sex marriage outside the Legislative Yuan took place in November and early December and I believed there would be more during the process of legalising marriage equality. To show that they far outnumbered anti-marriage equality demonstrators, pro-marriage equality groups organised a demonstration on 28 November and mobilised about 30,000 participants on a weekday with little notice. It is believed it was the first large assembly on LGBT matters, if the annual LGBT pride parades are not counted. The next event for pro-marriage equality was a music festival, which took place at Ketagalan Boulevard on 10 December to coincide with World Human Rights Day. This event gathered up to 250,000 supporters and everyone hoped for the best as the Legislative Yuan had marked 26 December as the next date for reviewing the amendments. However, the future of marriage equality in Taiwan remains to be seen.

Back in 2003 there were only 500 participants in the first Taiwan LGBT pride. On 29 October 2016 over 80,000 took to the street to call for marriage equality. I have been on marches for LGBT rights many times. Walking in the parades, I am always touched by LGBT people and their bravery. Each face represents a choice of lifestyle and family. They all have stories behind them. The unconventional lifestyle choices of the marchers motivated them to speak up. I started thinking about their stories, I mean, our stories. I realised that my story would contribute to the picture one day. Empirical study is one of the methods that can be used to approach these stories and I decided this might be a good starting place for me.

So, I sought to talk to the lesbian couples around me. This way of gathering information led to my choice of a qualitative methodology and

in-depth interviews as my research method. I wished to collect lesbian life stories to illustrate their ways of making their own families. The aim was to document detailed narratives of lesbians in my generation; thus this study does not constitute a representative sample of the population. These methods are discussed in greater depth in [Chapter 3](#).

Before the analysis can begin, however, it is necessary to expand on the relevant literature. Besides Asian authors, I consulted western studies and found something ‘different’. The differences reflected specific cultural and social contexts. In the first chapter, through literature on social change in Taiwan and women’s stories in my own family, I present a picture to situate myself and to consider accounts of how women’s lives and family relationships have been changing, which help to explain women’s life experiences in Taiwan. [Chapter 2](#) contextualises my research within western discussions and debates on same-sex intimacy. [Chapter 3](#) concentrates on the analysis of interviews I conducted with 15 lesbian couples, separately and jointly. In [Chapter 4](#) I discuss stories about the realisation of same-sex attraction and formations of lesbian identity, with data mostly from individual interviews. [Chapter 5](#) deals with these women coming out and their relationships with their families of origin. I also explore their relationships with their partners’ families of origin and develop a new perspective on relationships outside the patriarchal family. [Chapter 6](#) focuses on my participants’ relationship histories and their making of commitments, with data from both couple and individual interviews. Finally, in [Chapter 7](#), I discuss these couples’ views on egalitarian relationships and how this may be reflected in their daily interactions.

This research would not have been possible without these women’s support and knowledge, so firstly I would like to express my appreciation to all the women who participated in this research for their generosity in sharing stories. I also owe many thanks to my PhD supervisor, Stevi Jackson from the Centre for Women’s Studies at The University of York. My grateful thanks are also extended to women in my family and in my life.

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## NOTE ON ROMANISATION

All the non-English phrases in this book are Mandarin Chinese unless otherwise stated. It uses the Hanyu Pinyin system of romanisation for Mandarin Chinese words and phrases, except when a different conventional or preferred spelling exists. All Mandarin authors' surnames precede their first names. Whenever romanisation is used the first time, it is followed by Mandarin characters and an English translation in brackets, while specific terms will be in quotation marks; for example, *Eu Yu Shou Chi* (鱷魚手記, Notes of the Crocodile). All Mandarin Chinese characters cited in their romanised forms are listed in the Glossary.

## Women in Taiwanese Families: A Personal History

### TAIWANESE MARRIAGE AND FAMILY: THE PAST

The Han family has usually been conceptualised as an economic and residential unit in which production, reproduction and consumption were carried out. Marriage then is the key to continuing the family line. Following the conventions of the Han patriarchal family, a Taiwanese woman was positioned as passive within the male-centred household. As a daughter, she was never anything but a temporary member of her father's household. Upon marriage, she must leave and go to another home where she would be regarded as a stranger. Raising a daughter was a burden for the family as she would eventually enter her future husband's household. Parents arranged marriages on the basis of compatibility between the two families in terms of socio-economic status and cultural background. During the mid twentieth century, industrialisation changed people's lives. Young women had the chance to take on education alongside male students and work in the emerging factories. These experiences led to anxiety for their parents because girls might become entangled in romances with young men who might not be appropriate mates (Wolf 1972: 100). Up to the time when Wolf was doing her research in Taiwan, during 1958–1960 and 1968, marriage was commonly a family-based decision rather than a personal choice.

*A Never-Married Mother in the 1950s*

My paternal grandmother was born in 1921 and has lived in Taipei since then; she appears to be thin and short but is tough and strong. 'A-Ma' (阿嬤) means grandmother in Taiwanese Minnanyu (閩南語, Min Nan/Hokkien), which is her mother tongue, and I name her accordingly. Under Japanese colonisation, in her early years she went to a Japanese girls' school, learnt Japanese, simple calculation and female domestic skills. She began to learn Mandarin Chinese after Taiwan was liberated from Japan and came under the control of Chiang Kai-Shek's (CKS) regime in 1949. Although I am a poor Minnanyu speaker I try very hard to communicate with her in a mixture of Mandarin and Minnanyu as my family wish to keep our language alive. Since I can remember, she has worn 'qi-pao' (旗袍, the cheongsam, traditional Chinese dress), which she made herself, until she retired from her position as a basic level employee in a public agency. She has always been hard-working and unbelievably frugal.

In Mainland China the Chinese Civil War resumed in August 1945, having been suspended during the War against Japan, 1937–1945, and did not end until September 1949. The war had dramatic results for both Taiwan and Mainland China. The communists declared the founding of The People's Republic of China in Nanjing in October 1949, and the CKS nationalists moved to Taipei in December 1949.

Around the period of Japan's defeat in 1945 and the defeat of CKS's nationalists in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 and subsequent move to Taiwan, Taiwanese society faced unheard-of turbulence. Supported by the controversial Cairo Declaration, the nationalist government in Mainland China prepared to take over Taiwan from April 1944. In August 1945 the chair of the then-nationalist government, Chiang, appointed the Provincial Governor of Fujian, Chen Yi, as the first Taiwanese Chief Executive. The official takeover ceremony was in October the same year. However, with endless conflicts between the new authority and the Taiwanese people, the island was not as peaceful as expected after the war. In February 1947 there was a massacre of Taiwanese who were resisting the military KMT (Kuomintang, also known as the Chinese Nationalist Party) occupation of the island. However, not only numerous 'ben-sheng-ren' (本省人, 'home-province people', Taiwanese people) but also huge numbers of 'wai-sheng-ren' (外省人, 'external-province people', Chinese immigrants around 1949) were murdered in and after what became known as the 2-28 Incident. The wounds inflicted during this

bitter period by both sides seem to have healed, but the painful scars have left deep influences on politics and people's daily lives. Before CKS's regime had officially arrived in Taiwan, martial law was declared in 1948 and was not lifted until 1987. It became the longest period of martial law in modern history. Based on an anti-communist stance and in the face of communist infiltration, the 'cheng zhi pan luan tiao li' (懲治叛亂條例, Betrayers Punishment Act) was enforced immediately under Martial Law. The rights to free speech and public gatherings were abolished during this period. Behaviour and cultural products conveying 'immorality' were equated by the government with treason, and therefore condemned. Up to the mid-1970s, the period was commonly known in Taiwanese as the 'bai se kong bu' (白色恐怖, White Terror).

In her late 20s, A-Ma experienced fearfulness among such social instability. Before the withdrawal, there were no obvious distinctions between 'ben-sheng-ren' and 'wai-sheng-ren' among ordinary people: business intercourse, cultural exchange and friendships were possible until their status suddenly changed after the 2-28 Incident. A-Ma remembers that around that time many people were attacked in the street. A 'wai-sheng-ren' she was familiar with was seriously injured and chased by an angry crowd. She decided to help him. In fact it was an extremely dangerous decision to make under such confrontational circumstances. She hid him in a huge rice vat. 'I was terrified and could feel my heart beating strongly. I imaged my heart would jump out from my mouth,' she said to me. The vat of rice was dyed a horrible red by his blood.

Three years after Taiwan's foundation she gave birth to her first son, my father, in her early 30s while she was single. A few years later she had her second son with the same man, remaining unmarried. She never mentions anything related to the man or those days. The only thing I know is a photo of her as a young woman printed on a hand mirror. She showed it to me with pride in her youthful beauty. Everything seemed natural to me until I found that my father and I share the same surname as A-Ma. It was common among earlier generations in Taiwan for the wife to use a compound surname by adding her husband's surname. But A-Ma has only her family name. No one talks about this in our family. It seems to be taboo without explicit declaration. A non-existent grandfather does not bother me, but I believe it was a very difficult situation for my father and his brother. I heard that my father had a sense of inferiority as it said 'father unknown' on his old-version ID card. However, nowadays the household registration officer puts a slash in the column of father or leaves

it blank on the new-version ID. Only A-Ma's name is shown on it now. Even so, my father had some good memories of his grandfather during those hard days.

It is hard to tell if A-Ma's family accepted her single motherhood or not, but nevertheless they have very intimate interactions. I guess A-Ma and her family kept a balance between their tacit relationships. She lived alone with her two sons near her family of origin. Compared with my grandmother's well-off siblings, my father sometimes felt different because of the unequal financial conditions when hanging out with his cousins. However, he was favoured by his grandfather, who took my father to eat 'tàn á mī' (擔仔麵, in Minnanyu, the most common kind of noodle soup in Taiwan with thin slices of pork on top) at a street vendor's stall, which was a luxurious pleasure for ordinary people at that time of shortages and it seemed that the oldest man in the family could enjoy the privilege.

I believe that A-Ma was a brave single mother in her era and in the present day as well. Her belief in what makes a family can also be seen in her relationships with her two daughters-in-law. A-Ma's story tells me that it was possible for a woman to choose not to marry and yet have children in the 1950s in Taiwan; but she must have been very tough.

### *Women in Their In-law Families*

To ensure patrilineal continuity and to practise patriarchal genealogy, it is the essential responsibility of parents to ensure their children marry appropriately and have grandchildren. As Evans (2008: 172) puts it: 'Filiality—the requirement that children fulfil expectations of material care and ritual respect of their parents—has long been considered a pillar of China's cultural and social tradition.' Marriage is not a lifestyle choice but a practice of filial piety. Because of my curiosity about the lives of A-Ma's contemporaries, I then looked at other Taiwanese women's experiences in patriarchal households as daughters-in-law.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the works of anthropologist Wolf (1972, 1975) and Taiwanese sociologist Lin Chin-

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that a 'sim pua' (媳婦仔) who had been reared by a future mother-in-law might experience a quite different mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship when she turns into a daughter-in-law. But I will rely mainly on Lin's (2005) and partly on Wolf's (1972, 1975) materials, in which the daughters-in-law discussed had not experienced 'sim pua' lives.



Ju (2005), I consider mothers-in-laws and daughters-in-law from the 1920s to the early 1950s.

After getting married a daughter-in-law was expected to do all the housework, give birth, bring up her children and help with her husband's business if needed. Because of the principles of patriarchal genealogy, to continue her husband's family line was of the utmost concern. She was nothing until she became a mother. This pressure would be more stressful for those who married the eldest son. It was seen as her fault if the couple had no child, or more precisely, had no son. Once she had a son then she would have a secure position and rights in her husband's family. Wolf (1972: 149) vividly described how a mother-in-law in rural Taiwan watched her daughter-in-law:

Her mother-in-law begins asking embarrassingly blunt questions about her menstrual cycle and allows her to overhear the disgusted comments she makes to her friends. The watchful eyes of village women with few other interests take note of any swelling of her breasts or expanding of her waist-line and as the months go by comment questioningly on the absence of such symptoms.

It is interesting to note that it is the mothers-in-law who take the responsibility for monitoring their daughters-in-law's fertility. This motivation may stem from the mothers-in-law's desire to form her 'uterine family' (Wolf 1972). The potential grandmother considers her son's son to be a member of her uterine family who will burn incense for her after her death. This motivation turns into pressure on daughters-in-law. Moreover, getting along with her mother-in-law was always a difficult task for a new bride. A daughter-in-law is well aware that it is her mother-in-law's face she must watch. Heavy domestic work is the first difficulty to overcome. Lin quoted the autobiography of Taiwanese writer Yang Qien-He, who described how she began her life as a daughter-in-law on the fifth day after her wedding:

The mother-in-law would wake me up at dawn around 5.00 am to cook breakfast. She would then go back to sleep and left me in the kitchen cooking. Cooking then was not like today. I had to set up the fire in the stove by burning straw to ignite limestone chips to start cooking. Because it required experiences in controlling the timing of burning straw and the quantity of limestone chips, it took me a long time to

set up the fire. Usually when my mother-in-law came back to check my progress, I was still struggling with this difficult task. Kneeling down in front of the stove, listening to the sound of her clogs squeezing on the limestone chips that I spread all over the floor inadvertently, I could sense her anger and was very scared.

Men at the house had breakfast at 7.30 am but women ate around 9.30 am. After cooking the breakfast, I went upstairs to clean all the rooms. By the time of having breakfast, I had been starving because I started doing housework since five in the morning. Even when the breakfast time for women came, I could not just go for breakfast. I had to wait for my mother-in-law. (Yang 1995 in Lin 2005: 193–194)

This fictional-like scene, which happened during the first half of the twentieth century, is to be found only in historical stories. A daughter-in-law's domestic responsibilities and situation could change during the life cycle of the family. In general, only daughters-in-law shouldered the heaviest burden because they had no other daughters-in-law to share it. Lin analysed two sets of circumstances: 'first, if she married into a stem family with only one son; second, when she married a potentially extended family with more than one son but was the eldest or *the only* daughter-in-law for a period of time' (2005: 196, emphasis in the original). Things would not necessarily be easier if they lived in an extended family with other daughters-in-law or with their husbands' unmarried sisters, because they might also have to deal with conflicts among sisters-in-law. The hierarchy among wives of husbands' brothers is basically defined by the ranking of their husbands, but sometimes a mother-in-law's preferences might make things different. Besides, either in a stem or an extended family, the eldest daughter-in-law would suffer from the most demands and be expected to be the most responsible.

However, it was not only physically heavy labour that tired them out, but also the supervision and constant nagging from mothers-in-law. Lin (2005: 197) points out that, whatever they had achieved through education or work before marriage, daughters-in-law were situated at the bottom of the gender and generational hierarchy of patriarchal kinship and were often subjected to abuse. In upper-class families, their wealth would not ensure their well-being. Lin's informant Yu had trained at medical school in Japan and was a qualified doctor before marrying, but her achievement was not appreciated at all.

They were rich. He [her husband] lent out money for profit but he wouldn't give me money. They all looked down on me. He laughed at me, 'We are both doctors. If you don't have money, why don't you go out and work?' But I couldn't. He never gave it a thought that I was doing all the housework, giving birth, bringing up children as well as serving the patients at his clinic. (Lin 2005: 197)

A married woman in a patriarchal family will only be seen as a daughter-in-law and this role means subordination to her parents-in-law and her husband. This subordinate status in the generational hierarchy is revealed in the traditional kinship titles. A daughter-in-law calls her parents-in-law 'gong-po' (公婆, literally meaning grandfather and grandmother), the same as her children do. The title relegates the daughter-in-law to a junior generation, lowers her position in front of her parents-in-law and legitimates her husband's power over her. According to Lin (2005) most women did resist by using different strategies, although these were not necessarily successful.

Through committing suicide, attempting to divorce or escaping back to their families of origin, daughters-in-law searched for any way to have a better life before they then forced themselves to perform obediently. Wolf (1975: 135) suggested that the high incidence of suicide by women aged between 19 and 29 in early twentieth-century Taiwan was a type of revenge by young daughters-in-law against their husband's family because 'suicide was a socially acceptable solution to a variety of problems that offer no other solution'. Divorce and returning to her father's home for help would not succeed unless she had support from her family of origin. Today we assume that parents will not want to see their daughters suffer and will at least do something to ensure that their daughters are treated better. However, since daughters held impermanent positions in their families of origin, after a daughter became a wife the authority over her would transfer to the parents-in-law and her husband. Her well-being would then be controlled by them. Some daughters might be supported by their upper-class and wealthy families of origin, as Lin (2005: 204) mentioned, but in most cases daughters were asked by their own parents to obey their parents-in-law. The father would lose face if a married daughter stayed at home because this was against the norms of patriarchy. For the parents, there might be tension between traditional obedience and family attachment; however, persuading the daughter to obey was also for her own good within that social context. The story of Yang Qien-He in Lin's (2005: 202, 204) study presented a father's dilemma and 'the most successful form of

resistance' that a daughter-in-law could have made. Yang returned to her family of origin for help when her mother-in-law abused her. There was concern that to take a married daughter in could bring shame upon the paternal family. However, her modern-educated brother supported her and convinced their father to let her stay. Yang came back after a month and succeeded in moving out with her husband. Her mother-in-law became insane. The resources of Yang's paternal family and romanticism in their marriage both contributed to her successful resistance, although dealing with her mother-in-law remained very difficult.

Kandiyoti (1988: 279) analysed the different interests of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law under classic patriarchy (which geographically can be found in North Africa, the Muslim Middle East, and South and East Asia) and suggested that the most common form of women's passive resistance is to wait to become mothers-in-law in their turn:

In classic patriarchy, subordination to men is offset by the control that elder women attain over younger women. However, women have access to the only type of labour power they can control, and to old-age security, through their married sons. Since sons are a woman's most critical resource, ensuring their lifelong loyalty is an enduring preoccupation. Older women have a vested interest in the suppression of romantic love between youngsters to keep the conjugal bond secondary and to claim sons' primary allegiance. Younger women have an interest in circumventing and possibly evading their mother-in-law's control.

As Wolf (1972: 159) explained, Taiwanese women, whether young or old, looked for support from men; the younger turned to their husbands and an older woman sought support from the person whose loyalty she had spent much of her adult life cultivating—her son. It is understandable that Yang's mother-in-law became insane when her son left, for her son was the one who could ensure security for her old age. This mechanism led to the formation of the 'uterine family', in which a mother stakes her sense of security and belonging through reproducing and controlling sons. And this also reminds me of A-Ma, the mother who bonds herself tightly with her son.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This may cause anxiety in the mother/daughter-in-law relationship between A-Ma and my mother. I will discuss this in the following section.

In contrast, for a young woman, a husband who sided with her would be her best hope. Lin (2005: 205) argues that:

modernization processes during Japanese colonialism might have contributed to challenge[sic] the patrilineal ties. On one hand, the young couple was more likely to marry through romantic courtship and appeared to have stronger conjugal ties than couples from previous generations. On the other, employment outside the family also gave the young couple excuses to escape from the control of patriarchal families.

Lin countered Kandiyoti's argument of passive resistance by pointing out that, in her readings of women's life stories, these 'modern' daughters-in-law had shown visible resistance and if they failed, 'it was *the failed attempts* of daughters-in-law to resist rather than *a lack* of resistance in the first place that led to what Kandiyoti called "patriarchal bargains"' (2005: 206, my emphasis).

### *Rethinking A-Ma*

In 1976, when A-Ma was in her early 1950s, only 3% of women in that age group were single (DHRA).<sup>3</sup> It was nearly impossible for women to remain single in A-Ma's generation. These women had never lived in a husband's family as a daughter-in-law and had failed to transfer from their family of origin to their future home like other, conventional Taiwanese women. However, the existence of the single-woman-headed family in the 1950s was a challenge to patriarchal society, which could be a type of resistance by choice.

Although our family does not shoulder any responsibility for patrilineal continuity, as obviously we will not worship ancestors from our biological grandfather's family, A-Ma still holds the idea of valuing sons over daughters. She expected my parents to have a second child and hoped it would be a 'he' and she took the same attitude to my uncle and aunt after they had two girls. It is hard to say whether she had reshaped her understanding of the patriarchal family. However, there is a chance to rethink what we have experienced and to pass it on as heritage to the next generation. In the discussion of daughters-in-law's passive resistance, Lin (2005) confirms

<sup>3</sup> The data before 1988 are not free to retrieve from the DHRA website. I asked the DHRA for the data in February 2010.

Kandiyoti's suggestions that women resisted social change and colluded with patriarchy because they expected to benefit from the system in their old age. Modern daughters-in-law in their early twenties have resisted, even though not always successfully, and that makes things different. It is thus crucial to note what made this possible. In Lin's (2005) findings, it was the resources of their paternal family, the influences of modern discourses and the employment of their husbands.

For the daughters-in-law, failure to resist may not necessarily lead to a repetition of the patriarchal cycle. Bitter experiences may be passed on in a positive way to the next generations. The daughters would learn from them, re-resist continually and then have a chance to make progress. That is to say, resistance will not be limited within an individual or a generation; to empower the next generation could be a form of resistance. A-Ma has no daughters, but I as a granddaughter now understand that it is possible to disobey patriarchal values. A lot of effort may have gone into making this resistance a success and we may need to pay dearly for it. However, it is all worth it if we can make things a little bit different, including for my mother, the daughter-in-law of A-Ma, within our three generations. The absence of a grandfather thus means a lot to me because it constructs a woman-headed family as A-Ma's own uterine family, with which our family started.

It is astonishing that women's stories in Wolf's and Lin's research came from the modern era and not from a long time ago. However, women's attempts to subvert the patrilineal hierarchy and patriarchalism are nothing new. Women of A-Ma's generation had made some advances from within the patriarchal family. As long as insiders took action, patriarchalism would be challenged to some extent. What would women in the next generation do with patriarchalism? Following the line of my family story, what have my mother and women of her age done as daughters and daughters-in-law? Has society changed and made their resistance possible? To explain this, I need to tell another side of the historical story. That is, the story of my maternal grandmother.

## SOCIAL CHANGE IN TAIWAN (1970s-1990s)

### *A Long Way Across the Ocean*

I was never taught the history of what happened in 1945. For those whose families have lived in Taiwan for hundreds of years, Taiwan was liberated from Japan in 1945 and then, once again, the authority changed. As to the

homeless refugees from all over China, many followed Chiang Kai-Shek's regime and settled down in temporary places in Taiwan during the years immediately after the nationalist army was defeated in the Chinese Civil War in 1949. Numerous people who left their families and home towns sought to find a way to better their lives. Crowds gathered at the pier or jumped on trains to the east coast, eager to catch any ship to Taiwan. This included my maternal grandmother. At the time, she was married and had a child. The widespread feeling of insecurity among the people had increased day by day. She and her husband decided to head to Taiwan and left their first daughter in China.

The couple settled down in Taiwan in 1949. Without support and restraint from their families of origin, the patrilocal mores were fractured by the new conjugal family. Their second daughter, my mother, was soon born in Kaohsiung while society was still turbulent. As the family grew with time, my maternal grandfather did not even make enough money to cover the cost of food for five children. He founded two unsuccessful businesses in Taiwan and then started a successful small factory in Hong Kong. However, its geographical location led him away from his family in Taipei and he travelled back and forth before retiring.

Under such unstable economic conditions, my maternal grandmother spent her whole life as a housewife and tried her best to raise her children. Taking good care of them was the crucial aim of her daily life. Without a moment's pause, when my mother gave birth, she continued taking responsibility for the care of her first granddaughter, me. At that time, her youngest son was only 17. She took care of me until I was three. After that, in her late fifties, when three of her daughters were studying abroad in the USA, she accompanied them and took care of them and their four children afterwards. For an ordinary woman born in 1926 in China, who had been through wars and migration, life was never easy. As a mother who raised five children almost alone, her life could not have been much harder. I cannot imagine that she was born into a wealthy family with three servants. This really contrasts with my image of her; she was doing housework all the time. I do not have many memories of her. All I can recall is that she was always in the kitchen and was ready to feed everyone.

CKS's regime came to Taiwan in 1949; this was an influential historical event that affected numerous people's lives and provoked conflict between groups. For ordinary people, I believe, this was nothing right or wrong, but in fact their fates had been decided. These social and political changes had a profound impact not only on 'ben-sheng-ren' but also on 'wai-



sheng-ren'. At the very beginning, indeed, there was tremendous tension between the local population and the immigrants. We may get a vague picture by imagining how the huge numbers of immigrants lived their new but uncertain lives and how the Taiwanese people dealt with the new situation.

I have no idea whether Man-Yun and her husband ever wished to go back to China since I never had the chance to ask them. But it is certain that at the time when people left China no one would have expected the ocean to become so difficult to across again, and neither did those who stayed. Due to the political tension and military confrontations, cross-strait visits by Taiwanese residents to China were not allowed until Martial Law was lifted in 1987; and the two sides are still technically at war. Man-Yun did make a family visit to Guangdong once. This time, she was a guest and still left without her daughter. Everything had changed; the Fengs' old residence and her surviving siblings were no longer the same as in her memory. And her baby daughter was middle-aged. After the visit, she went back to the USA and lived there for the rest of her life. She had had three nationalities, but I cannot tell which country was her home.

This incredible woman, whom I called 'Po-Po' (婆婆), which means grandmother in Cantonese, is my maternal grandmother. She impressed me with her acceptance of whatever was in front of her. My mother and aunts say that they never heard Po-Po complain or ever quarrel with their father. She was too gentle to speak loudly. Her mental toughness showed in her way of maintaining the family. As an outsider who spoke Cantonese and accented Chinese, she learnt to speak Taiwanese Minnanyu through shopping at the local market. Ethnic identity mattered in various ways in their early days. Both my 'ben-sheng-ren' A-Ma and 'wai-sheng-ren' Po-Po were struggling for a living in the same place at the same time. And I, the half-blooded me, appreciate both of them and have benefitted from this particular standpoint that provides me with a chance to think of Taiwan's history from different angles.

What I am most interested in is the household structure that Po-Po inhabited. She was not in the patrilocal mothers/daughters-in-law line. She lived neither with her mother-in-law nor with her daughter-in-law. Her daughters were all supported by her with childcare instead of by their mothers-in-law. Besides, the father of the family, my maternal grandfather, spent more than half his time working in Hong Kong. Without any support from their families of origin, my grandparents formed a new style of nuclear family in Taiwan. Compared to the mother-in-law of a

uterine family, it is probably better to understand this family as implicitly mother-centred. It seems as though it was almost an isolated family form away from patrilineal ideology. Neither the resources nor the oppressions of a traditional patriarchal family were involved. However, the most interesting questions will be: Was the family less patriarchal than others? Did my maternal grandparents hold a relatively more liberal opinion on patriarchal restrictions on children? My mother's life provides some clues.

### *A Typical Working Mother*

My mother was born two years after her parents came to Taiwan in 1949. She, her three sisters and youngest brother are the so-called first generation of Taiwan-born 'wai-sheng-ren'. They were indeed born 'in' Taiwan but ironically were seen as outsiders. People usually recognise the 'in-group' others from the language one speaks and the accent one has. The most ironic thing is that my mother speaks Taiwanese Minnanyu as well as the so-called 'ben-sheng-ren'. She went to a local primary school in Kaohsiung and her classmates were mostly from 'ben-sheng-ren' families. Learning to speak fluent Taiwanese Minnanyu was thus a matter of 'life and death'. When the CKS government carried out its policy of 'speaking Chinese',<sup>4</sup> she and her 'ben-sheng-ren' classmates all suffered from it. As a result, my mother spoke Cantonese at home, Chinese at school and Taiwanese Minnanyu with her playmates. Her trilingual ability reflects how ordinary people adapted quickly to the social and political environment in Taiwan at that time.

My maternal grandfather treated education as the most important thing. I cannot imagine how this could have been possible in a five-child financially straitened family in the 1950s–1960s. My mother recalls that, when she was little, her parents told the children that there were only two choices for them: studying very hard to enter a state university or working as a basic level operator in a factory. The 'threat' seemed to work. Incredibly, my mother and her siblings all achieved higher education.

<sup>4</sup>From the imposition of martial law in Taiwan in 1949, Mandarin Chinese became the national language and was the exclusive language for education. The use of native Taiwanese dialects was banned in public. School children would be punished if they were suspected of not speaking 'guo-yu' (國語, the national language) on campus.

However, what made it an effective threat? I am sure my maternal grandparents would not look down on factory workers; besides, getting a higher education will not necessarily ensure a wealthier life. My maternal grandparents were not wealthy and the children had to take part-time jobs while they undertook their undergraduate education. Indeed, economic issues should be considered seriously; the sooner children can be financially independent, the sooner their parents may feel relief. Why did he insist on his children's education? The answers might be found in the traditional Chinese idea of the honourable scholar and the hope of intergenerational mobility. The educational achievements of one's children will bring honour and prestige to the family, as well as financial benefits to the parents. However, parents will have different expectations of higher education for their sons and daughters because of the traditional pattern of early marriage for women (Thornton et al. 1994: 93). If a daughter marries at a fairly young age, her economic contribution to her family of origin will be limited. It was also a common phenomenon during the industrialisation period in Taiwan that the oldest sister left school to work in a factory to support her younger sisters and brothers while they obtained higher education.

Luckily my mother and her sisters all finished their education successfully. The family ended up with four Masters degrees and one PhD. In contrast to the stereotype, the one who achieved the highest education was not the son. Although individual choices and other considerations must be taken into account, it still seems as though my maternal grandparents were more liberal about practising patriarchy since they did not intend to sacrifice any of their children's education. However, there are suspicions that my grandfather favoured his son even though he claimed he did not. Interestingly, the four sisters in the family are all career-oriented and none of them became housewives like their mother. My mother got her first full-time job right after her graduation from university and devoted all her premarital wages to the family. Instead of marrying in her early twenties, as the average woman did in the late 1970s, she waited until the age of 28. My parents have never mentioned the reason for their long courtship but it seems quite obvious that they could not form a stable family until my father finished his MA degree and military service. It could also possibly be the result of my mother's devotion to her family of origin.

My mother is really a filial daughter in some ways. But A-Ma, her mother-in-law, did not appreciate this filial behaviour and complained

that my mother did not save money before marriage and bring a dowry when she married to support the new couple. However, the contradictions and conflicts between them stem from far more than this. The first issue again relates to their ethnic groups; my mother is from a 'wai-sheng-ren' family and my father is a 'ben-sheng-ren'. Although my mother speaks Taiwanese Minnanyu very well, it does not help much to ease various problems caused by the different customs of the two families. A-Ma is not a career-oriented woman; she worked very hard simply to raise her children and live. She cannot understand my mother's passion for her career and sees this as a neglect of her family.

My parents met at a ball. After dating for ten years, they married at age 28 and had me one year later. They made a premarital agreement that they wanted only one child, regardless of sex, and would move out from my father's family home. Although they both agreed to this, to me it seems more like my mother's opinion. I have no idea how much effort they had to make to accomplish these two aims, but they did both within three years of marrying. To my mother, this new house was the home of the new core family. But my father did not think so. He gave A-Ma a pair of duplicate keys and welcomed her to come anytime. And she does. My father's decision and A-Ma's occasional unexpected visits always cause offence to my mother.

My parents both work very hard. Their specialties give them an advantage in the workplace. It happened to be the peak of the economic 'miracle' period in the 1970s–1980s when they started work. My mother works for an international company and did not give up her job after marriage or giving birth. Her mother helped to take care of her newborn baby for the first three years; her sisters and brother all supported her in various ways. I lived in my maternal grandparents' house, which was near my mother's office, during the weekdays and my parents would take me back at weekends. When my maternal grandmother left for the USA and could no longer take care of me, I went to a nearby nursery school half a year before the average starting age. Every day after school, I was the last kid waiting for my mother to pick me up after work. Sometimes she took me with her to her office if she had to work late. It was my mother's family of origin that supported the caring work of my infant period instead of my paternal family. At the time I was born, Po-Po was a housewife in her mid-fifties and A-Ma was still working full time. Furthermore, my maternal grandparents' house was only a ten minute walk from my mother's office.

Maternal childcare support ended when I entered nursery school. A-Ma took over part of the job afterwards. I remember that A-Ma took me with her to work during my summer break. As with other dual-income families, my parents made their best efforts to arrange a flexible solution for my after-school time. They sent me to a primary school which was close to my father's office and trained me to take a bus or school bus to A-Ma's house after school. I attended after-school care programmes and stayed at school for longer periods than most students. Sometimes I went across the road to my father's office and did my homework in a spare conference room. Then we went home together after my father finished his work. Later, once I was in the fourth year and was seen as old enough, I went home by bus, unlocked the door and waited for my parents on my own; I was a, so-called, latchkey child. It was not a hard time for me as I had a few playmates and I could have my homework done before my parents came home. I did not mind being alone and I think I have never felt afraid of being alone at home. But once I told my mother that 'I wish you were a housewife and could prepare dessert for me after school'. It really was selfish of me to say so and I have felt bad about this for a long time and wish I had never said it. I know she was hurt because I could not understand her, but I do not remember whether she responded or not at that time.

In fact, she has achieved a great deal at work. She also impresses me by her bravery in facing inequality and daring to challenge authority. Some time in the early 1990s, when I was in junior high school, her boss was the only man in her department and made continual, unwelcome sexual advances and requests for sexual favours to all his female colleagues. Each female employee in her office suffered and complained about this but had done nothing to improve the situation since the man possessed the highest power in the office. At that time we did not have the Sexual Harassment Prevention Act, which was not introduced until 2009. My mother and her female colleagues began to record every case of sexual harassment that occurred, tape recording the unpleasant phone calls, and tried to force the authorities to take action. The conservative response was what they expected. The board was unwilling to make a tough decision to dismiss him as the reaction might give a bad impression of the company. The possible negative consequences and the revenge of the man had frightened off most of my mother's companions. I have no idea how she had so much bravery to persist to the end, but she did, even though my

father was trying to persuade her not to go further. On the one hand, she felt very afraid that my father and I could be hurt; on the other hand, she very cautiously negotiated with the board. Finally, the company fulfilled her demand; the man was fired. Nothing bad happened afterwards.

I adore my mother because she is a strong-minded, independent woman. She always seems to know what to do and how to do it best, especially in regard to her career. She started out in the foreign sales department conducting export business, holding a management position. After 15 years, she noticed the emerging need for human resource management. She started to take courses on related topics at the university and decided to take the entrance examination of a graduate school in Kaohsiung. She passed and began to live her on-the-job graduate student life by flying back and forth between Taipei and Kaohsiung. I am so proud that she completed her master's degree and participated in restructuring the company. It is never an easy task to shoulder the dual responsibilities of a working mother.

My mother has had a deep influence on me. I think my parents made the right decision that one child was enough for them, or more precisely, for my mother. She witnessed dramatic changes in Taiwanese society in many aspects; these included the first wave of the Taiwanese women's movement. I have not yet discovered where her feminist ideas came from, but she was the first person to inspire mine.

### *Taiwan Miracle: Rapid Industrialisation and Economic Growth*

Social changes in both the economic and non-economic spheres have occurred rapidly in Taiwanese society since the 1970s, a decade before I was born. My generation enjoyed the results as soon as we were born and experienced a very different childhood from that of the previous two generations. I remember at the time the general wealth phenomena of average families and the atmosphere of well-being across the whole society, at least in Taipei. The economic 'miracle' in Taiwan after the Second World War not only increased the nation's wealth in a dramatic fashion, but has also changed its social structure. Notably, the transformation of the socio-economic background has affected women's lives.

Taiwan entered a period of gradual economic development in the 1950s, which began to take off during the 1960s. By the end of the 1960s the basis of the economy had switched from agriculture to industry. Due to the impact of the oil crisis in 1973 and a series of political and

international events during the 1970s, for instance, the withdrawal from the UN and the severance of diplomatic relations with Canada, Japan and the USA, the government realised the emerging need for basic construction and conducted the Ten Major Development Projects during the 1970s (Tsai 1989: 27; Hermalin et al. 1994: 79). The projects were targeted mainly at the transportation network, the development of heavy and chemical industries, and the production of energy. From the mid-1970s through to 1988, the island entered a stable industrial period. The annual per capita income in Taiwan grew rapidly from US\$ 154 in 1951, US\$ 2,455 in 1981 to US\$ 8,473 in 1991 and surpassed US\$ 10,000 in 1993 (DGBAS 2010: 13, Table 2). After the second oil crisis in 1979 the government's strategy shifted from heavy industry towards more high-tech oriented industries; the Science and Technology Development Programme was initiated in the same year and the first Science Park was established in December 1980 in Hsinchu, and a substantial sum was devoted to research and development spending.

Along with land reform and industrial development, Taiwan experienced rapid urbanisation during the 1950s, followed by a period of rapid growth in suburban areas over the next two decades (Tung et al. 2006: 130). As a consequence, the separation of economic production from the land and the migration of young people from rural to urban areas reduced the economic control of the family head and resulted in changes in Taiwanese family structures.

### *Educational Expansion and Employment*

Due to the favouring of the male heir under patriarchalism, Taiwanese daughters in the past were undervalued within the family and received a smaller share of familial resources for education than sons. However, women have benefitted from the industrialisation of Taiwanese society in terms of educational expansion and employment opportunities. Well aware of the links between education and development, the government introduced six-year compulsory education for children aged 6–12 in 1953 and in 1968 extended it three more years to age 15, both free and required. The result of compulsory education was reflected in a dramatic increase in school attendance at primary and lower secondary education level. The sex ratio in primary schools decreased from 156.5 boys per 100 girls in 1950 to 124.8 in 1954, which was the year after six-year education became compulsory. In 1970, the sex ratio of students at the nine-year



education level was 114.0. Compulsory education decreased the gender gap in the enrolment of basic education, but not necessarily for higher education (college and university level). In 1950, which is the earliest statistic I can find, the sex ratio of students at the undergraduate level was 616.3; the gap narrowed rapidly to 180.2 in 1970, around the period when my parents went to university, and it was 93.8 in 1998 when I entered university (DOS, [various years](#)). Nearly half of young people aged 18 to 21 entered higher education in the late 1990s and this reached 82.17% in 2009 (DOS [2010](#)).

Thus, within two decades, the higher education enrolment of female Taiwanese students had shown tremendous change. Besides the compulsory education policy, which may have increased female schooling at the basic educational level but did not necessarily have an impact on higher education, what caused the changes in female education? In the past, when the family economy ruled, women and children, as well as men, were generally involved in family-based production, especially labour-intensive production, where all family members were required to contribute. Accordingly, parents might be less interested in their children's education because schooling interfered with their contribution to household production and increased the costs of child-rearing. With industrialisation, education opened up opportunities for young people in the new labour market and could increase their potential wages. Thus, educated young adults worked outside the household boundaries and contributed their wages instead of labour to their family. However, after this transformation, parents' concern persisted as extended education postponed young people's entering the workforce and might delay marriage and reproduction. As a result of patriarchy, parents would invest relatively less in their daughters' education because sons were expected to be responsible for supporting parents in their old age, while daughters left home after marriage to join their husbands' families. Nevertheless, a daughter's contribution to the natal family could be extended after her marriage. There are other factors that encouraged parents to invest more in their children's education and to diminish the difference in their attitudes towards daughters and sons.

Thornton et al. (1994: 93–94) explained the expansion of parental investment in a daughter's education<sup>5</sup> from the utilitarian perspective.

<sup>5</sup> A study of Hong Kong parents' investments in their daughters' education suggests that it is part of family strategy (Mak [2009](#)) and an expectation of reciprocity, a product of ideals of filial piety (Jackson et al. [2013](#)).

Besides the consideration that a better-educated woman may have higher status in the marriage market, the parents' concern is their daughter's future economic contribution to her family of origin, both pre- and post-marital. As a result, they argue that the extension of a daughter's education may increase the marriage age of women. On the parents' side, they 'might be motivated to postpone her marriage in order to retain her earnings for the natal family' (ibid.). The daughter may voluntarily postpone her marriage in order to contribute to her natal family for longer because 'she feels indebted to her parents for their investment in her education' (ibid.). The benefit will still continue after her marriage. As the parents invest more in a daughter's education, they thus have a stronger reason to be repaid by their married daughter, especially when the potential bride has 'several younger siblings' (ibid.). Even if they do not expect a daughter's post-marital assistance, a better-educated daughter with a higher income may potentially provide help if necessary.

I am reluctant to think of my maternal grandparents as utilitarian. But when focusing on premarital wages, the explanation may be appropriate. For example, my mother contributed all her premarital wages to support her natal family and saved nothing for herself. Her sisters' and brother's education benefitted somewhat from this. However, what is problematic in Thornton et al.'s argument is that if the parents expect a post-marital contribution from their daughters, why do they tend to postpone her marriage? One possible reason is that a daughter's post-marital contribution is not absolutely dependable. When a daughter married into her husband's family, she became a member of the new family. And if she did not give up her career after marriage, she would be expected to contribute her wages to her husband's family if they were in a family economy structure. Thus, she would have to negotiate with them when her natal family needed financial help. Furthermore, due to the gender inequality in employment, it is not necessarily the case that greater investment in a daughter's education will lead to higher earning capacity; besides, to fulfil this argument, women must have opportunities to work outside the family.

In this argument, the family benefit is much more important than the individual's, especially women as individuals, and this is known as familism. The family type in the context of Chinese culture emphasises commitment to the family as an entirety. That is to say, each member of the family has a responsibility to achieve the common goals of the family and the benefit of the individual should be neglected if it conflicts with that of the

family. During the process of Taiwanese industrialisation, women devoted themselves to employment and changed their contribution to the family. Most of them no longer contributed labour as a housewife, staying at home, taking care of children and managing the household as had been expected traditionally; instead, they worked outside the household and contributed wages. It is said that women who work outside and contribute wages to the family will be more respected and will have relatively more autonomy and independence. Nevertheless, their contribution could also be regarded as an extension of women's sacrifice for her family from the perspective of familism; that is to say, wages are a different form of household labour in modern society. Female individuals in this sense are not actually empowered; on the contrary, they become more deeply embedded in the patriarchal family. From the viewpoint of familism, which places family before the individual, individual development and empowerment are not necessarily individual-oriented; it should be considered within the context of family (cf. Chang and Song 2010).

### *Marriage and Family Changes*

The Taiwanese marriage system has long been characterised by the overwhelming power of parents. Not so long ago, it was parents who arranged and directed the marriages of their children, thus marriage was a family-based decision rather than a personal choice. The interests of individuals were generally secondary to those of the family. However, educational expansion, more premarital employment and adult children living away from their natal families have changed intimate relationships and interactions between young adults and their parents. The percentage of parent-arranged marriages declined from 68% for the birth cohort of 1933–1934 to around 10% for the birth cohort of 1960–1964 (Thornton et al. 1994: 151, Table 6.1). The latest KAP survey of Taiwanese families and fertility showed that, among the 1970s birth cohort, it had dropped to 3.2% (BHP 2002: 106, Table 3A.4).

Certainly, the economic and social changes in Taiwanese society from the 1970s to the 1990s have led to changes in people's attitudes towards marriage, the way to form a union and the (conjugal) family. The average age of women's first marriage was 23.8 in 1979 when my parents married (DHRA 2009a). They were married in their late twenties, which was not a conventional decision among their generation; by the end of 1978, the proportion of never-married women in age range 25–29 was only 18.25% (DHRA 2009b). Lin et al. (1994: 204, Table 8.1) analysed marriage changes in twentieth-century Taiwan and

their figures show that marriage was once universal and occurred at a young age; 91.6% of women aged 20–24 were, or had been, married in 1905, 70.6% in 1956 and less than half (49.6%) in 1970. By 2005, only 8.30% of the same age group had ever been married (DHRA 2009b).

Not only had marriage choices changed by the 1970s, but the Taiwanese family structure has also transformed over time. Many patrilocal extended families have broken down, with each becoming several nuclear families. During the period of rapid rural to urban migration during the 1950s and 1960s, traditional complex households had started to break down into small units as young people left their parents' homes and settled down in urban areas as a result of employment or schooling (Tung et al. 2006: 131). In the 1970s and 1980s, as large, modern enterprises gradually replaced tiny family businesses, the extended family pattern was further weakened (ibid.: 132). In 1965 66% of all households were extended families but this had dropped to 50% in 1980 (ibid.: 130, Table 1). By the late 1980s the nuclear family had already become the dominant family type in Taiwan (ibid.).

However, with the trend of delaying or eschewing marriage, the nuclear family is gradually decreasing and the proportion of nuclear families was down to 48.1% of all households by 1999 (DGBAS 2006a: 16–17). That is to say, since 2000 the nuclear family has no longer been the typical form in Taiwanese society. The emerging household types are small households containing childless married couples or single people. The growth rate of married-couple households from 1988 to 2004 was 177.1%, while that of the single household was 148.6% (DGBAS 2006b). With the rapid growth of unconventional households the proportion of single-person and married-couple households is expected to increase steadily in the future in Taiwan. Looking at the age distribution and marital status of single households, elderly people aged over 65 comprise about 30%; among those who are under 65, unmarried people comprise 51.3%, while divorced people comprise only 16.7%. These figures have drawn much attention at the beginning of this century. Is the patriarchal family gradually collapsing in Taiwan?

### *Changes in Mother/Daughter-in-Law Relationships*

When I was at primary school, the most impressive thing about summer and winter vacations was that nearly all my classmates went back to their grandparents' homes in other cities for the entire period of the

vacation. I was envious because they all had somewhere to go other than Taipei. Since both my maternal and paternal grandparents' homes were in Taipei City, I had no experience of living in other cities or rural areas for vacation. However, the reason why my classmates were sent to their grandparents' homes in other cities was to take the childcare responsibility away from their busy working parents. Some of them were raised by their grandparents in rural areas and were taken back to their parents' home in Taipei when they reached school age. In fact, there was nothing different in the arrangement of childcare in my family. The only difference was the location of my grandparents' home; we all lived in the same district. I stayed at my paternal grandmother's home during summer and winter vacations; before she retired, she even took me with her to her office.

Nevertheless, it was my maternal grandmother who took care of me during the early newborn period, which I believe is the most demanding and exhausting task. Lin (2007: 31) argued that, even in the 1970s, with less patrilineal dominance than before, it was rare and unacceptable to rely on matrilineal kin for childcare. Due to patrilineal norms, children belong to the father's family line and share the same surname as their fathers and paternal grandfathers; thus, reasonably it would be the paternal rather than maternal grandmothers who took care of the next generation. It was only occasionally, and only when necessary, that maternal grandmothers would provide help. However, in the post-industrial Taiwan of the late 1990s, as young working women gained greater autonomy, the most significant childcare arrangement in the new middle-class family was the increasing involvement of maternal kin (*ibid.*: 50). Although they might live in the patrilocal family at the very beginning of their marriage, young couples consciously sought any opportunity to form their own nuclear families; most of them succeeded within one to three years of marriage (*ibid.*: 38). By moving out of the patrilocal family and actively mobilising their matrilineal ties, married working women in the late 1990s seemed to reverse the dominant pattern of the patriarchal family; that is to say that the newly formed nuclear families have gradually made the patrilocal norms difficult to maintain (*ibid.*: 52).

Compared to the situation of daughters-in-law during the first half of the twentieth century, young married women after the 1970s gained more power and lived different lives in terms of gradually untied cultural norms and improving economic status. According to Lin (2007), the transition period of shifting power between mothers- and daughters-in-law was the

1970s to the 1990s. The relatively better earning capacity of young daughters-in-law in a modern capitalist society enabled them to negotiate with the patriarchal family and changed the dynamic between them and their mothers-in-law. Meanwhile, with the collapse of traditional family production after industrialisation, mothers-in-law, who used to be able to control the labour of their daughters-in-law and manage the family economy, lost their advantages in the generational hierarchy. However, some did not; for those parents-in-law who possessed much more economic power than the newlywed couples, their generational authority did not decline immediately with industrialisation, while the most obvious and intense conflicts occurred between the two generations if they were in a similar economic position (*ibid.*: 20). Facing their loss of status in the 1970s, some mothers-in-law wished to reclaim their lost power by competing to take charge of household labour and childcare tasks with their daughters-in-law to secure their importance in the family. That is also the reason why, with anxieties about their old age, rural mothers-in-law might make the effort to take care of their urban grandchildren (*ibid.*: 33). During this transition period, the young daughters-in-law were still trapped in gendered and generational struggles as patriarchy still prevailed. They tended to avoid conflicts with their mothers-in-law, although they were probably in a better bargaining position than before. Thus, the relationship between mothers- and daughters-in-law had reached a tentative compromise. In the late 1990s, daughters-in-law were finding alternative forms of resistance and quietly changing patrilocal norms and unravelling patrilineal kinship patterns.

Alongside the storyline of my mother's childcare arrangements, I interpret her strategy of mobilising matrilineal ties as a form of resistance against patrilineal kinship. As my paternal grandmother, A-Ma, still had a stable full-time job when I was born and my maternal grandmother, Po-Po, was a full-time housewife, my mother had no difficulty in asking Po-Po to take care of me. My parents successfully bought a new house and moved in when I was one year old. This was even earlier than the trend in Lin's (2007) findings, during the late 1990s, that daughters-in-law left the patrilocal family to form nuclear families of their own within one to three years of marriage. So my mother was involved in both of the two main strategies that young couples used to resist the patriarchal family during the transition period: forming their own nuclear family and mobilising maternal ties.

Possibly as a result of my mother's resistance, A-Ma does not regard her as a perfect daughter-in-law. My mother sincerely respects A-Ma but did

not take the hierarchy for granted. When she disagreed with A-Ma, she would not provoke conflict but passively disobeyed instead. I noticed that quarrels between my parents were sometimes caused by conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Although A-Ma was never a daughter-in-law herself, she has traditional ideas about what a mother/daughter-in-law relationship should be like. Obviously, my mother does not fit into the category. Unlike some rural mothers-in-law in Lin's (2007) study, A-Ma has a sizeable, stable pension and lives near her son in the big city. She may not be better off than her sons and daughters-in-law but she need not worry about her old age at all. Security in old age would probably not be her main concern; instead, I believe it is the strong maternal bond between her and my father that makes the relationship uneasy. And my mother's 'progressive' thoughts also create more difficulties.

### *The Women's Movement in Taiwan*

The emergence of a women's movement in Taiwan is also evidence of women's greater freedom. It is widely accepted that the Taiwanese women's movement was started in 1971 when Lu Hsiu-Lien (呂秀蓮, also known as Annette Lu) introduced the post-war women's movement to Taiwanese society by writing newspaper articles (Fan 2000: 144). In 1976, she founded Pioneer Publishing (拓荒者出版社), which gathered like-minded women and promoted gender equality activities. After Lu was sentenced to prison in 1979 because of her political involvement with the opposition movement, in the well-known Formosa Incident, her struggle was continued by Lee Yuan-Chen (李元貞), who founded the Women's Awakening Magazine Publishing House (婦女新知出版社) in 1982. Awakening realised the importance of legislation and women's rights from 1984 onwards and, with other women's groups, succeeded in securing the legalisation of abortion in the Eugenic Protection Act. However, the consent of both the woman and her spouse were necessary. Lobbying for legislation was not successful in terms of women's autonomy; nevertheless, this experience opened up the possibility of women's organisations. The end of Martial law in 1987 led to the rights of assembly, free speech and publication, which were very significant for the women's movement. Many women became more attentive to social issues; for example, Awakening converted itself into a foundation that year. The same year, to support working women who faced an age-clause and a pregnancy-free clause in their work contracts, activists and female lawyers in Awakening began drafting an act regarding

equal employment between the sexes and, after 18 months of organising, introduced the 'Equal Employment Act for Men and Women' (ibid.: 150–151). Due to opposition from employers, the Act was not passed until 2001 and was renamed the 'Gender Equality in Employment Act' in 2008. Legislative change and lobbying work became the main tactics for Awakening and other women's groups during the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, the women's movement initiated at least eight bills, four of which were new proposals drafted and organised by Awakening; apart from the 'Equal Employment Act for Men and Women' mentioned above, seven of those eight have successfully won the approval of the Legislature (ibid.: 140–141, 2004: 179).

After gradually developing for about two decades, beginning in 1971, the women's movement gained momentum alongside the sex debate during the 1990s. A simple, powerful slogan 'Orgasm YES, Harassment NO!' coined by Josephine Ho (何春蕤) in a march against sexual harassment held by women's groups in 1994 had provoked an emerging issue within the women's movement, academia and the wider society. Ho's influential stance had drawn the media's attention and thus the mainstream activists were worried that the focus had been shifted onto sexual liberation rather than against sexual violence (ibid.: 162). However, sexual liberation did not become a lively issue of debate until the slogan was revealed in the media and Ho's subsequent famous book, *The Gallant Women: Feminism and Sex Emancipation* (豪爽女人: 女性主義與性解放), was published. In the author's own words, elsewhere, this book:

openly proposes first and foremost the exoneration of sexually active women (usually labelled and ostracized as sluts and bad women) and other sexual minorities (usually labelled and ostracized as perverts) so that women would no longer fear their own bodies or desires but could learn from these sexual subjects, their experiences/expertise, so as to break out of patriarchal gender/sex discipline. (Ho 2007: 126–127)

Not only has the book triggered heated debates ever since it was published, but the responses<sup>6</sup> from nearly all noted intellectual leaders, scholars and activists also made up Taiwan's own 'sex debates' (ibid.: 127). As criticism

<sup>6</sup>The responses and discussions in those debates from the end of 1994 to the summer of 1995 were collected in Ho's next book in 1997, entitled *Contestations*



of the book and oppositional stances emerged, the sex emancipation discourses developed separately in the form of study groups, underground organisations, college student groups, and so on (ibid.: 128). In May 1995 National Taiwan University (NTU) female students club (台大女研社) organised a viewing of adult films in their on-campus accommodation ‘for the purpose of exploring their own sexuality’, also known as ‘the pornographic film exhibition event’; it was, in Ho’s words, ‘a brave and ground-breaking feminist move in every respect’ (ibid.: 130). However, as the news spread, the organisers faced massive pressures and ended up holding a press conference involving mainstream feminist professors. Mainstream feminists publicly announced that ‘female sexual autonomy, a feminist-advocated sacred value, did not equal sex emancipation’ (ibid.); thus, the sex emancipation cause (or any sex radical stance) was excluded from the feminist agenda. Together with the setting up of the Centre for the Study of Sexualities at National Central University (NCU) by feminist sex emancipation academics in October the same year, the announcement was commonly marked as the very beginning of the ‘feminist schism’ in Taiwan. Furthermore, when the Taipei City mayor outlawed licensed sex workers in 1997, the pro and con stances around the rights of sex workers polarised feminist opinion and movements. Some of the women’s movement leaders ‘condemned the mayor’s decision and asserted the rights of sex workers’, while ‘some claimed the abolition of licensed sex workers was to “put them on the right track”’ (Fan 2000: 166–167). At the time, feminist sex radicals rose to the occasion and a protest march for the rights and legitimacy of sex work was staged in August 1997 by the former licensed prostitutes, whose disclosure to the public had shocked Taiwanese society.

The abolition of licensed prostitution provoked continuous debates and consequences; among them, the most influential issue was that staff members at Awakening were fired because of their open support for sex workers. In contrast to the feminist sex radicals’ active involvement in the prostitution issue, mainstream feminist groups ‘issued a gap order to their staff with regard to the issue so as NOT to contradict government policy to eradicate prostitution’ (Ho 2007: 130). Mainstreamer Lin Fang-Mei (林芳玫) argued that ‘the sexual liberation camp’s politics of

*over Female Sexuality: Dissenting Essays on “The Gallant Women”* (呼喚台灣新女性: 豪爽女人誰不爽?).

sexuality and desire has closely stuck to/glued itself to the gender politics women's movement organization, seeing in the latter a host-body' (1998: 58, as cited in Ho 2007: 130). Ho (2007: 130) comments that '[Lin] thus calls for the sex emancipation feminists, feminists who had been instrumental in the development of Taiwan's feminist movement from the start, to "leave" the feminist camp and organize "their own" movement.'

Nevertheless, the 'family catastrophe' of Awakening indirectly helped to materialise emerging activisms and organisations for sex rights. Some of the 'leaving home' staff of Awakening moved on to more focused work with gender and sexual minority rights issues and organised GSRAT (Gender/Sexuality Rights Association Taiwan, 台灣性別人權協會) in May 1999, which became one of the most active and staunch advocates of sex rights. It is clear when looking at the GSRAT website that they aimed to work on sex and LGBT issues, which had been neglected by the mainstreamers; that is, 'to collectively struggle against dominant culture's ignorance of and refusal to see the gender and sexual rights of gender rebels and sexual dissidents'. Also, the support group for prostitutes' rights, COSWAS (Collective of Sex Workers and Supporters, 日日春關懷互助協會), was founded in May 1999, based on the State-regulated Sex Workers Self-help Group (公娼自救會) during the protest period. As COSWAS found its own discourses on 'sex rights are human rights', it also searched for any opportunities to negotiate with opposition, mainstream women's groups, and set up a platform for public discussion on prostitution rights.

An urgent need for lesbian and gay movements also emerged during the early 1990s, which happened to be the most exciting period for social movements in Taiwan; for example, the Indigenous People's movement, the university students' movement, the feminist movement and the environmental movement quickly began to flourish before and/or after 1987 with the lifting of martial law. During the early 1990s, to resist oppression, homosexual movements gradually developed, with lesbian and gay organisations and on-campus student clubs appearing. The first nationwide lesbian organisation, 'women jhih jian' (我們之間, 'Between Us'), was founded in February 1990 under the aegis of the influential women's organisation Awakening (Chao 2000: 384), and is still the oldest 'homosexual' organisation in Taiwan. On the university campus, the first students' association for gay men was approved by National Taiwan University (NTU) in March 1993; it was

named 'NTU gay *problem* studies club' (台大男同性戀問題研究社) where the word 'problem' was added by the university for 'research'. It was later renamed the 'NTU gay studies club' (台大男同性戀研究社) but is best known as 'Gay Chat'. Alongside Gay Chat, two years later (February 1995) the first on-campus lesbian club was organised as 'NTU lesbian *culture* studies club' (台大女同性戀文化研究社, also known as 'Lambda').

Academic Liou (2005: 128) argued that the 'lesbian and queer movements started out as branches within the feminist movement when the activists, unable to fully come out, joined the women's movement to secretly promote gay-positive consciousness, and they indeed succeeded in obtaining support from within the movement in the earlier stage'. However, signs of a split in their intimate connection appeared with the failure to put gay marriage on the feminist agenda for the reform of marriage law in 1995. 'While some mainstream feminists lobbied for an amendment to the Constitution that includes same-sex behaviour as one condition for petitioning for divorce, some lesbian/queer feminists criticized the amendment for not including the legalization of gay marriage' (ibid.: 134). However, the tension between lesbian/queer feminists and mainstream feminists probably appeared earlier than this. Insider Ni Jia-Zhen (倪家珍) critically argues that as a women's movement activist she has been experiencing the limitations of the women's movement around the undeniable difference and diversity of women and the alliance/critical relationship between the women's movement and other movements during her active involvement in the lesbian and gay movement since 1994 (Ni 1997: 126).

Moreover, an aggravation of the conflict between lesbian/gay/queer movements and mainstream feminists flared up around the serious protests against the New Park redevelopment as the 28<sup>th</sup> February Memorial Park of Taipei City Government in 1996. The first lesbian and gay alliance, 'Tong-zhi kong chian hsing tong chan hsien' (Tong-zhi Space Action Front, 同志空間行動陣線) was formed to protect the collective history of the homosexual in New Park. But, what is the importance for homosexuals of a park? In Pai Hsien-Yung's (白先勇) famous novel '*Nieh Tse*' (Crystal Boy, 孽子), which was published in 1983, the flourishing era of gay subculture in New Park was vividly portrayed. Although the author Pai was not a gay-rights activist himself, the novel '*Nieh Tse*' can be seen as pioneering gay/queer movements in Taiwan in that it presented a local homosexual subculture at a time when the Ideological State Apparatuses denied the existence of

homosexuality in the society' (Liou 2003: 195, 192–193, as cited in Liou 2005: 127). As the most significant setting in the novel, New Park has long served as a social hub for gay men. In Lai Zheng-Xhe's (賴正哲) survey, 'through oral histories, male homosexual social and sexual activity in and around New Park has been dated back as far as the period around the end of Japanese colonisation in the mid-1940s' (Lai 1997: 77, as cited in Martin 2003: 51). However, the decision was not overturned because, as discussed above, 'mainstream feminists' anti-prostitution stance made them oppose the instances of prostitution accompanied by the gay/queer cruising in and around the park' (Liou 2005: 135). Moreover, 'when the activists sought to come out and raise gay-rights issues within the feminist movement, mainstream feminists, who feared that they might dominate the direction of the movement, snubbed them' (ibid.: 134–135).

As a consequence, New Park underwent its 'renewal' construction during the mid-1990s. This was my secondary school period and New Park was nearby. The park displayed its fuzzy boundary between vestiges of gay gatherings and its heteronormative 'refreshing'. Even though there were only a few homosexual occupants, we were given a serious warning not to cross through New Park at night as it was still 'a landscape of fear' (Wang 1996, as cited in Martin 2003). Although the protests seemed to be unsuccessful, the forming of 'Tong-zhi Space Action Front' and their public actions later indirectly facilitated the '2000 Tong-zhi civil rights Citizens Movement—Taipei LGBT Fun Festival (2000同志公民運動—台北同玩節)' which was the first LGBT movement to be sponsored by the Taipei City government. The awakening of LGBT rights proliferated and, three years later (2003), the first Gay Pride in Taipei was staged, with about 2,000 participants.

## SINGLE WOMEN AND LESBIANS IN TAIWANESE FAMILIES: THE PRESENT

### *Me the Daughter*

Although Western feminist theories and the various stances of the local movement might not have influenced every Taiwanese person, it seems that gender equality has attracted significant attention in Taiwan since the 1970s. Some of my generation (the 1980s birth cohort) first encountered feminist ideas and started thinking about women's issues during our

secondary school days. The very first enlightenment about gender and sexual minority issues, especially lesbian identity, attracted me and my classmates while we were at our girls' secondary school. Around that time, in 1996, Du Siou-Lan (杜修蘭) published her first lesbian novel *Ni Nny* (逆女, *Rebel Daughter*). It immediately became one of the most popular novels in my class. Among the lively romantic relationships between my classmates, lesbian sexuality seemed like something to be taken for granted; but while talking and gossiping about it we felt unsure about what it really was. Six years later, *Ni Nny* was filmed and became the first television serial to take lesbianism as its subject and certainly the first one to set up the lead character as a lesbian.

'Tong-xing-lian' (同性戀, literally meaning same-sex love/desire/attraction) was the first term I learnt for homosexual people in Taiwan, later I learnt the English word 'lesbian', referring to women who have erotic love with women, as people used to use its transliteration 'lei-su-bien' (蕾絲邊, literally meaning a fringe of lace). Since 1992, 'tong-zhi' (同志) has gradually replaced 'lesbian and gay' as a term denoting homosexuals. It was at this time that Hong Kong-based film critic Lin Yi-Hua (林奕華, also known as Edward Lam) first used *tong-chi* [tong-zhi] in Taiwan in 1992 to translate 'queer' in the 'Queer Cinema' section of the annual Golden Horse International Film Festival held in Taipei. However, tong-zhi is not an equivalent of 'lesbian and gay'; it originally meant 'comrade' during the Chinese revolution. Lin playfully borrowed Dr. Sun Yat-Sen's last words: 'The revolution has not yet succeeded; the comrades must keep on struggling'<sup>7</sup> for contemporary queer activism. Liou (2005: 137) comments that his appropriation of this political identity is 'a call for solidarity in the emerging gay/lesbian/queer movements.'

It is said that to use 'tong-zhi' is less discriminatory than 'tong-xing-lian'. Similarly, the term, 'nyu-tong-zhi' (女同志, female tong-zhi) is more neutral and less pathologising for lesbians who would choose 'nyu-tong-zhi', instead of '(nyu-)tong-xing-lian', to come out. Martin (2003: 23) argued that 'Previously, although same-sex sexual subculture had existed, there had been no generic term like *tongzhi* which at once positively

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Sun Yat-sen was the leader of China's republican revolution and is referred to as the National Father of the Republic of China. The original in Mandarin Chinese is 「革命尚未成功,同志仍須努力」

politicizes sexual identification and notionally includes both men and women' (emphasis in the original).

After the late lesbian writer Chiu Miao-chin (邱妙津) published her semi-autobiography *Eu Yu Shou Chi* (鱷魚手記, Notes of The Crocodile), in which the protagonist has the nickname la-zi (拉子), la-zi became the most popular nickname for lesbians because the novel was so well received in lesbian subculture. Liou (2005: 132) argued that la-zi 'may be an abbreviation of a phonetic transliteration of "lesbian"', however, it is indeed a neologism in Chinese and it 'develops lesbian subjectivity within lesbian and gay discourses' (Chen 2005: 13). Among my friendship network, 'la' (拉), which I believe is an abbreviation of la-zi, is more familiar to us. As Chen (2005: 13–14, emphasis in the original) found in her study when interviewing:

[Do you name yourself as nyu tongzhi?] Rarely, I usually name myself *la*.  
[Why?] Because nyu tongzhi is too explicit, some people might feel antipathy. It is better to use *la*.

Chen (ibid.) pointed out that, as the 'tong' in tong-zhi in Chinese means sameness, la-zi 'seems to depoliticize the meaning of lesbian', while either nyu-tong-zhi or nyu-tong-xing-lian both imply homology with homosexuality. Indeed, as Liou (2005: 138, emphasis in the original) argues, 'such a relish in verbal pleasure is a strategic avoidance at the earlier stage of confrontation with social oppression and a tactic of buying time; without knowing what *ku-er* or *tong-chi* or "queer" means exactly, the public might be induced to use them and benefiting [sic] the movements.' Furthermore, it is precisely because la-zi/la does not semantically refer to a homosexual in Chinese, that by using them to refer to the self or others the speaker shows belongingness and intimacy in the dialogue. La-zi/la then became a politicised, in-circle code within the lesbian community.

Queer theory and politics were introduced in Taiwan at about the same time as lesbian and gay theory. However, the subversive translation of 'queer' makes the 'queer' movement different from the one in the west. In 1994, Chi Ta-Wei (紀大偉) and Hung Ling (洪凌) first used 'ku-er' (酷兒) as a phonetic transliteration of queer in the local journal '*Dao Yu Bian Yuan*' (島嶼邊緣, The Isle Margin); as 'ku-er' is a 'newly coined word carrying the connotation of "cool" and "stylish"' (Chi 1997b: 10, as cited in Liou 2005: 136), it carries a different

meaning from ‘queer’ in the context of English-speaking society. Thus, the new implication of queer as ‘ku-er’ serves both ‘as a code word to avoid censorship and an empowering self-renaming’ (Liou 2005: 136). Some ‘ku-er’ authors, like Chi, Hung and Chen Hsueh (陳雪), purposely used the subversive implications of ‘ku-er’ to demonstrate their favour for the deconstruction of categories of gendered and sexual identity (Martin 2003: 23). Also, a new term ‘guai-tai’ (怪胎, freak) is used with self-conscious pride of being queer where queer politics is involved, while tong-zhi is associated with the promulgation of gay-positive images.

### *We, Taiwanese Daughters in the Family*

Changes in attitudes towards marriage among Taiwanese women of the 1980s birth cohort have shown in their decisions about age at first marriage and flexibility in lifestyle choices. At the end of 2008, 68.48% of Taiwanese women aged 25–29 remained single, compared to the previous generation, of whom only 18.25% were single in 1978 (DHRA 2009b). The average age of first marriage for females has been delayed from 23.7 (1978) to 28.4 (2008) (DHRA 2009a). The single population, being an ‘unconventional’ choice, has always attracted much attention. However, another growing number has appeared in the rising proportion of never-married women over 35. Among those aged 35–44 the proportion increased to 16.73% in 2009, significantly higher than the figure in 1979 (3.0%) (DHRA 2009b). That is to say, for various reasons, remaining single has become a possible lifestyle choice for women. This gradual change may not only be a continuation of the shift towards delaying marriage, but may also represent the beginning of a trend towards lifelong singleness. With changing marriage values, a growing rate of labour force participation, and increasing economic independence, it seems that we have more space for not entering (heterosexual) marriage and are taking advantage of this. As one of these single women in her thirties, I wonder. As we seek sexual autonomy, do the social changes lead to a wider variability for single/lesbian daughters to negotiate within their patriarchal family? How do we deal with the fuzzy boundary of ‘traditional’ in ‘modern’ society? Although the social context may have made it easier for lesbians to exist as single women, similarities between lesbians and (heterosexual) single women render them invisible. Even though the sexuality-related movement and discourses have vibrantly developed over the past two decades, lesbians face more barriers than (heterosexual) single women.

Emerging lesbian discourses and first-hand narrative studies have gained popularity on university campuses. Many relevant MA dissertations are quite influential. For example, the book *Nu Er Quan* (女兒圈, *The Circle of Daughters* 1997) is a rewrite of Cheng Mei-Li's (鄭美里) MA dissertation, written for National Tsing Hua University in 1995. Her dissertation might be the first anthropological field study on Taiwanese lesbian groups, which provides me with a starting point to think forward.

In the context of the patriarchal family, a lesbian who has never entered into a heterosexual marriage would be seen and treated as a single daughter in her family of origin, regardless of her sexuality and her intimate relationships. Relationships outside heterosexual marriage would not be recognised. This ambiguity between lesbians and single women has created a niche for lesbians who are not yet ready to disclose. However, this may not necessarily be a good strategy in practice (cf. Kamano and Khor 2008) because it keeps lesbians invisible and will not help to make their family lives easier.

Patriarchalism influences the actions of each Taiwanese family member. Individuals in the family do not passively accept it and they also search for strategies to deal with it. Through possible changes in the attitudes of individuals, the conflicting relationships within the patriarchal family may achieve a new balance. The patriarchal mechanism is not a monolithic entity and should not be analysed from a stable, one-dimensional perspective; it can be changed by the people within it in terms of the individual's cultural and economic resources. Based on these resources, an individual may have the chance to transform the power relationships within the patriarchal system (Lin 2005, 2007). In other words, a negotiating interactive relationship within the patriarchal family is possible; thus, the practices of the patriarchal family may be challenged and changed. This may also make the niche more possible. Taking financial independence as an example, a working daughter whose family relies on her income may have more freedom to negotiate. There are varieties of conditions that may affect the negotiations and reverse the oppressed position of daughters, depending upon the resources they have. The patriarchal bond is, thus, in principle negotiable for single daughters, and lesbians too.

Gender and sexuality are socially constructed and cannot be understood outside the social context in which they exist. However, sexuality and gender are rather different and there are differences in the ways in which they are socially constituted. While gender is a social division and a cultural distinction between female and male, I draw on Jackson's (2006: 106)



definition, 'sexuality refers to all erotically significant aspects of social life and social being', such as desires, practices, relationships and identities. Gender defines the social categories women and men and locates them differentially in virtually all spheres of life, including the sexual (*ibid.*: 107); gender also defines those who are lesbian or gay as these are the unions of 'same' sexes.

T/Po roles, in the context of lao-T or the questioning of the T-Po binary in the early 1990s, were no doubt gendered social phenomenon. As I was reviewing the debates on T/Po role-playing in Taiwan, I noted that the T/Po binary is seen as the reason why lesbian relationships cannot attain an ideal of equality. With Rich's (1980) concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality' in mind, heterosexuality is related to the perpetuation of gendered divisions of labour; gender inequality between men and women is not supposed to happen between same-sex partners. The concept and the practices of T/Po, which assume the binary divide and inequality between lesbians, inevitably trouble those who advocate egalitarianism in same-sex couples. To claim a gender-free nature between lesbians, however, is problematic. A lesbian woman is still under the influence of heterosexual matters. These challenges to T/Po role-playing ignore the fact that '[b]ecoming lesbian and gay does not entail a loss of gender since homosexuality, as much as heterosexuality, is defined by gender. Yet it does require negotiating different ways of investing gender with erotic significance and different forms of gendered self-understanding' (Jackson 2006: 116).

While the terms T and Po have already had a short history both in academic and lesbian communities in Taiwan, my definitions of T/Po roles, role-playing and patterns are rather broad, they are based on my understanding of Taiwanese lesbianism and my conceptions of gender and sexuality. The roles T and Po and the sexual and non-sexual relations of the roles are socially defined and are contextually and historically variable. In using T and Po to refer to different gendered characters of lesbian women as the way they are, my perspective on them presents 'gender in gender'. In addition, the burden of heteronormativity behind the gendered terms T/Po, which is developed in a different setting from those of butch/femme, requires analysis and empirical exploration. The 'gender in gender' perspective of T/Po, however, is not reducible to the male/female distinction and division between lesbian women. T/Po is gendered; yet it is ordered not only by gender, but by other social relations and identities. The concept of T/Po role-playing and patterns will be

elaborated in relation to many other sexual and non-sexual social aspects in the analysis chapters, in which I will explore the connections and interactions between T/Po and lesbian identities, group norms, relationships and family practices.

### *T/Po Representation and Culture in Taiwan*

Independence may be a crucial resource for younger lesbians. Today they may develop their independence and change their relations with their families. However, negotiation was not as possible as for older generations of lesbians in the patriarchal family during the last few decades. To claim independence might carry different meanings for older lesbians in the context of the Taiwan of the late 1960s. Looking at older lesbians' struggles, Chao Yen-Ning (趙彥寧, also known as Antonio Chao) directed her attention to their difficulties of living a lesbian lifestyle in that society.

Originally stemming from the abbreviation of tomboy, the term 'T'<sup>8</sup> refers to lesbians who take on a masculine sexual role in a Taiwanese context. The counterpart of 'T' is the feminine role 'Po', which literally means T's wife. According to Chao's (2001: 185) fieldwork findings, the distinction and representation of T and Po 'did not come fully into formation until the first T-bar was opened in 1985—that is, at a time when Martial Law was soon to be abrogated along with the lifting of police force's regulation of unconventional social space.' However, the terms T and Po were created earlier, in late-1960s Taipei. Those who came out as tomboys and started to participate in the newly emerging gay subculture of that time are the so-called 'lao-T' (老T, old tomboys). Chao's (2000, 2001, 2002, 2005) lao interviewees were born between the 1940s and 1961. Chao examined the material difficulties of lao-T's housing issues in the Taiwanese social welfare system.

'Jia' (家) is a very complicated idea in Chinese culture; it has a broader meaning than a home, a family or a household and sometimes it combines all three dimensions. Thus, 'ban jia' (搬家, moving) is not only to move house. The concept of lao-T 'ban jia' is complicated between the three

<sup>8</sup>T is a noun and can be used in both the singular and plural. There are no variations between singular and plural in Mandarin Chinese. I use T for both forms, instead of a T or Ts.

notions of 'jia'. Chao (2002: 375) explains the principle functions of 'ban jia' action in Taiwanese society, which she calls the relational-materialistic aspect:

The semantic domain of the term 'ban jia' in Taiwan is much broader than that of its English counterpart 'moving' or 'moving house'. The first part of the term, 'ban', literally means 'move', and its second part, 'jia', refers at the same time to 'home', 'family', 'house' and 'household'. It then follows that the act of 'ban jia' is not simply about changing one's living location, but also implicates a reconstruction of one's 'home' which, . . . is defined in closely patrilineal terms. The word 'jia' thus entails a specific form of material base on which a legitimate patrilineal household can be founded. A house symbolizes and at the same time is commonly considered to provide a concrete form for social security, and a tender and productive family life, as well as forever love—all in heterosexual terms.

Because of their gender/sexual identity and lifestyle choices, most lao-T experienced the breakdown of their relationships with their families of origin in their early years. They kept quite a distance from the orthodox definition of home and family; as a result, the natal family system did not support them nor ensure their protected position within Taiwanese heterosexual ideology. For Taiwanese heterosexual couples, owning a house provides a productive security in marriage; as a result, it becomes symbolic of maintaining a long-term and stable family life. Chao (2005: 69) mentions a common social practice in Taiwan whereby, whether the couple lives in an urban or a rural area, parents, presumably both the husband's and wife's but mostly the former, are in charge of the accommodation after the wedding and contribute significant financial support. Thus, possessing a house is culturally and logically relevant to heterosexual kinship, as well as the marriage system. Until now, not only for lao-T, but for young T as well, the tricky dilemma is that they are neither a daughter of the family who will be taken by a husband, nor a son who is going to take a wife. By traditional marriage rules, the family of the bride will prepare a trousseau, in some cases including a house if she is lucky; and the groom's family usually contributes a house or a new room in the family house.

As a result of newlywed house purchasing trends, banks provide substantially lower interest rates for would-be or newlywed couples to take out bank loans. Lao-T, as single women without parents or spouse

as a guarantor of material or financial security, are always less-favoured or rejected by heterosexual society; Chao (2005: 71) terms this a 'kinship joint guarantee mechanism'. The most radical case is that one of her informants was denied permission by the City Government of Taipei to apply for a low-interest house purchasing loan because her 80-something mother owned quite a few pieces of immovable property. What makes this event ironic is that her parents had disowned her 30 years before and she had stopped visiting them ever since. As Chao (2002: 376) argued, 'Without a meaningful biological family (*jia*) to begin with, they are further deprived of the access to constructing a *de facto* home of their own' (emphasis in the original). 'Ban *jia*' as a result can be very unpleasant and possibly distressing 'for moving house literally means *losing* her home/family/household *once again*' (ibid., emphasis in the original).

Since the household plays a crucial function of material assurance, maintaining a long-term relationship is more difficult for lao-T. Chao (2005: 71) argued that, stuck in a vicious circle, lao-T are unable to stably maintain their intimate relationships and, meanwhile, their sense of homelessness deepens. On the other hand, Po's ambiguous identity might also contribute to Lao-T's uncertainty in intimacy. They are seen as hesitating between the 'normality' of the heterosexual lifestyle and 'the circle' constituted by the T-Po lesbian community, and are therefore often destined to be betrayers and heart-breakers (Chao 2000: 381). Most women who have dated lao-T will marry men in the end. Thus, lao-T regard Po as outsiders, not 'within-the-circle', and consider T-Po relationships to be uncertain. What makes them 'within-the-circle' or not is all about lesbian identity. For lao-T of that generation, being a 'T' is 'associated with a "fixed" sexual identity'; nearly all of them claimed that being a 'T' is 'natural' (Chao 2005: 54–55). On the contrary, a 'Po' is an attached counterpart of a 'T', they do not necessarily take on a lesbian identity even if they have indeed lived a same-sex lifestyle for a long time. For example, Mei ying, an informant of Chao's (2002: 369), says 'I could have settled down with a man, don't you see?'

However, not every woman who dated lao-T was floating between men and women. An unstable relationship between lao-T and Po might also have been due to lao-T's unrestrained and unfaithful behaviour. Hsiu hsiu, another Po interviewee of Chao's (2005: 55), claimed to have suffered from this when she was young.

Those T were all the same, frivolous and loose, they would never settle down. You cannot get along with them unless you can bear this. I have to say that a T breaks women's heart [sic] more than a man does.

It is worth noticing that in these lao-T's 'love and hate' stories, the women who dated them were not fairly considered. Their naming as Po at the very beginning implied their subordination as the counterpart of T (Chao 2000). Their sexual identity was uncertain and, accordingly, their floating intimacy was stigmatised. Nonetheless, this is not a generation-specific phenomenon. Although the binarism of T and Po is not a universal phenomenon in Taiwan, it is still commonly considered easier to cope with the lesbian identity of Po in heterosexual society because of their feminine appearance. It is possible that Po are induced and lured to be lesbians and, thus, it is easier to 'change back to normal'. Today, the binary of T/Po sexual roles in the lesbian community has been widely debated and even provoked conflicts among different groups since the 1990s. Some lesbians refuse to identify as either T or Po; new categories of identity have developed, of which 'bu-fen' (不分, in between) is the most popular. This new wave in creating lesbianism shapes how lesbians identify themselves and interact with people in the community. For example, Po lesbians seem to have become empowered and have developed an independent identity; they are no longer attached to the T identity. On the other hand, the T identity is examined as well as the T/Po binary.

In contrast with lao-T, lesbians in the younger generation had more opportunities to engage with the LGBT rights movements from the early 1990s. They became visible and presented a different image from that of lao-T. In 1990, the first, and so far the only, nationwide lesbian organisation, 'Between Us', hosted reading groups and introduced theories from exclusively lesbian feminist texts written in North America. Members are mostly intellectuals, college and graduate students in Taipei City. In mid-1994, its bimonthly newsletter, *Girl Friends*, first appeared. *Girl Friends* disputes, or at least calls into question, the T-Po binary, instead advocating 'egalitarian' lesbian relationships (Chao 2000: 384).

Feminist lesbians in academia went on to elaborate this argument. For those who have been engaged in the Gay Rights Movement since the early 1990s, breast-binding is something unheard-of and happened only among those T-bar folks before the 1990s. They ignore the lao-T culture that Chao revealed and also emphasise the non-T-Po division in their community (Chao 2000: 385). A key informant of Jian Jia-Shin's (簡家欣) claims

that ‘They [lao-T] have never participated in the new lesbian community... While we are all lesbians; the sub-culture they represent is very different from ours’ (Jian 1996: 141, as cited in Chao 2000: 385).

Although the new community advocates their ‘new’ feminist lesbianism, ironically they began to imagine the multiple orientations of lesbian sexual roles only on the basis of the T-Po binary. Sexual roles have evolved more like a spectrum than a binary opposition. However, Zheng (1997, as cited in Chao 2000: 386), also a founder of ‘Between Us’, along with other members, argued that ‘the sexual performance of T’s involves an uncritical imitation of masculinity and a masculinity that is necessarily heterosexual’. In their attempts to deal with homophobia and to be adopted into the global community of ‘comrades’, feminist lesbians reproduce bourgeois ideology in distinguishing themselves from those who are ‘uncivilized’ and thus ‘not truly enlightened’, instead of from homophobic (bourgeois) society at large. Thus, T-bar community members have been subordinated in post-Martial-Law Taiwan. Chao (2000: 388) describes this process of producing a ‘global’ identity as a form of ‘domestic colonialism’, and concludes ‘this then is the process of domestic colonization that allows a country to imagine itself to be a truly modern state by eliminating subaltern groups including sex workers and working-class Ts.’

However, Liou (2005) took a different view, which might support my argument that Po lack their own identity. Although there are indeed class differences between T-bar and university feminist lesbian subcultures, as Chao argued, Liou (2005: 140, emphasis as original) pointed out that ‘she also deliberately ignores the issue of sexism involved in the *T-P*<sup>9</sup> relationship in *T-bars* by displacing it onto the issue of social class’. She also disagreed with Chao’s neglect of ‘the need of other lesbians—whether or not on the university campus—to create a non-commercial and more diversified subculture of their own’ (ibid.). Consequently, Liou seems to agree more with Zheng<sup>10</sup> about her idea of designating *nyu-tong-zhi* ‘as a term encompassing T-Po, bu-fen and “lesbian” to suggest the diversity of lifestyles among the lesbian communities’ (1997: 107, as cited in Liou 2005: 141).

Debates on lesbian identity and political issues often focus too much on the opposition between the T-bar community and university lesbians.

<sup>9</sup> Meaning the same as Po in this thesis.

<sup>10</sup> Romanised as Cheng in Liou’s article.

However, it is noteworthy that there is not a clear division between T-bar and university lesbian subculture since T-bars have a new look nowadays and diverse practices of lesbianism are also emerging in the university. Also, university lesbians and elite lesbians in academia are not necessarily engaged in the feminist movement or tong-zhi activism, and on the other hand, some lesbians in T-bar communities or in non-academia might show great interest in activism. This being the case, I agree with Liou's criticism of Chao about the need for 'other' lesbians to have their own diversified subculture.

### *Me in the Mirror: Rethinking My Mother and Me*

People always say: like mother like daughter. I found an old picture of my mother taken on her graduation day in her early twenties. Looking into the mirror, I realised how much we look alike. However, are we really alike? During my teens, the way I found to rebel was not to be the same as my parents. I doubted the norms that they had been following. I refused to do what they expected me to do. Differences could be made by choices; I believed so when I was young. However, my lesbianism is not made by this.

The first time I discussed homosexuality with my mother, I was still in secondary school. A close friend of mine who studied at the boys' secondary school near my girls' school was an open gay. When I mentioned him to my mother, she did not show any panic or antipathy as most parents did, and she said he must have had same-sex sexual experiences. Queries occurred to me but I was, and am, not able to talk with her on this subject or about my own lesbianism.<sup>11</sup>

My mother, her mother and A-Ma are just ordinary but real women in my life. I may not understand women in Taiwan as a whole through their stories, but as long as I can locate myself within the storyline of the women in my family, I can understand my standpoint. Based on my narratives of my own past, intertwined with theirs, I have constructed and reconstructed my family

<sup>11</sup> I came out to my mother while I was writing my PhD thesis. We talked during a quiet night. There was no drama; surprisingly she remembered each girl that I had dated. She claimed that she knew it a long time ago but hadn't mentioned it because she did not wish to hurt my feelings. Her acceptance has opened up our conversations about lesbianism and lifestyle choices. In this chapter, I retain my original account, which was completed before my disclosure.

memories. Jackson (1998: 47) reminds us, 'Feminists have seen the need to locate ourselves in relation to our work, to make it clear where we are speaking from.' I believe that, as a feminist researcher, if I draw on my family's experiences, I am able to listen to other women's stories. Storytelling is not simply telling a story; this is how I link myself to my study.

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## Western Theories on Same-Sex Intimacies

The old-fashioned question ‘What is the family?’ has a range of answers in the contemporary world depending upon the person who is speaking. Although the word ‘family’ is still powerful and pervasive, an emphasis on the creativity of its definition has been deployed to denote changing relationship patterns. The old-fashioned answer to this question is very predictable, for ‘the family’ is no doubt based on blood and marriage. Albeit marriage involves individual choices in some way, the marriage institution is, in fact, still limited to heterosexual couples in most parts of the world. Alongside the debates on changing relationship patterns, the emerging ‘new stories’ (Weeks et al. 2001: 12) of non-heterosexual lifestyles, which object to the exclusiveness of the conventional meaning of the family, are reshaping intimate relationships.

Studies of non-heterosexual relationships emerged from the late 1970s and have recently expanded to look at those unexplored experiences that might have been unthinkable to older generations. The fact that contemporary heterosexual and same-sex relationships are now equal in the eyes of the law in some Western countries has attracted research interest into the changes in formalised relationships provided by legislative changes. These new narratives are emerging, for example, around experiences of lesbian parenthood, reproductive technologies and same-sex marriage for younger couples (e.g. Nordqvist 2011; Heaphy et al. 2013). These issues, however, are less relevant to Taiwanese lesbians’ current situation, given that this book focuses on Taiwanese lesbians’ perceptions of ‘families’,

experiences of making their own ones and the way they make sense of their unconventional lives without legal recognition. By focusing on primarily 1990s Western literature, however, I review research in the field of same-sex intimacies and debates on egalitarian lesbian relationships where they are relevant to the social circumstances of my research field. This review begins with Weston's (1997) pioneering study of 'families we choose' in the Bay area of the United States, and goes on to explore how the notion of 'the family' has been reshaped. I then examine the debates on the egalitarian ideal and the dominant conception of 'no preordained script' in lesbian couples.

## SAME-SEX INTIMACIES

### *Negotiating Relationships with Families of Origin*

In a previous discussion regarding the disclosure of sexuality in the context of Taiwanese society, Chen (2005: 34) points out that 'in eastern culture, homosexual identity and coming out are not political or social affairs and silence has always been the characteristic of Chinese culture'. In contrast, Weston (1997) argues that coming out is crucial to self-acceptance and is also a test of the unconditional love and enduring solidarity of the family. Disclosing a lesbian or gay identity to parents or siblings represented bringing sexual identity into the cultural domain of 'the family' and frequently involved an anxiety-filled struggle (Weston 1997: 43). When someone reveals the 'truth', not only about the self but also about their kinship relations, acceptance by the family affirms love and kinship, while rejection 'could entail severance of family ties previously held to be inalienable' (ibid.: 44). Bearing such a risk in mind, I shall ask: why not keep the secret in the closet? In fact, it may be seen as a necessary risk for many people. Coming out 'is structured in terms of a conceptual opposition between hiding (or lying) and honesty', and relates to the coherence of the inner self and the outer social landscape as 'self-acceptance could facilitate unification of the inner self, but without disclosure to others this self would remain trapped in the private, interior space known as the closet' (ibid.: 49–50). As a man remembering his years in the military in Weston's (1997: 50) study said: 'I felt like I wasn't one whole person, trying to please two separate groups (those who knew and those who did not).' Coming out offers a person a chance to create 'a sense of wholeness' by 'establishing congruence between interior experience and external

presentation, moving the inner into the outer, bringing the hidden to light and transforming a private into a social reality' (ibid.). Disclosure then turns out to be not simply a matter of producing truths about the self through confession, but of establishing that self's lesbian or gay identity as a '*social* "fact"' (ibid.: 66, emphasis in the original).

However, bringing speech about homosexuality into the realm of family may situate a lesbian or gay in a vulnerable position. Due to the possibility of rejection and the fear of being disowned and losing their family after coming out, many people tried to be well-prepared before acting, for example, by establishing financial independence, a separate residence and emotional strength (ibid.: 62). As Weston's participant Brian, who had decided to tell his parents only after living away from them for two years, puts it, 'because even if they do react negatively, I don't need them. I'm sufficient on my own. I guess I was afraid that they gonna cut me off or something. So I wasn't gonna tell them until I was absolutely sure that I could take care of myself' (ibid.). Similarly, in Chen's (2005) study, Taiwanese lesbians seek to detach themselves from the family's financial support, move out and claim that they will never marry as these actions imply taking control of their own lives and developing distance from their family. Even so, Chen's (2005: 42–43) participants tended to deny that their sexualities affected them in making their life plans. Another crucial element of 'getting ready' to come out is mental strength; sometimes this implies adulthood or self-acceptance of one's own sexual identity.

When a lesbian or gay man was young or dependent or unsure of their sexuality, the anxiety about discovery and the emotional threat of losing love influenced people's considerations, since the result of disclosure is unpredictable. Weston (1997: 66) argues that, by the 1980s, satisfaction with a lesbian or gay identity and the lack of any desire to change had become idealised prerequisites for coming out to others. These criteria ensured that people were strong-minded enough, as in Weston's quotation: 'I have to feel okay about myself when I tell them, so they have no choice but feel okay about me.' Furthermore, people applied the criterion of self-acceptance to distinguish between confessional and other modes of 'truth telling' (ibid.). However, some people are sceptical about the permanence of blood ties and seem to have a relatively casual attitude towards any possible results of coming out to family. As Weston's (1997: 52) interviewee Philip, whose attitude surprisingly is shared by many gay men and lesbians in San Francisco, says:

If you can't be honest with somebody, then what kind of relationship are you really salvaging? What are you giving up if they react badly and they're gone? What have you really lost? Now families, I know, are different—for some people, not for me.

However, individuals are situated in different family relationships and cultures. Deciding not to disclose does not necessarily imply dishonesty to the family or self-denial. But I am not arguing in support of a myth that family is forever or justifying hiding sexualities. Weston was told some 'great' coming out stories in her field and found that these stories revolve around traumatic incidents. For example:

the protagonist was institutionalised, threatened with electroshock therapy, kicked out of the house, reduced to living on the street, denied an inheritance, written out of a will, battered, damned as a sinner, barred from contact with younger relatives, shunned by family members, or insulted in ways that encouraged him or her to leave. (ibid.: 61)

The truth is that these horrible experiences are not uncommon. Sometimes, coming out is not only a conceptual opposition between lying and honesty but also a matter of life and death.

Undoubtedly, a self-defined lesbian or gay man preparing to come out seeks acceptance and the reconfirmed love of their family. Weston (1997: 69) argues that coming out to blood family, for those who had not previously been married, 'doubled as a declaration of independence and adulthood', which also shows the correlation between claiming an autonomously defined sexual identity and seeking recognition as an adult. Another story about a woman who came out to her mother in a bar after buying drinks to celebrate her twenty-first birthday is the best example (ibid.). Chen (2005: 44) argues that 'in general, approval from families or others might not be necessary, but being a lesbian, other's approval and support are important, because it is on the basis of social discourse that we construct our identity and find our sense of self'. Support and acceptance are often more important in the family than in wider society. Most of Chen's participants put their parents' approval of their lesbian sexual identity as the priority; as one says, 'It's *enough* for me if I can get my close friends and parents' support, because then I don't have to worry what I have to do if my [lesbian] identity is disclosed' (ibid.: 45, my emphasis).

*From 'the Family' to Families*

Looking at the ways in which non-heterosexuals in San Francisco construct new forms of family and kinship with lovers, friends and children, Weston portrays their families, which they describe as 'family *we* choose' or 'family *we* create' (1997: 109, emphasis in the original), and assesses the challenges these families present to conventional heterosexual assumptions. Compared with the family traditionally identified with biology, chosen families are built on lovers, friends and perhaps children. As they are often excluded by their blood relatives after disclosing their sexuality, they choose the members of their families in terms of belongingness, supportiveness and mutual understanding. Weston's (1997: 108) informant Toni pictured the people she called kin as the gay people around her whom she chooses to help her with her life. She would rather choose them, whom she called 'my inner family—my community', to be her potential kid's godparents, or to watch her cat, than her mother or her sisters. The most interesting thing she mentioned is: 'So there's definitely a family. And you're building it; it keeps getting bigger and bigger. Next thing you know, you have hundreds of people as your family,' for this 'pictured family members as a cluster surrounding a single individual' (ibid.) and indicated the subjective power of the individual to formulate her own relationships.

Similarly, in Weeks et al.'s study (2001: 10), many non-heterosexuals use the language of friendship to identify how their families are created: 'I think the friendships I have are family... And I think you make your family—because I've never felt like I belonged anywhere,' and 'I have a blood family, but I have an extended family... my friends.' The usage of the term family here obviously differs from the traditional one, which can be seen as 'both a challenge to conventional definitions and an attempt to broaden these' (Weeks et al. 2001: 11), and raises the following two issues: firstly, it 'suggests a strongly perceived need to appropriate the sort of values and comforts that the family unit is supposed to embody, even if it regularly fails to do so'; and secondly, 'this usage illustrates a very important ethos that now pervades the non-heterosexual world: a sense of the freedom and agency which the concept of "created" relationships brings' (ibid.: 10). Those things the blood family should and often doesn't provide for its sexually different members are replaced by the supportive chosen family. In Goss's words, everyone 'has the right to create family forms that fits his or her needs to realise the human potential

for love in non oppressive relationships'; and, 'Everyone has the right to define significant relationships and decide who matters and counts as family' (Goss 1997: 19, as cited in Weeks et al. 2001: 9). However, there are still many non-heterosexuals who dislike the term family, especially lesbians, for 'its historic baggage and oppressive heterosexual connotation' (Weeks et al. 2001: 10). Their negative feelings represent tensions between non-heterosexuals and their family of origin after coming out, and lead them to look for identities around a group of people who are supportive. It is nothing new for non-heterosexuals to commit to community, but to build new commitment forms of kinship among those they have chosen has challenged the conventional definition and more or less replaced parts of the function of the family. Although the term family carries such a great weight, both the common usage and its creative, broader meanings can be found in the new family stories.

While telling the new stories or narratives about families of choice, when narrators 'construct their stories they engage in a process of explaining their own worlds to themselves, thereby conceptualising who they are' (Lewin 1998: 38, as cited in Weeks et al. 2001: 12). Thus the stories are powerful; they illustrate alternative ways of being, new experiences of family lives and ongoing actions of doing family. For the narrators, they 'give meaning to their lives, affirm their identities, and present their relationship as viable and valid' through narratives (Weeks et al. 2001: 11). It is noteworthy that the language in use also 'gives rise to claims for recognition and legitimisation as crucial elements of the claim to full citizenship' (Plummer 1995, as cited in Weeks et al. 2001: 11).

Alongside the new adoption procedures successfully passed in the UK at the end of 2002, which fully recognised the rights of lesbian and gay couples, and registered civil partnerships in July 2003, the growing awareness of the significance of 'families of choice' (Weston 1997; Weeks et al. 2001) seems to challenge the idea of a conventional family. However, the inadequacy of 'the family' has not only been embodied within the non-heterosexual world, Weeks argues that these shifts have to be seen as aspects of much wider changes in attitudes towards marriage and relationship and 'a weakening of the dominance of the traditional notions of family and kinship, which has had several effects':

One is the opening up of what constitutes 'family', with the recognition that family is something you *do*, rather than something you belong to; and you



can do family in a variety of ways. This has accompanied the recognition of a plurality of types of family: there is no such thing as ‘*the* family’, it is now generally said, only *families* in all their diversity (Silva and Smart 1999). Another is a growing centrality of the couple relationship in popular discourse over the wider kinship networks. As Jamieson (2002: 136) suggests: ‘The historic shift from “the family” to the “good relationship” as *the* site of intimacy is the story of a growing emphasis on the couple relationship.’ (Weeks 2004: 159, emphasis in the original)

However, the language of family is ambiguous and contradictory in the new family stories of non-heterosexuals. As the narrators told of their day-to-day lives, they were all aware of the basic sense of the family as a biological tie for them, a tie people will never be rid of. It is certain that familial relationships will not necessarily build around friendship within non-heterosexual narratives, as long as individuals conceive kinship in biogenetic terms. As Weston (1997: 35–36) argued, some gay men and lesbians in the Bay Area believed that blood ties represent the only authentic, legitimate form of kinship. One of her informants, Lourdes, a Latina woman, explained:

the bonds that I got with my family are irreplaceable. They can’t be replaced. They cannot. So my family is my family, my friends are my friends. My friends can be *more important* than my family, but that doesn’t mean they are my family . . . ’Cause no matter what, they are just friends—they don’t have your blood. (Weston 1997: 36, emphasis in the original)

Another informant, Jenny, who is from a Chinese-American family, pictured her idea about the difference between kinship and friendship:

I had a lot drilled into me about your friends are just your friends. *Just friends*. Very minimalizing and discounting [of] friendships. Because family was supposed to be all-important. Everything was done to preserve the family unit. Even if people were killing each other; even if people had twenty-year-old grudges and hadn’t spoken. (Weston 1997: 118, emphasis in the original)

Weston argued that, in some cases, a lesbian or gay identity may contradict an ethnic or racial identity: ‘often those who disputed the validity of chosen families were people whose notions of kinship were bound up with their own sense of racial or ethnic identity’ (ibid.: 36). If having a

family was destined for some people, being gay and coming out might be ‘associated with going against the family’ (Berzon 1979: 89, as cited in Weston 1997: 36). Furthermore, it could ‘be interpreted as losing or betraying that cultural heritage’ (Weston 1997: 37). Indeed, some cultures view family as the basic institution of race and ethnicity. However, it is not only an issue about a particular ethnic ideology or family values, but the conventional acceptance of what and who constitutes a family. If being gay presupposes going against family, if non-heterosexual identity is ‘the antithesis of building strong family institution’ (informant account in Weston 1997: 37), that is to say that non-heterosexuals are not embraced by their family of origin, yet are rejecting the chance to form their own. Sometimes it may be non-heterosexuals themselves, rather than the culture or society, who have attached the label of an ‘against the family’ lifestyle, as the idea of the family to them is also limited and exclusive. However, for the recent generations of non-heterosexuals, ‘the new stories—embodied in a library of “coming out” narratives—told of discovering the self, achieving a new identity, finding others like yourself and gaining a new sense of belonging’ (Weeks et al. 2001: 14). Although lesbian and gay identity may conflict with racial or ethnic family values, besides forming chosen families, they may have other strategies or forms of resistance for wider sexual autonomy. But this has been neglected in the studies by Weston and Weeks et al., as they both focus only on families of choice. Also, the relationship between the chosen family and the natal family has rarely been mentioned. From the perspective of the micro-system, particular family dynamics and individual differences may be involved in the discussion on families of choice. Any negotiations or conflicts between non-heterosexuals and their natal families should not be neglected in empirical studies.

Furthermore, the complexity of the notion of family involves contradictory usages of the term family as ‘people are uneasy with a term that is so clearly associated with an “institution” which has often excluded them, and which continues to suggest the perpetuation of an exclusively heterosexual mode of being’ (Weeks et al. 2001: 16). In fact, the usage can be traced through non-heterosexual narratives throughout the twentieth century although often in an ironic or self-mocking way (ibid.: 15). From another perspective, to some extent the term family is attached to a stigma of heterosexual exclusiveness. As Goss (1997: 12, as cited in Weeks et al. 2001: 16), who advocates the rights of non-heterosexual people to form their own families, writes:

*We are not degaying or delesbianizing ourselves by describing ourselves as family.* In fact, we are Queering the notion of family and creating families reflective of our life choices. Our expanded pluralist uses of family are politically destructive of the ethic of traditional family values. (emphasis in the original)

Lacking a corresponding term to describe this part of non-heterosexual intimate relationships, the exclusivity and limitations of the term family restrict our ideas of intimate relationships. Meanwhile, as Weeks (1991; as cited in Weeks et al. 2001: 16) argued, the issue is about ‘the poverty of our language in describing alternative forms of intimate life’. Since the 1970s critics of the family have talked ‘not of replacing the family but instead of recognising *alternative families*, an acknowledgement of the pluralisation of forms of family life’ (ibid, emphasis in the original). Rising divorce rates, the delaying of marriage and the emergence of new patterns of intimacy are characteristic responses to a shifting society and are a significant and developing feature of both heterosexual and non-heterosexual worlds (Weeks et al. 2001: 20). Thus, the appropriation of the language of the family by many non-heterosexuals can be seen as a battle over meaning, ‘one important way in which the sexually marginal are struggling to assert the validity of their own way of life’ (ibid.: 17).

From the early 1980s the HIV/AIDS epidemic exposed the vulnerability of non-heterosexual couples in terms of the absence of relational rights and the lack of full citizenship. Same-sex partners were often ignored or bypassed by medical authorities as their lovers lay sick or dying; also, insurance companies refused cover for same-sex couples (ibid.: 18). Lesbian and gay activists managed to obtain successes in the establishment of lesbian and gay units by some local authorities and by local-government-supported campaigns against job discrimination, biased sex education and so on (Weeks 1991: 105). A major achievement by activists working within the political parties was the adoption by the UK Labour Party Annual Conference in 1985 of a resolution calling for an end to all legal discrimination against lesbians and gay men. In addition, the election to Manchester City Council of Margaret Roff as the UK’s first openly gay Mayor in November 1985 fuelled a heightened public awareness of the issues. However, since 1986 these in turn have provoked controversy, which made a major contribution towards the subsequent passing of Section 28 in May 1988. This stated that a local authority ‘shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the

intention of promoting homosexuality’ or ‘promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’. It is surprising that, after the condemnation of ‘pretended family relationships’ in Section 28, the usage of family became much more common in Britain as a form of opposition, of ‘reversing the discourse’ (Weeks et al. 2001: 17). Section 28 remained in force until 2000 in Scotland and 2003 in the rest of the UK, by which time the discriminatory nature of the law was fully recognised. During the 1990s the advocating of ‘full’ citizenship and relational rights for non-heterosexuals provoked heated debates. This issue will be discussed in more detail later, but it is worth looking at a different perspective on family which might have triggered these debates.

### *The Heterosexualised Family*

It is clear that Weeks et al. (2001: 46, 39) suggested families of choice as ‘a powerful affirmation of a new sense of belonging, and an essential part of asserting the validity of homosexual identities and ways of life’, which have ‘many strong parallels in the meaning of family practices across the heterosexual-homosexual divide’. It is hardly surprising that people would use heterosexual marriage as the marker for comparison and thus focus demands on ‘equal’ rights. However, it is problematic whether this leads to a happy beginning for non-heterosexuals and heterosexuals to nurture a diverse landscape of families, in marriage, divorce and anything related. One participant in Donovan et al.’s study (1999: 706), Malika, hesitated about this:

Of course we want the same rights as heterosexuals—but I don’t know if we do really.... We create our own lifestyles and...relationships that are different from heterosexual relationships but I think in terms of—not just legislation but in terms of civil rights and the right to participate in society...we should have those rights. But I don’t...think that we should be wanting to mimic everything...that heterosexual relationships have...it’s about having choice[s] and to...have those validated.

Besides, with a rejection of heterosexual assumptions, some non-heterosexuals may affirm differences that root their relationship patterns in a distinctive history. As David, a gay informant in his early 1920s, says:

to me, the whole basis of lesbian and gay relationships are different from heterosexual relationships . . . I don't know whether it's good or bad, but I mean, that's a fact. It is blatantly different. And trying to tailor heterosexual laws and understanding towards gay relationship is bound to fail. (Weeks et al. 2001: 46)

Another informant, Rachel, echoed him equally strongly:

I do not, as a black lesbian, want to be seen as the same as a heterosexual couple. I do not want to marry my lover, nor do I want to do anything that even remotely looks like that. I don't want to make a commitment publicly. I'm quite content with the fact that I can make a commitment privately, and that's just as important. (ibid.: 47)

This stance on the subversion of family norms has arisen in the lesbian and gay movement, not merely as an individual perspective. Since the 1970s the lesbian and gay movement has oscillated between advocating justice and equity and questioning 'conventional values in the name of something better'; the latter stance is what Weeks called a 'moment of transgression' (1995: 108–116). The transgressive element of lesbian and gay politics challenged the existing sexual order, subverting existing norms and offering a sharp critique of the family; as the Australian gay theorist Dennis Altman puts it, 'straight is to gay as family is to no family' (1979: 47, as cited in Weeks et al. 2001: 15). The manifesto of the London Gay Liberation Front (1971: 2, as cited in Weeks et al. 2001: 15) is more explicit, speaking for a host of radical challenges to the family in this moment of transgression: 'The very form of the family works against homosexuality' as it is a denial of identity.

However, the freedom to choose kin and family ties is not necessarily to be able to challenge heterosexual norms of family practices. To assert differences between hetero/homosexual lifestyles may temporarily maintain a distance from heterosexuality, but it will never eliminate heterosexual dominance. Then, what makes the informants avoid being equated with heterosexual relationships? The well-worn example of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 may confirm the truth that the family, by definition, is heterosexual. It is clear that if lesbians and gays can only have 'pretended family relationships', it is precisely a pretended *heterosexual* family relationship. Why should and do non-heterosexuals want to be included in such an undesirable institution? There is no doubt that society

favours such relationships in legal rights and public benefits, upholding monogamous coupledness as the ideal, by which 'good' sex, proper relationships and the paradigmatic lifestyle have been normalised. This argument involves debates on sexual citizenship and are expanded on later.

Feminists have noticed that the term the family is itself problematic since it glosses over the historical and cultural variability of family forms and the many different forms of family life that women experience today (Jackson 1997: 323). Also, differences among women and the impact of class, ethnicity, race and sexuality on family life have been the subject of recent feminist analyses. Among these aspects I focus here on normative heterosexuality and its interrelationship with patriarchy. Guillaumin's (1995, as cited in Jackson 1997: 340) analysis provided the fundamental truth: 'The reason why marriage is by definition heterosexual lies in its history as a patriarchal institution: a sexual relationship whereby a man established rights in the person and property of his wife.' The emergence of non-heterosexual families echoes the questioning of heteronormativity as these families challenge not only normative sexual practices but also a normal way of life, since heteronormativity defines both (Jackson and Scott 2010: 85). However, governing far more than erotic lives (Ingraham 1996: 187, as cited in Jackson and Scott 2010: 81), heterosexuality is 'an organising principle of many aspects of social structure and social life, and an important one' (Jackson and Scott 2010: 81). Family as a non-sexual aspect of social life seems to be no exception and thus may be seen as an institution for perpetuating heteronormativity. If a prerequisite of family is heterosexuality, now the point is whether the sexuality of the person who is doing family makes any difference. Can we do family non-heterosexually? Can non-heterosexuals be situated heteronormatively but do family differently? If so, it is possible that the family is no longer heterosexual. If not, family practice is still heterosexual no matter who is doing it. That is to say, while doing family, non-heterosexuals are practising, instead of pretending, 'heterosexual' family relationships. Furthermore, we seem to have little opportunity to practise non-heterosexual families as we are involved in a wider context that is already heterosexual. Even so, we cannot get rid of heteronormativity by practising a non-heterosexual lifestyle. Although people experience various forms of family life today, normative family conceptions dominate our understanding and direct legislation. As Rahman and Jackson (1997: 124) argue, 'However diverse family forms are becoming, a variety of state social policies reinforce the institutionalised heterosexuality and male dominance on which families are still founded.' Furthermore, 'Why

would lesbians and gays want to be included into an institution which has served to perpetuate heterosexuality and patriarchy?' (ibid.)

Instead of advocating rights enabling lesbians and gays to establish pretended (heterosexual) family relationships, in Weston's (1997) and Weeks et al.'s (2001) studies living arrangements and self-defined kin and family ties within lesbian and gay communities are suggestive of far more varied and fluid possibilities. For many non-heterosexuals, the idea of a chosen family is a powerful affirmation of a new sense of belonging, an essential part of asserting the validity of non-heterosexual identities and ways of life. Also, aware of the diversity of family forms existing today, I appreciate that people negotiate with patriarchal, heterosexual dominance in different situations by using different strategies. Noticing the distinctive terms used to describe non-heterosexual lifestyles, the language 'family we choose' or 'family of choice' represents the awareness of its difference from 'family'. However, does this usage of language separate the chosen family from family as a different institution? In fact, I am not optimistic about Goss's assertion that 'we are Queering the notion of family and creating families reflective of our life choices' (1997: 12, as cited in Weeks et al. 2001: 16), as various family forms may not subvert the conventional heterosexual family, and may not even be able to revise the statement that the family is heterosexual. Perhaps all we can do is to attach new meanings to the well-worn term by enhancing the diversity of families.

I argue that, embodied in a wider context of institutionalised heterosexuality and male dominance, the most important standpoint is to look at the ways in which non-heterosexuals negotiate with heteronormativity and patriarchal families. In fact, we are not able to ignore the impact of family heritage. Various family forms today may include something new or something interesting, but, ironically, while we appropriate the language of the family, the well-worn notion of family remains the starting point for the process of diversifying. People construct the idea of family within everyday interactions and experience various forms of families in terms of class, ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality. Taken together, these aspects complicate how families are understood and defined. Thus, according to these two empirical studies, non-heterosexuals built their ideals on to it, which provided the basis for creating familial relationships of a chosen or non-biological sort. Furthermore, I argue that there may be subtle and sensitive relationships between constructing a non-heterosexual family and the families of origin, whether their sexuality is disclosed or not. Thus, I am concerned with how they negotiate with their families of origin.

## LESBIAN/GAY NORMALISATION AND EGALITARIAN LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

### *Heterosexuality and Lesbian Relationships*

As discussed in the previous section, heterosexuality is an institution ordering not only sexual relations but also many aspects of social structure and social life. Furthermore, the privileging of heterosexual relations underpins the idea that heterosexuality is the original blueprint for interpersonal relations (Richardson 1996: 3). It seems as though lesbian relationships are no exception, but the question is: how is heterosexuality implicated in lesbian relations and lifestyles? Frank Caprio described female homosexuality as follows:

Many lesbian relationships between two women become the equivalent of a husband-wife relationship. The mannish or overt lesbian likes to take on the role of the 'husband' and generally attaches herself to a female partner who is feminine in physique and personality. She regards her mate as her 'wife'. (Caprio 1954, cited in Richardson 1996: 3)

As Richardson (ibid.) argues, a great deal has changed since Caprio wrote this, both in terms of lesbian and heterosexual lifestyles, but this does not mean that 'heterosexuality has relinquished its hegemonic hold on conceptualisations of both the sexual and the intimate'. Related to this is the question of lesbian identity and relationships, or more precisely, role-playing. Historically, lesbians have been portrayed as 'virtual men trapped in the space of women's bodies', whose mannish appearance and masculinity rendered 'their existence compatible with the logic of gender and heteronormativity' (ibid.: 4). However, as I argued in [Chapter 1](#) about the Po's identity in the context of the Taiwanese lesbian community, in this logic, the femme-type of lesbian has been frequently neglected in lesbian discourses. As Richardson (ibid.) points out, the reason why femme is more problematic is worth further discussion. To reject the above definitions of lesbian identity, desire and practice that were seen as derived from a patriarchal and heterosexual model of society, in the 1970s the new establishment of lesbian identity defined lesbianism as a political alternative to, rather than a derivative of, heterosexuality (ibid.). However, this subversive identity politics might lead us to overlook the profound impact of patriarchal and heterosexual norms on lesbian identity and



relationships. Butler (1990, 1993, as cited in Richardson 1996: 5) argues that 'we can never escape hegemonic discourses so that even a lesbian feminist identity is produced within hegemonic heterosexual norms'.

Furthermore, Richardson (*ibid.*) points out that 'if our understanding of the structure of intimate relations is typically mediated through dominant heterosexual and gender norms, it is also the case that conceptualisations of desire and of "sex" as a specific set of practices are similarly encoded'. It is often assumed that sex between women involves either role-playing or primarily acts of affection and is not really 'sex' at all (*ibid.*). Related to this is the question of heterosexualised sex, which constructed the dominant discourse of female sexuality as passive and meeting a man's needs, and the view of sex as synonymous with intercourse. The lesbian is portrayed as unlike a real woman in her interests and desires and more like a man; this view has influenced the interpretation of sex between women as an imitation of vaginal intercourse and the stereotype of involving a penile substitute when a woman has sex with another woman (Richardson 1992: 192). In addition, the 'feminine' lesbian in role-playing lesbian sex is challenging 'the assumption that such women are attracted to and form relationships with butch women and are not in any case "real lesbians"' (*ibid.*). The concept of the masculine and feminine types of lesbian who complement each other is also exclusive of any other possibilities of sex between lesbians, for example, two butches or two femmes having sex. However, as Richardson (*ibid.*) argues, 'such stereotyping can create anxieties in some lesbians about imitating heterosexuality'. In rejecting heterosexual mimicry, some lesbians are discouraged from engaging in certain kinds of sex and, furthermore, in some studies lesbians are described as having a relatively low interest in sex or not to be having 'real sex'. This portrayal of lesbian (sexual) relationships is certainly questionable; rather than looking at lesbian sex seriously and recognising its diversity, to play with definitions may not be a successful way of resisting heterosexuality.

If we interpret lesbian sex through heterosexuality, the difference makes the lesbian a pseudo-man who wants a penis of her own and it also views lesbian sex as necessarily involving vaginal penetration in mimicry of heterosexual intercourse. But, sexual acts which a lesbian experiences during sex with another woman are in a different context from those with a man and thus have a different meaning. Richardson's example has made this point very clear; she argues that: 'The experience, both psychologically and physically, of a man's penis in your vagina is not the same as

the experience of a woman's fingers inside you, not to mention bananas, vibrators, or dildos' (1992: 197). As Lamos (1994: 95, as cited in Richardson 1996: 9) remarks: 'Alas, the dildo-bedecked lesbian may be disappointed that her parody of the phallus is interpreted differently by others, especially by heterosexuals who take the dildo or butch/femme straight, so to speak.' Besides, the heterosexualised sexual experience and sexual body have made an impression on lesbian sex as primarily penetrative and have thus ignored diversity.

Jeffreys (1996: 76) argues that masculinity and femininity, as the genders of dominance and submission, are eroticised to create the sexuality of male supremacy, which she calls 'heterosexual desire'. In such desire 'one participant is "othered", or reduced to subordinate status through dominant/submissive, objectifying sex' (Jeffreys 1990, as cited in Jeffreys 1996: 76). The 'difference' between the sexes, which is supposed to give the excitement to heterosexual sex, is political, a difference of power. Both femininity and masculinity are learnt behaviours, which respectively demonstrate deference and dominance: 'heterosexual desire is formed out of, and requires for its excitement and continuance, the subjection of women' (ibid.). Furthermore, it is not limited to opposite-sex couplings; lesbians and gay men can experience heterosexual desire too, through the reproduction of gender through butch/femme role-playing or other stylised forms of gender power difference.

In addition, Jeffreys points out that butch/femme role-playing in the 1990s was a clear example of the portability of gender for the creation of heterosexual desire (ibid.: 78). In lesbian sex magazines, lesbian fiction and lesbian theory she found that the rehabilitation of role-playing and the promotion of this practice 'represents role-playing as serving a specially sexual function' (ibid.: 78–79). Garber comments that the difference between butch and femme is erotic and is a difference within sameness, in terms of novelist Lee Lynch's words 'Butch . . . is knowing how to stand on a street corner and catch a femme's eye' and femme 'is spotting the butch and knowing how to get her clothes off' (Garber 1993: 148, as cited in Jeffreys 1996: 79). Jeffreys remarks that it is 'the difference of power that is enlisted to create the excitement of heterosexual desire' (Jeffreys 1996: 79). This power in role-playing relationships, as Jeffreys argues, was expected to follow heterosexual patterns during the 1950s. As Kennedy and Davis (1993, as cited in Jeffreys 1996: 80) point out, according to their study on 1950s butch role-playing in Buffalo, USA, one characteristic of lesbian masculinity was violence against femmes. However,

Kennedy and Davis tended to be contemptuous of the idea that butch/femme role-playing replicates heterosexuality: 'By definition this culture was never simply an imitation of heterosexuality, for butches did not completely adopt a male persona, and fems [sic] were aware that they were not with men' (1993: 190, as cited in Jeffreys 1996: 80).

Jeffrey's argument would be problematic if we overlooked the fact that a woman chooses her lover because she is a woman who has adopted masculine characteristics and not a man. The erotic relationship between women may, but may not, involve role-playing. Even so, lesbian role-playing may differ from the role-playing of heterosexuality. However, Jeffreys holds a different opinion, that the differences between these two 'are less startling than the similarities' (1996: 80). She refers to Loulan's explanation that the feminist idea that role-playing lesbians are 'mimicking male/female roles' originated from lesbian self-hatred, our fear that lesbians are just an inferior version of heterosexuality (ibid.). In Loulan's own words, 'somewhere in our deepest homophobic selves, we agree that lesbians are an ersatz version of the heterosexual model', whereas in fact 'butch and femme have nothing to do with male and female' (1990: 48, as cited in Jeffreys 1996: 80). Furthermore, Jeffreys attributes role-playing to some root other than a male/female model, 'a dualism nature' (ibid.: 81). The idea that butch and femme necessarily complement each other is challenged by the existence of butch/butch, femme/femme and other relationships, as argued in Richardson's (1992: 192) study and in my previous chapter. Also, the assumptions about butch/femme role-playing are challenged by the limited discussion of femininity and masculinity that is reproduced in these relationships, and I would especially question the construction of the femme role and the femininity of femmes, which is claimed to be complemented by the masculinity of a butch. As Richardson (1996: 4) argues, 'the complementary femme "type" of lesbian is mentioned much less frequently in representations of lesbians in scientific discourses and popular culture—perhaps not surprisingly as she is more problematic'. The assumption of butch/femme role-playing is questionable, not only because the femme is less discussed but also because of the assumed complementarity. It is yet more problematic in that the femme identity is constructed in terms of a butch identity.

### *Normalisation*

On the question of heterosexualised families, I would like to move the argument forward in this section to discuss the issue of citizenship. Related

to this is the idea of normalisation, which has dominated the rights-oriented agenda of the lesbian and gay movements since the 1990s (Phelan 2001; Waites 2003, both as cited in Richardson 2004: 392). The concept of ‘equality’ is central to these political discourses, in which lesbians and gays ‘are represented as oppressed minorities seeking access to core institutions such as marriage, family and the military, as “good” citizens who want to be included and share in the same rights and responsibilities as heterosexuals’ (D’Emilio 2000, as cited in Richardson 2004: 392). The idea of lesbians and gay men as being normal, good citizens who are deserving of inclusion and integration into mainstream society is an equal civil rights issue. In the early movements in Europe and the USA after World War II, a number of ‘homophile’ organisations, which were formed in urban centres such as Los Angeles, San Francisco and London, adopted the political strategies of a minority group seeking tolerance from the heterosexual majority (Richardson 2005: 515). They sought homosexual rights and aimed to reverse the medical model of homosexuality as pathology by claiming that homosexuals were normal people, just like heterosexuals (Richardson and Seidman 2002, as cited in Richardson 2005: 515–516).

As Richardson (1998: 83) argues, ‘ideas of citizenship are based upon certain assumptions about sexuality, in particular hegemonic heterosexuality,’ and thus the ‘normal citizen’ has been constituted as heterosexual. Moreover, ‘it would appear that access to this new citizenship status is located primarily through being in a publicly recognized normative (good gay) couple relationship’ (Richardson 2004: 391). A rights-based stance adopts a position of ‘demands for equality on the grounds of “*sameness*”, rather than “equality in difference” arguments’ (Chasin 2000, as cited in Richardson 2004: 392, emphasis in the original). Consequently, in terms of the recognition of lesbian and gay relationships and families, many activists tend to take ‘the line of arguing for the sameness of families, of sharing similar “family values”’ (Lukenbill 1995; Chasin 2000, as cited in Richardson 2004: 392).

However, this is related to the question of problematic heterosexualised families and the politics of assimilation. To gain the ‘sameness’ of citizenship status alongside heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men need to be assimilated into mainstream, ‘normal’ culture, which favours monogamy and a stable family life. The normative emphasis is on the loving lesbian/gay couple living together in a marital-style relationship; an example is the

British government's justification for extending civil rights to same-sex couples, that it would:

send a strong message about the *seriousness* of such a *commitment* and, in turn, promote and support *stable relationships*... It would provide for the legal recognition of same-sex partners and give legitimacy to those in, or wishing to enter into, interdependent, same-sex couple relationships that are intended to be *permanent*... *Committed* same-sex relationships would be recognised and registered partners would gain rights and responsibilities which would reflect the significance of the roles they play in each others lives. This in turn would encourage more *stable family life* (DTI 2003: 13, 17, as cited in Richardson 2004: 398, emphasis as the original).

In this description, the 'good sexual relationship' is defined through association with certain intimate norms in terms of a marital-like model; besides, the demand for 'sameness' in fact reinforces 'difference' between heterosexual and homosexual in the fact that marriage continues to be defined as a specifically heterosexual privilege (Richardson 2004: 398–399). Seidman (2002, as cited in Richardson 2004: 397) explains that 'in addition to participation in the market and the military, a key site for the operation of these normalizing processes is same-sex marriage and/or civil partnership recognition'. Thus, the normal gay is:

associated with specific social behaviours. For example, the normal gay is expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride. (Seidman 2002: 133, as cited in Richardson 2004: 397)

Through an adherence to dominant intimate norms, the boundaries between acceptable and non-acceptable sexual behaviour, good and bad citizenship and what is considered 'other' have been challenged by the idea of the normal lesbian/gay (Richardson 2004: 404). As Warner (1999, cited in Richardson 2004: 396–397) points out, the shift from conduct-based to identity- and relationship-based rights claims since the 1990s 'represents, in part, a decoupling of homosexuality and sex', which he regards as central to the process of gay normalisation 'through locating lesbian/gay sexuality primarily in a domestic setting in the political focus on the right to lesbian/gay "marriage"'. What is more, Richardson points out that 'it is primarily through *sexual* coupledness that a normalized

lesbian/gay status is achieved' (2004: 397, emphasis in the original). The integration of lesbian and gay couples into social and political life as a normative relationship is not solely a process of lesbian/gay normalisation, it also establishes a boundary between good and bad lesbian/gay relationships based on certain institutions and citizenship through the public recognition of the normative lesbian/gay couple. The idea of lesbians and gay men as being normal, good citizens who deserve inclusion and integration into mainstream society is, in fact, problematic because it excludes the new otherness: 'women and men who are not in couple relationships, who engage in sex outside of monogamous relationships and who form intimate associations and family relationships that are not based on traditional gender and familial norms' (Smith 1995; Richardson 2000c; Phelan 2001, as cited in Richardson 2004: 403).

The exclusion of otherness in terms of a certain model of citizenship has confirmed homophobia and the fear of uncontrollable sex/sexuality. As in neoliberal governments, good lesbian/gay citizens are presented as supportive of the choosing, responsible lesbian/gay subject, who is demanding the right to make lifestyle choices that are approved of as 'low risk' to society (Nussbaum 1999, cited in Richardson 2005: 522). However, as Richardson (2005: 522) points out, 'the "risk" lesbians and gay men might pose to society is rendered governable through establishing the "ordinary" "normal" lesbian/gay as a category of persons who desire, and achieve, responsible citizenship primarily through civil registration'. While establishing their ordinariness and normality, 'good lesbian/gay citizens serve as a means for establishing new boundaries in relation to sexuality, ones which are constitutive of "other" sexualities that can be figured as problematic and in need of control' (Seidman 2002, cited in Richardson 2005: 522). Furthermore, there is a failure to address the interrelations between gender and sexuality and a lack of awareness that heterosexuality is a gendered institution (Rahman and Jackson 1997; Richardson 2005). As Rahman and Jackson (1997: 122) argue, 'gays and lesbians are not simply commonly oppressed through their homosexuality but are located differently in relation to compulsory heterosexuality. Rights pursued by gay men may not, therefore, be rights appropriate for lesbians.'

### *Egalitarian Lesbian Couples*

In Weston's (1997) empirical study of 40 gay men and 40 lesbians, as mentioned in the previous section, she points out that there was almost

none of the division of labour that people have long associated with gender. They describe a 50/50 responsibility for household work prevailing in their relationships, and many regarded the equitable division of paid and unpaid labour as 'one index of an egalitarian relationship' (1997: 149). The political philosopher, the late Susan M. Okin, who was renowned for her theory of justice within the family, gave her opinion on Weston's study but I found it less persuasive than her early works. Okin (1997) took the homosexual relationship as a 'good' model because they took equal shares in domestic labour, and as a 'good' practice that embodied her imaginary gender-free society. Focusing on the lesbian couples in Weston's (1997) study who identified themselves as butch/femme, Okin noted that they did not allocate tasks and responsibilities along gender lines; and, among those who bore children, the femme-identified partner would not necessarily be the biological mother. Although Okin may be eager to advocate gay rights, and she concludes that 'far from being a threat to "family value," gay and lesbian family relationships may provide . . . a very good model for heterosexual families to follow' (1997: 56), it seems problematic to assume heterosexualised 'gender equality'.

Dunne (1997: 180) referenced Johnson's (1990) empirical study of 108 long-term lesbian couples and argued that 'feeling that relationships conform to a more egalitarian model appear to be a crucial dimension to enduring lesbian relationships'. With this common belief, Johnson's interviewees considered that their egalitarian ideals would not be possible in a heterosexual relationship because they viewed them as 'innately unequal' (Johnson 1990: 120). The interviewees of both researchers coincidentally attributed their egalitarian relationship to 'the lack of taken for granted guidelines' (Dunne 1997: 184). In Dunne's (2000: 133) own study, one particular account appears to demonstrate the reason why lesbian couples feel more egalitarian within their relationships:

I suppose because our relationship doesn't fit into a social norm, there are no pre-set indications about how our relationship should work. We have to work it out for ourselves. We've no role models in terms of how we divide our duties, so we've got to work it out afresh as to what suits us . . . We try very hard to be just to each other and . . . not exploit the other person.  
[Dolly, in 19-year partnership with Meg]

Similar assumptions are revealed in Tsai's (2006) research. She found that her Taiwanese interviewees tended to believe their relationships

were more equal than those of heterosexual couples because of ‘the lack of given scripts and restrictions’ for conducting their relationship. Even if there is actual inequality in task allocation between the couple, they still feel they have a more equal relationship than heterosexual couples because household labour is not distributed by gender. Instead, lesbian couples allocate tasks by individual interests, habits or specialities (Tsai 2006: 45). Furthermore, the distribution can be negotiated in a flexible way (ibid.: 65).

Nevertheless, all relationships, including intimate relationships between women, involve a power dynamic to a greater or lesser extent. When facing power differences or power imbalances, Dunne’s respondents believed that ‘there’s a far greater chance of working them out’ (1997: 184) than in a heterosexual relationship. The reason they have such a confident belief in ‘working out’ imbalances is attributed to a lack of any ‘clear overriding power dynamic shaping the relationship’ (ibid.). In their accounts, power factors are plentiful and complex, but loose and fluid; most importantly, none of the factors plays an overriding function in the power dynamic of the relationship. Thus, the respondents in Dunne’s study believed that ‘they could exercise greater self-determination and experience relative freedom from domination’ (1997: 185). Indeed, ‘there are no similar ideas that can be mobilized to naturalize and justify one woman’s domination of her female partner, and so relationships that involve domination will be more visible and perhaps less readily accepted’ (ibid.: 187). As a consequence lesbians tend to be more aware of the operation of power and avoid its abuse by self and other. This is exactly a benefit of the absence of a given script; Dunne’s respondents knew that they had no set roles or expectations, thus, ‘there’s no obligation to fulfil a role, you make your own’ (1997: 182).

It seems that lesbian couples are free from gender roles since there are no assumptions provided/expected and there is more room to be creative in negotiating the relationship. Without the institutional backing of marriage to encourage long-term commitment, comfort and equality between partners seems the best recipe for longevity in lesbian relationships. However, this does not mean that lesbians expect an idealised romantic relationship with their partners. Factors that may lead to inequality or an imbalance in the power dynamic within the relationship are discussed both in Dunne (1997) and Tsai (2006), such as economic inequality, house ownership and whether or not the relationship has been disclosed. However, by referencing Dunne’s (1997) analysis of the ‘symmetric



specialized approach' and the 'asymmetric approach' to household tasks, I focus here on how lesbian sexual identity could be involved in task allocation and whether the gender-labelled tasks gendered their performance.

For those who took the 'symmetric specialized approach' to household tasks, heavy chores were perceived as 'practical' rather than 'masculine' tasks and 'the women involved in doing these "practical" tasks did not see them as expressing the more masculine side to their personality' (Dunne 1997: 210). In contrast to the couples who shared all the housework equally, with each of them performing both 'male' and 'female' tasks, the 'symmetric specialized approach' type tended to specialise in tasks and leave the more 'male' ones to the partners who appeared to have greater strength. They consciously refused to 'fit into any role' and believed in assigning tasks according to physical character. Thus, they did not see the allocation as being male/female role-playing.

One respondent of the asymmetric approach type identified herself as a woman and 'thought of [her partner] as in the "male" role' that was expected to do the 'male-ish' tasks. She explained why she allocated tasks along gender lines: 'I was determined that I am still going to be a woman; there was no way I was going to do mannish things' (Dunne 1997: 214). By so doing, the respondent, Meg, regarded this 'filling in a traditional female role' as 'her way of affirming her femininity' (ibid.). In describing the asymmetric approach type, Dunne linked the inequalities in task allocation to the mirrored male/female role-playing in the relationship between lesbian couples. Also, these more butch/femme divisions of household labour were a strengthening of traditional husband/wife divisions. Furthermore, Dunne suggested that these reflected backwardness by pointing out that 'none of those aged under 30 had experienced "butch/femme" relationships and they had no desire to do so' (ibid.). Respondents would generally embrace an egalitarian approach to household labour because, as she argued, 'contemporary lesbians lack an ideology that legitimizes the domination of one partner over another' (ibid.). According to this study, relationships along butch/femme lines tended to be short-lived and transitory. Women did not desire an imitation male/female relationship in which they were subjected to their partners when they were in relationships with women. Dunne emphasised in her conclusion that "butch/femme" relationships appear to be fairly *uncommon*' and their existence does complicate the argument (Dunne 1997: 223, emphasis in the original).

Undoubtedly, there are three presumptions that make the statements above seem reasonable. Firstly, that butch/femme relationships mirror

heterosexual relationships. Secondly, that both relationship types involve an unequal division of household labour and are against feminist ideals. Finally, embracing more flexibility in women's relationships facilitates the operationalisation of egalitarian ideals, not only 'the role of institutionalized heterosexuality in shaping differences between women and men in most areas of social life' (Dunne 1997: 224), but also the mirrored, traditional butch/femme relationship, which should be challenged and taken seriously. Consequently, since the butch/femme relationship does not operate in an egalitarian way, butch/femme role-playing in a relationship will not be seen as a 'proper model'. In fact, Dunne did point out that the butch/femme relationship is 'fairly uncommon'.

My intention here is not to ignore actual or potential inequalities in intimate relationships between women, nor to approve of women's subjection to other women, but to query why butch/femme relationships are stigmatised and assumed to involve an asymmetric division of household labour. If we narrow down butch/femme to a mirror of the heterosexual relationship, then butch/femme relationships will be seen as institutionalising gender inequality. Butch/femme role-playing relates to sexual identity and has a significance for individuals; this could be arbitrary if the diversity of butch/femme relationships is simply reduced to one scene. And this also leads us to overlook any possibility of egalitarian heterosexual relationships. While researchers neglect the fact of butch/femme relationships and assume them to be fairly rare, it will be more difficult to approach equality in social life. Lesbians from different classes, areas and communities face different problems in doing family and practising family life. It is undeniable that different lesbian communities share different rules about conducting relationships. By simplifying these issues and analysing them together, some of women's lifestyle choices are overlooked and inequalities in lesbian relationships are not effectively challenged.

What is more, I query why lesbian couples tend to believe that they have more idealised, egalitarian relationships than heterosexual couples and insist that this equal practice is there between women. I am not going to neglect the fact that within women's intimacy there is far more opportunity to practise more egalitarian relationships. Dunne (1997: 206) found that feminist respondents commonly and particularly favoured the symmetric shared approach to task allocation. They were more flexible; tasks would be performed together and 'each partner should feel competent in performing both "male" and "female" tasks'. By suggesting a default, egalitarian lesbian relationship, and that butch/femme lesbians

are a vanishing minority, a particular set of moral guidelines for lesbian relationships are defined. It is worth enquiring further into why lesbians commonly believe that lesbian couples *should* follow such egalitarian relationships and where this ideal comes from. In assuming a hierarchy of good/bad relationships, these studies of lesbian families seem to over-emphasise gender equality within lesbian relationships. This assumption of gender equality is based on the concept of equality between the sexes and is constructed from a heterosexual perspective, and does not consider situational differences among diverse relationships.

Similar findings can be seen in Heaphy et al.'s (2002) study, but the narratives they discuss indicate that the operation of an egalitarian ideal 'has to be struggled for against other inequalities such as those relating to income, day-to-day commitment, emotional labour, ethics difference and the like' (Heaphy et al. 2002: 249). Also, they have pointed out that there are structural inequalities between men and women, which relate to the different material resources available to them; 'while women focused on the material and the emotional, in men's accounts the primary focus is the extent to which heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships are bound up, with particular notions of masculinity—and particularly the "possibilities of being" in terms of their emotional lives' (ibid.: 253). Nevertheless, gendered differences of practising relationships between lesbians and gay men are not mentioned in more detail in most studies. What is more, the question remains unresolved: why should same-sex relationships be attached to an egalitarian ideal?

I am inspired by Jacqui Gabb's insights and find a tentative answer in her work. Lesbian families with children seem to complicate the issue, as childcare often makes household labour more complex. However, it may also be a chance to highlight this issue. Gabb (2004) suggested that there is an unequal division between 'birth' and 'other' mothers and pointed out some significant differences between her study and those of other researchers by questioning the methodology and epistemology of radical research on lesbian parent families. I agree with her about the researchers' preference that: 'While research may concede that not all lesbian parent families are "progressive", quotation and analyses typically highlights those who are' (Gabb 2004: 174). Thus, those who represent more traditional family forms will easily be neglected by default. Noticing the presence of a 'community' myth of the ideal lesbian parent family, Gabb (2004: 174) argued that these progressive stories 'consolidate an ideal (imaginary) form through a process of repetition; erasing diversity,

obscuring the presence of less “progressive” practices beneath the weight of a “community narrative”.’ However, the community myth impacted on both researcher and potential interviewees; in Gabb’s study, such respondents either ‘perceived themselves as “just like any other [heterosexual] family” or characterized radical family practices as something only “real” lesbians do’ (ibid.). Furthermore, they may not identify themselves as possible interviewees (corresponding to the (ideal) community narrative) and are rendered outside discourse, ‘they become invisible’. ‘The Lesbian Family’ constituted by the (ideal) community narrative becomes the model; and the consequence is ‘similarly constituted families who then compare their own parental practices against this ideal’ (ibid.). ‘Hence it is not surprising that interviewees may feel under pressure to strive toward an egalitarian “ideal” and/or (re)present their families in relation to this “preferred” form’ (ibid.).

The assumption of the egalitarian ideal relies on the couple being of the same sex, which creates an exception from the gendered roles and expectations that impact on the operation of heterosexual relationships. Awareness of the notion of an egalitarian ideal among same-sex respondents is, in fact, based on antipathy towards dominant heterosexual relationship norms; I argue that adopting the ideal egalitarian relationship could be seen as resistance against heterosexual lifestyles, as it is a way to affirm difference. In Heaphy et al.’s (2002: 255) study, the notion that couples might organise their own domestic lives in accordance with male/female (or butch/femme) roles was sometimes seen as shocking and almost always rebutted by respondents. However, as Gabb (2004: 174) suggested, research with egalitarian lesbian couples may be misleading because, ‘Those who do not recognize themselves within the (ideal) “community narrative” are rendered outside discourse—they become invisible.’ As a result, the diversity of lesbian identities and related relationship practices may be neglected in studies on lesbian couples. Furthermore, by overlooking the diversity of lesbian relationships, the discourses may also fail to notice the impact of heteronormativity upon lesbian lifestyles. The boundary between good and bad relationships has been drawn through the recognition of an ideal community narrative. These community myths and lesbian subcultural norms also appear in Chao’s (2000, 2001, 2002, 2005) studies in the Asian context. However, my question is: do lesbians form their identity and construct their relationships according to these rules?

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## Methodology

Major works, such as those of Weston (1997) and Weeks et al. (2001), have noted the emergence of ‘families of choice’ and recognised non-heterosexual intimate lives as forms of families. The new families and their stories play an important role in empirical studies. Plummer (1995) argued that the usage of the language of ‘family’ gives rise to claims for recognition and legitimisation as crucial elements of the claim to full citizenship. However, the language of family for lesbians is considered to be far more complicated in the context of Taiwanese society as there is not yet a legitimated institution of marriage or partnership for non-heterosexuals in Asia. Among all the difficulties, the Confucian/Han/Chinese patriarchal system in Taiwan has impacted on lesbians’ notions of family and the way in which they form their families and make connections with their families of origin.

Much research on same-sex intimacy has focused on polarised gender role-playing and egalitarianism between lesbian partners (cf. Dunne 1997). There are, however, few studies that engage with the notion of family for lesbians and the obstacles/supports they may encounter while practising family in the context of Taiwanese heterosexual family structures. By focusing on Taiwanese lesbian families, my aim is to provide an empirical interpretation of the emerging intimate forms of lesbianism, changing notions of family and the developing culture of lesbian lifestyles. I am also concerned with lesbians’ relationships and interactions with both partners’ families of origin. Thus, this empirical study is designed to fill a gap in the literature on lesbian family practice.

As Heaphy et al. (1998: 454, citations in the original) mentioned, '[q]uantitative studies based on surveys are, of course, notoriously difficult in relation to homosexuality, not least because of the difficulty of establishing a sampling frame for a "hidden" population, and the problems of defining what is meant by "homosexual lifestyle" (Plummer 1981; Weston 1991; see also Davies et al. 1993: 66–71)'. It is crucial for researchers to acknowledge that if identities, and the patterns of relationships that are built around them and sustain them, are 'contingent', 'emergent' and 'processual' (Giddens 1991, 1992; Weeks 1995), then reflexive research techniques, which can begin to uncover that complexity, are needed. A questionnaire survey, even of a self-defining sample, would fail to reveal the complexity of meanings around identity and relationships. A methodology based on semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, can provide a way of exploring shifting nuances of identity by providing brief life-histories of the subjects, and can allow for the development of narratives of 'intimate' and 'family' life (Heaphy et al. 1998: 455).

I considered collecting the relationship stories of the couples, which are embedded in individual histories of sexual identity and family interactions. Both sides of such stories are crucial to understanding family practices. With this concern, my methodology was influenced by Heaphy and Einarsdottir (2013). In their study of young couples' civil partnerships in the UK, they interviewed same-sex couples both together and apart in order to generate three relationship stories: a couple one and two individual ones. This methodology enables researchers to acknowledge that the value of interviewing partners together and apart is to make connections between the stories couples tell and the relationship they actually live.

### CONTACTING INTERVIEWEES

Recent Taiwanese studies on lesbians that I reviewed in Chapter 1 set about their fieldwork in different ways; for example, Chao (2000: 378–379; 2005: 50); conducted her interviews and on-site observations in lesbian bars; Chen (2005) posted her advertisements on lesbian websites; Li (2007: 23) contacted participants through emails or MSN Messenger (latterly Windows Live Messenger) with a semi-structured questionnaire before making contact by phone and in person.

In my study the recruitment was carried out through my friendship network and the potential informants were voluntarily recruited by



snowballing. Unlike some lesbian studies that draw their samples through advertising in LGBT-friendly newsletters, cafés or other gathering occasions, which ‘produces a highly self-selected sample’ (Burgess 1984: 57–58, cited in Dunne 1997: 27), or that recruit participants within a relatively closed community (Dunne, *op. cit.*), I initiated snowballing to approach potential participants among my own friendship network. Dunne (*ibid.*) was aware of the possible problem of a discrete network of respondents that snowball sampling could generate. She therefore set out to make her snowball sampling as diverse as possible and aimed to present the diversity of participants within a relatively small community.

Sharing this concern, and also being aware of confidentiality, I separately contacted various lesbian friends from different friendship networks and the intermediaries were asked to pass the short description of my study only to people who met my requirements. I did not intend to publicise my study among lesbian groups or spread it among my friends for two reasons. Firstly, I wanted to map the relations between me (the researcher), my friends (the intermediaries) and the participants and explore the diversity of the implicit community as we belong to the same generation and a similar social context. Secondly, I might lose some possible participants if I publicised the project more widely. Unlike Dunne (*ibid.*), none of my participants knew me in advance. We may have common friends and have heard about each other, but we had never met before. As Dunne (*ibid.*: 24) mentioned, the researcher who has personal ‘insider’ knowledge and shares a fundamental commonality within the lesbian community can help to build up high levels of trust, which is necessary for conducting sensitive research. She also found that the commonality helped to ease the hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee. My concern goes further; I believe that many of the couples would not have agreed to be recruited had I not been a lesbian and also a friend of someone they trusted. [Figure 3.1](#) presents the friendship network.

Personal connections and contacts are very important in Chinese culture. When conducting research on Chinese women’s work and lives, Liu (2007: 17) found some very important consequences for the conduct and content of interviews when using personal/informal networks. If the interviewee was close to the intermediary, the interviewee viewed her as reliable and was willing to talk openly and easily in a conversational way. On the other hand, where the relationships between Liu, the intermediary and the interviewee were less close, or there were several links connecting

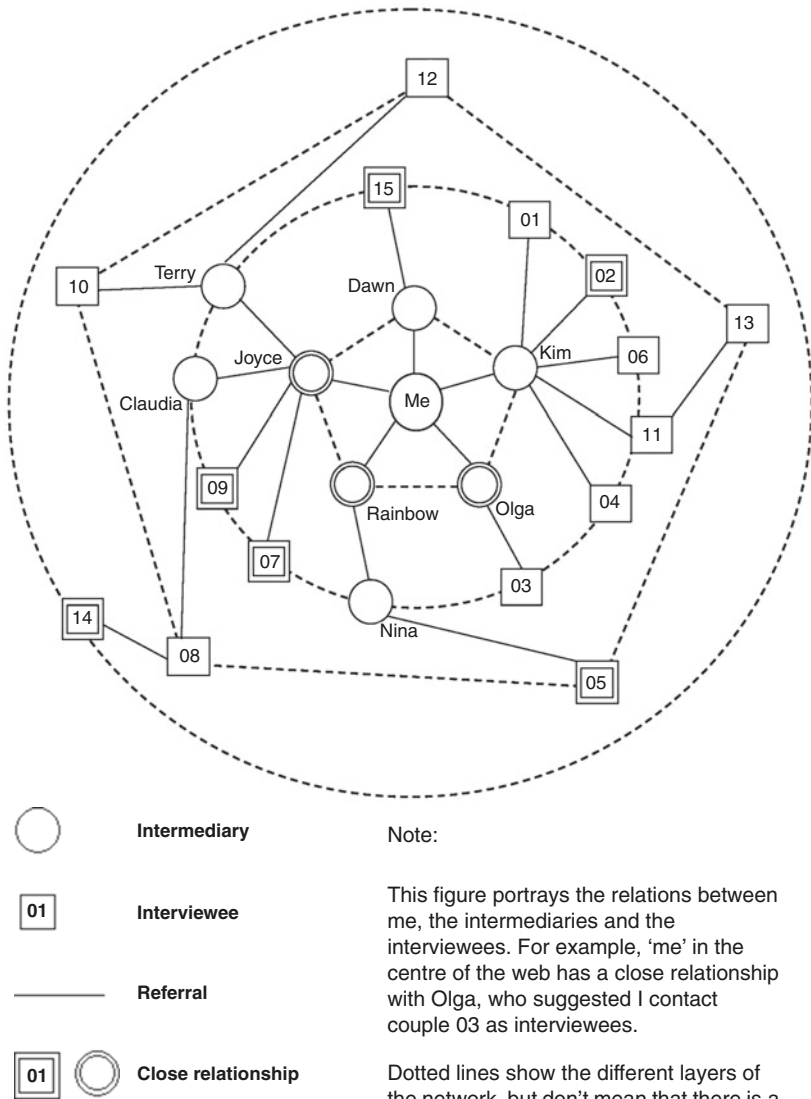


Fig. 3.1 Recruitment network

them, the interviewee had no real feel for who she was or what she was going to do with the information given, and was therefore less willing to talk freely. Well aware of the influences of a known intermediary, I contacted my friends and thereafter used snowballing. I found that my personal networking strategy was very helpful in approaching possible participants; however, it was not necessarily beneficial in getting consent from them.

One exception to snowball sampling is the case of Camille and Petra. I contacted my friend Rainbow with my research requirements and explained my concern about not spreading the advertising. One day, surprisingly, Camille emailed me about their willingness to be interviewed. She said that she had been passed the information by Nina and had no idea where she got it. Nina is one of my acquaintances, but I had not contacted her about my fieldwork. It was my friend Rainbow who had circulated my requirements to others, including Nina. Rainbow then realised that it might be against my intentions and sent another email to stop the spread. As mentioned before, advertising among the community produces a highly self-selected sample. Camille and Petra actively wanted to participate because they saw it as an opportunity to review their 13-year relationship. In fact, they were the only couple who responded because of the email.

I started contacting my friends (the intermediaries) two months before I went back to Taiwan. The requirement was simple: 'I'm looking for lesbian couples aged over 30 who are childless, self-identified, in a stable, long-term relationship and have been living together for at least two years.' A few potential couples were suggested for me to get in touch with through emails. Their responses are very interesting; fortunately some of them consented with no questions, some asked for further details of my research and some were considering their decisions, or were about to refuse, after reading my return emails. The reasons that people refused or hesitated to be interviewed are varied. Because my research is about private issues, I realised that I should provide more space and information for them to consider. To ease the lack of trust and unfamiliarity that a more distant relationship between me, the intermediary and the interviewee might cause, I thus suggested a first casual meeting before they made the decision, even though doing so would take up more fieldwork time. They were told that they were free to ask me anything about the research and about me and were under no pressure to make a decision. Most of them agreed. In the end, all the

couples who met up with me before the interviews consented to participate in my study.

I believe that the first meeting was crucial for my participants to agree to being interviewed. The more they knew about me and my research, the more willing they were to be involved. During the casual conversation, I explained my study background, the research I was doing, what had made me interested in this topic and so on. I also explained that my main interest is in family practices; our conversation might involve sexual lives but this would not be the main issue and would not be discussed in detail. I made it clear that I did not intend to question them about sexual practices.

At the first meeting, many questions came up, both expected and unexpected. They were interested in my sexuality/identity, my relationships, current status and previous ones, my student life in the UK, habits in common and gossip. One couple even tried to match me up with one of their friends. I did not record any of these conversations or include them as part of my data, although they indeed gave me some ideas and helped to smooth the interviews later on. The only thing I collected during the first meeting was background information, including: age, duration of relationship and cohabitation, educational background, employment and family background. I noticed that people became uncomfortable if the interviewer was writing while interviewing and thus I did not make notes during the interviews, but they seemed to feel fine if I did it while meeting up for the first time. In the first meeting it was really helpful for me to write down simple information about them. For those few cases that did not have a pre-interview meeting, I collected it at the beginning of the couple interview, wrote it down and returned the notebook to my bag immediately.

In terms of sexual identities in my study, in common with other research on non-heterosexuals (Dunne 1997; Heaphy et al. 1998; etc.), self-identification was the key to the sampling approach. However, Heaphy et al. (1998: 457) remind us that, '[s]elf-definition is not unproblematic, but can demonstrate the complexity of identities and the problems of sampling that attempts to rely on neat categories and definitions of these'. As discussed previously, the plurality and changes involved in the translation of what people call lesbians and how they name themselves in Taiwan are diverse in different contexts, and include 'Tong-xing-lian' (同性戀), 'lei-su-bien' (蕾絲邊), 'nyu-tong-zhi' (女同志), 'la-zi' (拉子) and 'la' (拉). Also, the English-language 'lesbian' is sometimes more common than its Mandarin translation. Apart from practical

usage, both in Taiwan and in the West, the diversity of definitions and meanings that shape lesbian identity have initiated considerable academic debate. '[E]ach definition appears either to exclude women who may see or have seen themselves as lesbian (for example, Ferguson 1981), or to include women who do not (for example, Rich 1984)' (Dunne 1997: 25–26, citations in the original). Aware of this, I did not intend to confine or even to confuse the participants or to exclude women who had experienced heterosexual relationships. When recruiting, I chose the term that I generally use to name myself, 'nyu-tong-zhi' (女同志), which is also the most common usage among my friends. However, I asked the participants to talk about their sexual identity when doing individual interviews and learnt about the complexity of identities from them. This will be discussed in more detail in later chapters as it relates to other issues.

I avoided recruiting immediate friends because relationships with family of origin would be questioned, which could cause emotional reactions and be sensitive for some participants. I also tried as much as possible to avoid recruiting lesbian/women's activists as the issue of same-sex marriage rights is currently emerging in Taiwanese society. I was concerned that their activist background might have influenced their notions of family and family practices, although three of them were involved in related movements. During the fieldwork period (August 2010–January 2011), I participated in Kaohsiung gay parade on 18 September and Taiwan Gay Pride on 30 October in Taipei. My empirical study is not designed to review or to support the movement; instead, by participating in the parades I wished to get involved in the wider context of Taiwanese lesbian lifestyles and observe particular notions of family that might differ from those of gay men and Western society.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWEES

The fieldwork took four and half months, during which I conducted qualitative interviews jointly and separately with fifteen couples aged, on average, 33. The oldest participant was 40 and the youngest 28. This generation has benefitted from the educational expansion since 1968, when the government introduced nine-year compulsory schooling. Most had attended higher education; 13 had BA degrees, nine had MAs and two had PhDs. Their parents were less well-educated; 14 out of 59 attended higher education; none of them had a PhD, only one had an MA degree and 13 had BAs (see Appendix).

I chose the assumed names for the participants from popular lesbian novels and movies, such as Nan (Nancy) and Kitty in *Tipping the Velvet*, Nic and Jules in the American movie *Kids Are All Right* and Tina and Bette in the famous drama serial *The L word*. In remembrance of the iconic Taiwanese lesbian novelist Qiu Miao-Jin, Crocodile and Zoe are names of the main characters in two of her influential semi-autobiographical novels; *Eu Yu Shou Ji* (鱷魚手記, Notes of the Crocodile) and *Meng Ma Te Yi Shu* (蒙馬特遺書, Montmartre Testament). At the time of the interviews, the length of relationships varied from four months to 16 years. All except two individuals had siblings, on average two, with four being the most. One couple had a five-year-old daughter; seven couples had cats, one had a dog and one had both. A short description of the interviewees is presented in Table 3.1. Of the 15 couples 13 were living together at the time of interview, while the other two lived separately and were planning to move in together in the future. Among the 13 cohabitating couples, three lived with flatmates and/or family and one couple had flatmates where they spent their weekdays (Jessica and Helen). Four out of the 13 couples owned their flats, two lived in family-owned ones and the other seven couples rented flats. One month after the interview, one couple (Clarissa and Sally) bought their own house. In two couples both partners owned a flats; they lived in one of them and rented the other out. Two of the cohabitating couples had unconventional living arrangements; Jessica and Helen lived in Jessica's place (family-owned) during the working week with one flatmate and spent their weekends at Helen's place (also family-owned) with just each other. Edith and Abby lived separately in their parents' houses on weekdays and lived together during the weekends in Edith's own flat. Compared to the 'lao-T' in Chao's (2002, 2005) studies, who were born during the 1940s up to 1961 and faced housing difficulties, my participants were younger and had relatively more opportunities to form a family.

The study group was designed to include 10 to 15 lesbian couples who were over 30 years old, childless and had been living together for two years or more. These criteria were to establish the feasibility of my study; but they changed slightly as the study progressed. All the shifts showed the complex nature of the concepts and languages we use in dealing with lesbian relationships and also encouraged me to rethink the scenario I had set up for my research.

Dunne's (1997: 23–24) participants were aged on average 30, ranging from 17 to 59, to study different stages of the life cycle. Chen (2005: 7)

**Table 3.1** Snapshot of interviewees

<i>Assumed name (Age)</i>	<i>Place of residency</i>	<i>Educational background</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Child/ Pet</i>
<b>Clarissa (36)</b>	TPE	MA	Public servant (law-related)	Cats
<b>Sally (36)</b>		MA	Law firm	
<b>Jessica (35)</b>	TPE	MA	Unemployed	Cats
<b>Helen (34)</b>		MA	NPO staff	
<b>Evelyn (30)</b>	TPE	Vocational	Advertising	Cats
<b>Ninny (30)</b>		high school Junior college	Service sector	
<b>Wilhelmina (32)</b>	TPE	BA	Hardware engineer	Cat
<b>Vivian (35)</b>		BA	Software engineer	
<b>Camille (31)</b>	TPE	MA	Social worker	Cat
<b>Petra (32)</b>		MA	Software engineer	
<b>Maggie (32)</b>	USA	PhD	Final year PhD	
<b>Angel (30)</b>	Taichung	PhD	Assistant Professor	
<b>Angie (37)</b>	Hsinchu	BA	Management in electronic semiconductor industry	
<b>Clara (37)</b>		BA	Infant school teacher (part time)	
<b>Edith (32)</b>	Kaohsiung	MA	Junior high school teacher	
<b>Abby (32)</b>		BA	Medical service	
<b>Lisbeth (35)</b>	Yilan	BA	Publishing house owner	
<b>Mimmi (40)</b>		High school	Writer	
<b>Rachel (32)</b>	TPE	MA	PR	
<b>Luce (32)</b>		BA	Service sector	
<b>Nic (29)</b>	TPE	MA	Primary school teacher	Cat
<b>Jules (34)</b>		Junior college	Small cafeteria owner	
<b>Crocodile (35)</b>	TPE	BA	Dentist	Cat &
<b>Zoe (29)</b>		Vocational high school	Shop assistant in family-owned grocery store	Dog
<b>Tina (32)</b>	Taoyuan	BA	Unemployed for 3 months	Child
<b>Bette (34)</b>		High school	Manufacturing	
<b>Theresa (31)</b>	TPE	BA	Educational administration	Dog
<b>Jess (32)</b>		BA	Medical services	
<b>Kitty (31)</b>	TPE	BA	Educational administration	Cat
<b>Nan (28)</b>	Tainan	BA	Works in family-owned business	

set the required age of her interviewees at over 20, 'considering the stability of self-identity, maturity of mentality and the pressure to get married'. Like her, a relatively more stable identity was one of my concerns. Li (2007: 22) was concerned about the economic resources needed for doing family and focused on interviewees' employment; she therefore looked for couples in which at least one had a job or was financially independent. Also, she found that the age of 30 is a crucial point for getting married among Taiwanese women nowadays. Judging by the median age at first marriage of Taiwanese women, which in 2009 was 28.4 (DHRA 2009), the 1980s birth cohort are expected to marry around their late 20s to early 30s. Taiwanese lesbians in our 30s have experienced the pressure to marry. Thus I set the age limit above 30 as it is beyond the culturally expected age to marry. Finally, the very personal reason that I wished to research lesbians in their 30s was: we are of the same generation and were brought up in a similar social context.

Benefitting from educational expansion, high rates of labour force participation and increasing economic independence, women in my generation may be more able to choose our own lifestyles than previous generations. Those who are under 30 may be still in education or have just started working. However, a required age limit is not necessarily a restriction as individual differences exist. For example, the youngest participant, Nan (aged 28), had been working for years since graduating from university and was financially independent and stable.

Similarly, I modified the requirement for the duration of relationship and cohabitation; Li (op. cit.) argues that a long duration of dating is not a necessary determinant for a 'serious' relationship or family formation. She therefore considered 'the sense of becoming a family' as the most important criterion in her study. I used the requirement of a two-year relationship at the beginning of recruiting and then realised that this actually limited the developing idea of relationship/family, as well as my research. Thus, I revised the language to a 'stable long-term relationship' and left it open to my participants to interpret. Take Kitty and Nan for example, they had been dating for two years, which they claimed had been an unhealthy relationship, separated for one year and then restarted a relatively stable and serious relationship four months prior to the interview.

Recruiting a couple with a child was really outside my plan. After interviewing most couples, one of my participants contacted me and asked if I wanted to recruit her ex-girlfriend, who was in a couple with a five-year-old daughter. On my supervisor's advice and with the idea



of qualitative research ‘going with the flow’, I contacted them and waited for unexpected interesting things to come out of it. The only issue we had to sort out was the childcare while doing the couple interview. They asked Tina’s mother to take care of their daughter and then we had time to talk.

Snowball sampling is highly practical and efficient, especially for a small qualitative study targeting a ‘hidden population’ such as this. The most successful method of recruitment was snowballing from my friendship network and previous participants; the latter produced the couple with one child. Furthermore, this recruitment method protects the anonymity and confidentiality of participants by avoiding public advertising. However, these methods often result in a homogenous sample and participants who are likely to share certain beliefs, views and characteristics. While some effort was made to vary the sample through starting snowballing from different community groups and by avoiding convenience sampling, my choice of method seems to have resulted in a sample of ‘middle-class’ lesbian couples. Participants were mostly well-educated and many of them were professionals with a greater potential to be property owners.

My original intention was not to sample middle-class women or women from similar class backgrounds. I classified people for sampling and analytical purposes on the basis only of age, identity and specific couple experiences. In addition, I did not ask participants what they perceived their class background to be, nor did I make assumptions from their narratives to place them in designated class groupings. Although the recruitment methods used might have limited participant diversity, the conclusions obtained have highlighted the current social situation—the difficulty of making lesbian families in Taiwan—which will be discussed in the conclusion.

## INTERVIEWING

### *Interview Format*

My interviews started with the couple interview and then the two individual interviews. The format of the interviews was carefully explained the first time we met or before starting. Unlike Heaphy and Einarsdottir (2013), who arranged the individual interviews in alphabetical order according to partners’ first names, which seemed to be rational to the participants, I had not planned the order of the two individual interviews in advance and left it open to the couple for their convenience and

preference. Most of my participants did not insist on the order and arranged the two individual interviews according to their own schedules; however, I found that the sequence might mean something to the couple. In Crocodile and Zoe's case, before the couple interview Crocodile asked me to arrange her individual interview first and then Zoe's because she judged that this might ease Zoe's fear about the unknown individual interview. Interestingly, after the couple interview when we were fixing up the individual sessions, Zoe showed no preference about whether to be interviewed before or after her partner.

Most interviews were conducted on weekday evenings or during the weekend, in order to coordinate with informants' work time. I asked participants to set aside three hours of their time for the couple interviews and two hours for each individual interview. Because of the time limit and mental energy, I conducted no more than two couple interviews per day and arranged the others for other days.

The initial interview plans were open-ended and designed to guide the informants through key factors of their family practices, based on four key themes: relationship over time, individual histories, forming a lesbian family and both partners' family of origin. The couple interview focused on the couple's relationship story, family practice, relationship commitments and their notion of family. Individual interviews focused especially on sexual identity, previous relationships, family relationships and interactions with her partner's family of origin. The initial interview schedule based on the four key themes was as follows: [Table 3.2](#) presents the questions for the couple interviews and [Table 3.3](#) presents those for individual interviews.

Researching lesbians 'doing family' in Taiwan, Li (2007: 23) found that most of her participants were very sensitive about interviews related to private, lesbian relationships and wanted to complete the interview together. None of her interviews were done at home. I was aware of the possible difficulty that my interview format might cause. My participants were asked to arrange three interview times and could be interviewed at home. I could not have conducted my interviews without their friendly cooperation.

### *Conducting the Interviews*

An ideal interview location should be private and quiet to allow both interviewer and interviewee to concentrate and for the best quality recording. Based on the commonality we shared and the mutual trust due to having a friend in common, I suggested conducting interviews in

**Table 3.2** Couple interview questions

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-topics</i>
Background information	Assumed name, age, duration of the relationship, educational background, employment, family background, kinship
Forming a lesbian family	Story of becoming a couple, notions of family, (long-term) commitment, decision/negotiation about cohabiting/ forming a family (when and how), living arrangements, practical issues, future expectations/plans, willingness to have children, home ownership (if any), house purchasing plan, everyday-life interactions (in terms of sexual role), division of household labour, financial arrangements, decision-making, conflict resolution, views on egalitarian relationships, development and future expectations of the relationship
Relations with both partners' family of origin	Disclosure of sexuality and relationship (if not, how to justify their cohabiting), leaving home stories, pressure to marry, relations and interactions with both families of origin, obstacles and/or support from both families of origin when forming their own family, importance of recognition from family of origin, elder-care arrangements for both sets of parents.

informants' homes, which might help to ease the tension of interviewing and also satisfy the material requirements of the interview setting. However, as a stranger concerned about visiting private places, I did not insist on conducting the interviews at their home, especially for individual interviews. As mentioned earlier, 13 out of 15 couples lived together at the time of interviewing, while the other two couples lived separately. Among the 13 cohabitating couples, four lived with flatmates or family and one couple had flatmates at the place they spent their weekdays. In these cases, the interviews might have been interrupted and influenced if there were people around. Both my participants and I noted this issue in advance and made arrangements accordingly. When conducting fieldwork on private, sexual issues, Chen (2003: 68–69) noted the inevitable difference between doing interviews in public and in private (or without interruptions). In her interviews she was concerned that the conversation might be easily overheard by other customers if it took place in a coffee shop and in one case of

**Table 3.3** Individual interview questions

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-topics</i>
Identity	Self-defined identity/self-identified sexual role, previous relationship experience
Coming out history	Experiences of coming out (who, how and influences), social life, friendship network, importance of lesbian community, involvement in lesbian and/or feminist movement, sexuality in the workplace
Relational practice	Tensions between partners, negotiation pattern, (long-term) commitment, couple interactions (in terms of sexual role), division of household labour, financial arrangements, decision-making, conflict resolution, views on egalitarian relationship, future expectations of the relationship
Family of origin	Experiences of coming out to family, parents' and/or siblings' views on lesbian sexuality and relationship, family relationship, obstacles and/or support when forming their own family, recognition and acceptance
Partner's family of origin	Relation and interaction with partner's family of origin, role in partner's family relationships, participation in family get-togethers, recognition and acceptance from partner's family of origin

interviewing at home the interviewee consciously suspended the conversation when his daughter walked by.

Location was an important factor in ensuring the interviewee felt at ease. I asked whether they wished to be interviewed at home for the couple interview and provided an alternative place for those participants who wanted to be interviewed elsewhere. If they wished to have interviews done in a shared house, we also arranged time according to the flatmate's schedule. In the end, eight out of 15 couple interviews and six out of 30 individual interviews were conducted at home. Most other interviews in Taipei were conducted in an empty café called 'Station',<sup>1</sup> which was in the basement below a friend's clothes shop. It was more private and quieter than any other café and was located in an easily accessible part of Taipei city centre.

As some of the interviews were conducted in the couples' homes, to protect my own safety, I let one of my close friends know in advance where and when the interview would be carried out, and contacted her before and after.

<sup>1</sup> It was closed to customers and I was given special access.

My participants were quite flexible and thoughtful about the place of interview. Only three couples refused my visit to their homes. I discovered that to accept my interview request both jointly and separately on sensitive and private topics is one thing, to invade the privacy of their homes is another. Even though some of them had met me once before the interview and I had disclosed my sexuality to them, various considerations still existed that were also related to cultural norms. For example, Evelyn and Ninny refused to be interviewed at home as Evelyn claimed: 'Our place is in a mess.' A clean and tidy home was considered a general norm by many of my participants; many of them told me that they had cleaned up their places before my visit. For other couples who lived with family or flat-mates, their decisions may have involved other residents' privacy as well as their own. Unexpectedly, many couples welcomed my visit but changed their minds due to the convenience of meeting up at 'Station'. One of the reasons was the location; some participants chose 'Station' as it is easily reachable after work and located in a famous shopping area. Kitty, for example, lived and worked on the outskirts of Taipei city and was very happy for me to conduct the interview in her home. However, when I mentioned the location of 'Station', she cheerfully changed her mind as the interview provided her with a chance to dine and shop in the area.

Considering participants' convenience, their possible concerns, confidentiality and recording quality, I provided an alternative interviewing place. However, the choice was left to the interviewees as to where they would feel most comfortable and where was most convenient for them. For those participants who lived in other cities, I went to visit them or conducted the interviews in Taipei if they had travel plans. In most cases, participants who lived in cities other than Taipei suggested being interviewed in Taipei if possible as it would be more convenient for me. Lisbeth and Mimmi, who lived in Yilan, were jointly interviewed at home and separately interviewed at 'Station' one after the other while they were visiting Taipei. Similarly in Kitty and Nan's case, I interviewed the couple and Nan individually when she came up to see Kitty in Taipei. The interviews were mostly in Taipei and the others were in Taoyuan, Hsinchu, Yilan and Kaohsiung. [Figure 3.2](#) presents the locations of the interviews.

Attributable to both a known intermediary and/or an initial meeting in some cases, I believe my participants were all willing to talk openly and express their feelings as if in a casual chat. Impressively, one of the couples was shocked by the completion of the interview after three hours 'chat'; they thought the 'formal' interview had not yet begun. A few participants



Fig. 3.2 Interviewing locations

were unsure of what to say in the interviews and expressed their worries by saying: 'We're just an ordinary couple, nothing special to contribute to the research.' A similar issue arose in Liu's (2007: 16) research; most of her interviewees responded with 'I am not worthy of being interviewed', as interviewing in China is generally assumed to be for a journalistic purpose. Liu then explained that the interview was different from the popular sense and was more like a casual chat. She also 'cited other women as examples by saying that a few who felt that they had nothing to say had ended up talking for more than two hours' (ibid.). My way of resolving the issue was to assure them that there were no difficult questions and they were only being asked to tell their own stories. Every account is special to me and my research because the stories are told by lesbian couples who live their lives in their own ways.

Petra was very cautious about her time commitment and said in advance that she could only afford one and a half hours for my interview. Nevertheless, when the interview was near the end and I was about to close the conversation she said that she didn't mind spending more time and was keen to answer more questions as she was in a good mood for talking. 'Time is unnoticed when I chat away,' she said. I told her that she was free to say anything she wanted to, including anything that we had not mentioned in the interview. In the end we continued the conversation for another hour. On average, I spent seven hours in total interviewing each couple; three hours for the couple interview, and two hours for each individual interview. Three couple interviews took more than three and a half hours and the shortest one took just under two hours. The interviewee who gave the shortest interview was not pressed for time, but the interview took place in a distracting café that caused us both discomfort. That location was chosen for my interviewee's convenience and in other interviews the privacy of the location was of most concern.

### *Interviewing Couples Together and Apart*

Influential studies on same-sex couples have suggested that same-sex relationships are more equal than heterosexual ones, mainly because of gender sameness (e.g. Dunne 1997; Weeks et al. 2001). However, many emerging studies have also argued that relational inequality exists between same-sex couples (e.g. Gabb 2004; Heap and Einarsdottir 2013). Considering that relationships, in practice, are correlated with social, familial and personal aspects, my approach looks at how Taiwanese lesbian

couples situated themselves when negotiating relationships with each other. The relational interactions that are constructed on the basis of flouting dynamics of power, therefore, could be explored by conducting interviews both jointly and apart.

When interviewing couples Heaphy and Einarsdottir (2013) noticed that some had a ‘dominant’ narrator. In extreme cases, the dominant narrator was not only in control of the storytelling but the relationship itself was structured according to her. It was the ‘scripting capital’ that influenced one partner’s dominance in telling the couple story:

relationship ‘expertise’ where one partner was more experienced in relationships than another or could claim to be more knowledgeable about how relationships should work. Combined with other kinds of resources (economic, social and cultural), claims to expertise could allow a partner to accrue greater *scripting capital* that, in turn, could enable her or him to be dominant in structuring the relationship itself. (Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2013: 62, emphasis in the original)

The significance of such scripting capital can be illuminated by how couples begin to tell their stories. There was not always an obvious dominant narrator between partners in my study, nor were they explicitly negotiating who would start or deciding to ‘do it together’ in the first few moments. The absence of negotiations, however, might not necessarily reflect an unequal structuring of relationships. If indecisive, one of them would speak straight away and the other would naturally continue to talk while reaching a comfortable rhythm in their storytelling. Take Jessica and Helen as an example. Following my question: ‘How did the relationship begin?’ Jessica first gave one sentence of comment and then Helen narrated a fuller version of the story and asked her partner to expand it. And Jessica went on to provide her part. It was more like ‘partners took turns at speaking, displaying more equal “ownership” of the relationship story, and suggesting that partners were equally resourced to narrate and structure it’ (ibid.: 11). Sometimes, the exchange would be followed by a suggestion or request to the other party. Theresa and Jess serve as one example:

Theresa: Um . . . I don’t know how to explain because there are plausible accounts of the event.

Jess: What do you mean by plausible accounts?



- Iris: Does it mean that until now you two have not come to an agreement on the story?
- Jess: Yes, there is. Let's put it in a simple way: she pursued me.
- Theresa: Come on! You . . . you [Jess] seemed to have a different statement at the very beginning [stage of our relationship].
- Iris: Have there been any discussions or debates over the years?
- Theresa: I suggest that it's better to have her saying.
- Iris: Either of you, or both.
- Jess: Oh, you go on.
- Theresa: Because I want to know her true feelings about it.

After a simple summary was given by Jess, Theresa responded: 'The account for today is so simple!' I encouraged Theresa to expand or correct Jess's version if she wanted. She then added some details and confirmed what Jess had said by saying 'She said *all right* when I disclosed my love to her' (my emphasis).

It seemed as though Lisbeth and Mimmi had talked over their story many times. Thus, Lisbeth was aware of the equal narrating and consciously passed the authority of storytelling to Mimmi. However, she initiated telling the story in her own way rather than introducing her partner to join the conversation as she claimed she would.

- Lisbeth: Because she is always there . . .
- Mimmi: (Overlapping) In the end I am the one who keeps company with her all the time.
- Lisbeth: She is with me constantly. [Mimmi: Yes.] Yes, and I'll tell you one thing . . . that . . . um . . . that . . . , in fact, I could have ignored her. For me she is . . . You say this by yourself. Every time you asked me to say your part for you, now you say it. Why? What is the reason that you are always around me? And why should I care since I could have disregarded you?
- Mimmi: What? It sounds very complicated.
- Lisbeth: You can tell the story in your own way. I presented the story in my way; it's your turn now.

Very occasionally, one partner would take the lead, although in these cases the other would echo her partner or give her own opinions. When interviewing Crocodile and Zoe, I noticed that Crocodile was very protective of Zoe about the possibility of any difficult or embarrassing questions. However, Crocodile, the leading storyteller, would

seek confirmation or correction from Zoe. It caused no conflicts if Zoe corrected Crocodile's memory or had a different interpretation of the story.

Some of the couples had been developing their friendship for quite a while before starting the relationship. In these cases, their relationship story would begin with a narrative of previous interactions and sometimes was followed by their explanation of why they did not get together at an earlier stage. Camille and Petra fell into this category. They spent a few moments narrating their interactions before beginning their relationship. When it came to the start of the relationship, Camille suggested that Petra explain the situation while she herself needed some more time to recall.

- Petra: We were classmates in high school.  
 Iris: But you didn't commit to the relationship until university, did you?  
 Camille: We started seeing each other during the summer vacation before going to university.  
 Iris: Then . . . what was the turning point? (Pause, embarrassment)  
 It's fine if you find it uncomfortable to say.  
 Petra: Frankly, no. We've talked about this a hundred times!  
 Camille: It just takes time to recall, it's been a long time. [ . . . ] You go on and explain what happened to you [before we started seeing each other]. I need to recall my memory.  
 Petra: Me? What happened to me?

Conducting interviews with couples together and apart enabled me to explore the flow of relational power between them and to make connections between the stories couples tell and the relational selves revealed in each individual interview.

### *Ethical Issues*

Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured before gaining the participants' oral consent. Consent was recorded instead of signing a formal consent form, because Taiwanese women might be reluctant to sign a formal document to avoid being publicly identified as lesbians. The interviewees were informed that the interviews would be recorded with their permission and that the transcripts would be used only for research purposes. All names were changed in the thesis. I clarified to the

participants that the individual interviews were not being conducted to look for contradictions between the two accounts, but to explore individual histories. And I assured them that the information given in individual interviews would be kept strictly confidential and would not be shared with their partner. The participants were encouraged to tell their stories as completely as possible, but they knew that they could stop at any time if there were any concerns. I told them that my main interest was in family practices and that the conversation might involve sexual lives but this would not be the main issue and would not be discussed in detail. I did not intend to question them about sexual practices.

Any details relating to names, emails, addresses and other sensitive information were separated from the recordings and transcripts. I removed identifying information from my transcripts and assured participants that no identifying information about individuals would be revealed in written or other communication. Unusual locations, work places, institutions and friends' names that could be identified from a description were also changed in the quotes to protect participants' privacy and anonymity.

Since I prioritised participants' convenience for interview arrangements, three interviews with each couple were conducted on separate dates except for one couple, who did the two individual interviews one after another. The interview sequence created time gaps between them and thus the possibility of discussing interview content with their not yet interviewed partner. While I assured the confidentiality of each individual interview and I would not pass any information to either interviewee, participants had a chance to share them with their partner prior to the following individual interview. They might have revealed my interview questions, their answers to them or their experience during the interview. I did not, however, raise this as a possible issue or ask them to avoid it. In fact, only one participant, Jessica, mentioned this at the end of her interview and asked me whether it would cause problems for my research or not if she talked about my interview questions with her partner. I explained to her that it would be her decision to reveal or not to reveal them because I had no intention of challenging their trust and making them keep secrets from each other. Neither did I worry about interview questions been practised or rehearsed since these interviews were all about participants' personal history and experiences. Thus I believed the disclosure did little harm to the interview account I was going to be given. Jessica agreed with me and thought it would be more fun to discuss my interview when her partner had done hers. However, she wanted to

confirm that a slip of the tongue would not have a terrible impact on my work since talking to each other about what their day had been like was their daily routine and would keep their relationship healthy.

Jessica and her partner were my second couple and I did not change my strategy in subsequent interviews. However, I randomly asked the second individual interviewee whether her partner had shared interview content with her or not. Interestingly, the answer was usually no or their conversation about the individual interview merely touched the surface. Participants were not asked not to discuss it, but they chose not to, or chose not to tell me. They often talked about the couple interview, as they shared the stories and, if something was not known before my interview, they might wish to talk about it again privately afterwards. Individual interviews, by definition, were about personal issues, which a participant might or might not want to share with their partner. Keeping their account confidential was my responsibility, but the decision to disclose to their partner (or not) was theirs alone.

Interviews were conducted when I gained participants' oral consent. Women in my family who were involved in my autobiography chapter, however, were not asked to provide their consent or were unable to give it. Telling family stories is my way of situating myself in this research and thus I consider it involves different ethical issues from using biographies of research subjects in sociological research. My family story, involving other women in my family, in fact is my story and my memory. Through women's stories across three generations in my own family, which parallel literature on social change in Taiwan, I attempt to present a picture of how women's lives and family relationships have been changing over the decades. I am telling stories drawing upon my experiences and memories and stories told to me. My other purpose about using personal narratives is about the ethics of representation. By providing an insider's narrative I hope my accounts can help to explain Taiwanese women's life experiences and make them more understandable to outsiders. Self-narrative is revealing something about myself; in this research my personal story serves to locate me within Taiwanese society and expose both myself and my participants.

### ANALYSIS OF DATA

I conducted all the interviews in Mandarin Chinese, although occasionally participants would use English and/or Taiwanese Minnanyu to express themselves. This often happened when they found better or more familiar

expressions in languages other than Mandarin. For example, participants who had experienced living or studying abroad would sometimes use English vocabulary in mostly Mandarin sentences. Or, participants from Minnanyu-speaking families occasionally used Minnanyu idioms. In such cases, I would confirm with them in Mandarin to make sure I had not misunderstood them.

The total length of my 45 interviews exceeded 105 hours and data were all transcribed in Mandarin, unless otherwise specified. Since I aimed to minimise my involvement during the interviews and to encourage them to talk freely, I found that they occasionally included casual talk. I recorded emotions (laughter, silence and significant pauses, e.g. 'hmm') as much as I could; however, at the beginning of transcribing, I intended to skip those casual chats. My transcription style changed quite quickly when I realised that I could be missing crucial conversation in among 'irrelevant chat'. It is also worthy of notice that, as the interviews progressed, interviewees produced their own narratives with a mixture of answers to my questions and relevant memories, which might easily be viewed as chatting. I therefore transcribed the whole interview, and found how important the 'chatting' was later when I read through the transcripts.

I did not translate quotes into English until they were preliminarily selected for inclusion in the thesis. This was to capture the original meaning, acknowledging the importance of analysing accounts in the original language. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and distinctive personal information was avoided in order to avoid them being easily recognised. When doing the translation, I romanised specific Mandarin terms that have no equivalent in English or that might easily confuse readers; all romanised vocabulary is followed by the original Mandarin and English translation in brackets. Translating quotes became difficult when I tried to keep the colloquial conversation as original as possible, but could not find equivalent idioms and/or expressions in English.

To organise the enormous amount of data, I coded the transcripts manually and demarcated layers of corresponding themes associated with my research questions and in relation to debates in the existing literature. Four main themes emerged, and these formed my main analysis: formation of lesbian identity, lesbians in their families of origin, relational practices and home arrangements. As themes emerged, I created new Word documents with the themes as headings and selected relevant quotes from transcripts to place under these headings. Each quotation clip was

summarised to manage the data more easily. I categorised different points of view under the same headings and created subheadings to develop meaningful comparisons.

Transcripts were originally printed out and organised into 15 sets of couple documents, each containing transcripts of one couple interview and two individual interviews. Making sense of a massive amount of data was a fascinating, but time-consuming, process. The key point was to make them manageable. The first stage of my data organisation was to familiarise myself with the content and highlight important topics from the couple documents. Topics were indexed primarily according to research questions at this stage. I kept my research questions nearby in the process of developing and applying new categories, as Mason (2002: 160) suggests, and constantly crosschecked them with the data. Then I went on to index topics that emerged outside the research questions. Interviewees spontaneously initiated these unexpected discussions in most cases, except in the case of the couple with a child where I slightly amended the interview questions. The experience of living with a child was out of my expectation, however, their narratives became significant in the analysis process as they provided a different perspective on making a lesbian family in Taiwan.

As my aim was to explore lesbians' families and relationships, I sought to capture the voices of people who were trying to relate their intimate life through their stories about it. With this in mind, further indexing and retrieving methods were thematic and systematic. Selected relevant quotations from transcripts under themed topics were placed in separate indexing documents. At this stage, each theme document had 15 sections from couple interviews or/and 30 sections from individual interviews, unless the information was not provided. However, each section of quotation could contain more than one theme and conversely each sequence of the quotation could come from a different part of the interview. This is because in-depth interviews are less structured and questions are not asked, and might not be answered, in a particular order. Interviewees were encouraged to talk freely and it is possible that similar questions come back into the discussion some time later to keep interviews running smoothly. Similarly, interviews sometimes went off at a tangent and unexpected topics might be brought into the discussion.

I created tables and figures for organising information wherever they were needed. Diagrammatic presentations of data were made to help comparison and to be read more easily and quickly; in addition, the use of tables and figures helped make analysing the data more efficient and systematic.

These themed topics were also divided into two major parts; one mostly from individual interviews, and the other mostly from couple interviews. As I started with couple interviews, I concentrated on relational histories, household arrangements and their relations with both partners' family of origin. Data from the individual interviews covered issues of sexual identity, previous relationships and their relationships with families of origin. Some issues were covered in both couple and individual interviews. In addition, interviewees commonly initiated discussions of previous relationships in couple interviews or continued their relational experiences in individual interviews. Thus, there was some overlap between the two sources of interview data; nevertheless, themes could still be identified and [Chapter 4](#) is based entirely on individual interviews. Following the individual narratives, I then moved on to the couple's relationship and to their wider social relations and social context.

Thematic analysis requires researchers to attempt to go beyond the surface meanings of the data to make sense of it and tell an accurate story of what the data means. The most difficult part of a comprehensive analysis is to contextualise the themed topics and to make logical arguments based on them. It is crucial for researchers to be able to define themes, to determine which aspects of data are being captured and what is interesting about the themes by reading data extracts interpretively and reflectively. I attempted to weave my data into a coherent story to give a picture of how these lesbians' lives are lived.

Finally, I took a descriptive approach to presenting themes and to analysing what made them meaningful. As my aim was to detail the culture of lesbians' families and the different ways they were making it, I set out with the primary goal of description. However, this research is not purely descriptive. I did not stop at descriptions and I went on to examine patterns and to contextualise the phenomena I described. I appreciate theories that are built from the ground, which are founded on empirical observation. Since my research area is relatively little known, but emerging, and Taiwanese lesbian culture is new to Western readers, I see it as my responsibility to present a clear, and hopefully, vivid picture. At the same time I hope that in constructing a detailed representation of these lives I can improve future understanding. I want, above all, to give priority to the stories I was told and to give a voice to the interviewees in their own ways of telling their lives.

## REFLECTION ON THE PROCESS

Before I started analysing the interviews, I was pre-warned that I would become tired of reading transcripts over and over again. This necessary process was, however, a great pleasure to me, never a chore. I sometimes found myself laughing out loud and the next second my eyes brimmed with tears. My emotions were no coincidence. These were not random romantic stories that would touch anyone's heart, but reflections of me and my friends. Being an insider, I was familiar with the bitterness and sweetness in their accounts and could explore unfamiliarity based on those.

Studies on same-sex relationships, both in the West and in Asia, have illustrated their creativity and diversity that differs from conventional heterosexual relationships. Lesbian-formed families have also been described as 'families of choice' that advocate an egalitarian model of family form. However, my understanding of Taiwanese lesbian relationships seems to present a different picture. My curiosity about these differences became my research questions and later formed my comparative arguments. Rather than contesting the accuracy of others' research, I suggest that the reason for differences between analyses lies in the subjectivity of the researcher and relates to the standpoint from which researchers are speaking. Thus I sought to locate myself in relation to my work by looking into my own family history and snowballing interviewees through my friends. As Gabb (2004) has pointed out, the 'insider' status of researchers in this field is all but routine, where the researcher's lesbian status is highlighted at the outset and situated as crucial to the research process. However, I do not suggest my insider knowledge is unique among researchers, but merely a factor that enhances the research.

My sameness gave me an advantage in recruiting my interviewees via friendship networking. Interviewees were friends of my friends and had prior trust in my research and myself. All the interviews went smoothly and interviewees talked to me as one of them. Many interviews were conducted in interviewees' own homes without hesitation. I could relate to similarities and differences based on shared generational knowledge and socio-economic background. Nonetheless, my academic status and sampling style also gave me a disadvantage and might have put off potential participants. One couple told me that my non-academic appearance eased their worries about being involved in 'serious'



academic research. Many of my interviewees regarded their involvement in my research as helping out 'similar people' rather than coming forward for academic purposes. I was aware during the interviews of my own status as researcher, but did not predominantly have more information about lesbian couple lifestyles than my interviewees. Their stories presented a variety of elements in their relationships. It was not always romantic and sweet notions that occurred during the interviews; yet I sometimes envied their stable, loving relationships, partly because of my lack of experience in long-term relationships. The majority of them had experienced (and were still in) stable relationships that were longer than any I had had. And, surprisingly, I was often offered matchmaking with someone in their group, although I never accepted it. I acknowledge the limitations of my study and the fact that my own experiences and research data from interviewees' narratives represent only a fraction of the diversity in lesbian relationships.

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## Individual Sexual Stories

In this chapter, I explore my participants' individual sexual narratives, focusing on accounts of becoming sexual, lesbian identity and sexual roles. These accounts differed depending on whether they had prior heterosexual experiences. I first consider how these Taiwanese women acknowledge same-sex attraction. Participants who did not have previous hetero-experiences frequently talked about 'feeling different' from an early age, while those who had such experiences developed varied strategies for struggling with heteronormativity when 'changing sexuality'. I discuss how participants first became aware of same-sex attraction and analyse three strategies through which present lesbian-identified women make sense of their sexualities and their discontinuous pasts and pre-lesbian (or bisexual) selves and embrace a change in identity. I then discuss how Taiwanese lesbians realised, formed and reformed their identity in a patriarchal, heterosexual society and how sexual roles and T-Po role-playing were involved in self-identity, erotic relationships, peer groups and lesbian/feminist community politics. I explore the social spaces within which lesbian women learn the label 'lesbian' in Taiwan, particularly in school, university and other peer groups, through which they establish supportive networks and seek information. Each way of building a community creates different subcultures and norms of lesbianism, particularly in relation to T (masculine) and Po (feminine) roles. Importantly, collective identification is adaptable and may throw up contradictions in the wider community and/or in later relationships.

## BECOMING A LESBIAN

Identifying as non-heterosexual can occur at any stage during the life course; however, early researchers on sexual identity development (for example, studies by psychologist Vivienne Cass 1979) and their critics were more interested in early ages. This is perhaps to be expected, given that most linear stage models ‘mark the onset of sexual identity development as the individual’s first awareness of same-sex attractions, presumed to occur in late childhood or early adolescence’ (Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000: 608). The linear developmental paradigm has been challenged by recent evidence from many perspectives, which suggests that there is much more variation in the process; ‘this approach fails to account for (potential) fluidity in those [sexual] identities’ (Clarke et al. 2010: 156) as it assumes that sexuality is innate, fixed and already there to be introspectively ‘discovered’. This assumption fails to explain cases of trans people (ibid: 156–157), bisexual/unlabelled women (Diamond and Savin-Williams 2000) and women who change their sexual identity from heterosexual to homosexual after a substantial period of heterosexuality (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995).

Overlooking the role of social context (e.g. family, peers and community) and historical processes (e.g. the women’s and gay liberation movement; the AIDS/HIV crisis) in facilitating or impeding development is another crucial problem of standard linear models of sexual identity development; in fact, ‘socio-historical factors may be responsible for considerable differences in experiences of identity development between cohorts’ (Clarke et al. 2010: 157). In addition to symbolic interactionists, who view sexual identity formation as a process of creating an identity through social interaction (cf. Plummer 1975), emerging studies on sexual orientation and sexual identity formation, especially for young people, also point out some more important factors, such as gender differences, ethnicity and social class (Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000; Dubé and Savin-Williams 1999; McDermott 2010). Notably, Diamond and Savin-Williams’s (2000: 308) findings suggest the importance of interactions between women’s personal characteristics and environmental/situational contexts that include, for example, a woman’s family relationships, friendship and local community ties, ethnic background, social class, access to educational and work opportunities, access to information about sexuality, and opportunities for both same-sex and other-sex friendships and romantic relationships.

These factors, however, vary from one country to another. In my empirical data I found variations in Taiwanese lesbian identity over the life course<sup>1</sup> and these were situation dependent. As Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000: 298) suggest, ‘variability in the emergence and expression of female same-sex desire during the life course is normative rather than exceptional’. Taking different circumstances into account may be more important than considering the timing of women’s first same-sex attraction, first sex and first identification.

*That Was the First Time That I Fancied a Girl...*

I begin with individual sexual stories, in which the first same-sex attraction of my participants varies in terms of age and context. I address the importance of individual differences and circumstances as the sexual self is constructed and situated in the wider social context. It is not surprising that recalling the first crush on a girl leads to more memories. Some participants narrated the scenes and the feeling in a dramatic way, which they might not have been able to articulate or name at the time. In some instances, there is chronological incongruence between making meaning of the sexual self, recognition of lesbianism and adopting a lesbian identity (or choosing not to). I present three stories of first same-sex attractions, in order of the age at which the scenes took place.

Although many studies suggest that ‘individuals’ earliest recollections of same-sex attractions take place around age ten’ (Diamond and Savin-Williams 2000: 304), the earliest recollection among my interviewees was from Bette, who talked about her considerable feelings for a girl playmate at the age of four. She waited at her door every morning and shared a ‘precious’ snack with her. Bette recalled that she felt very happy when watching her eat.

There were a few boys and girls in [my grandparents’] village that I played with. I wanted to share my favourites with her in particular. And, I... I think I had the feeling since I was four; the feeling that I was attracted by one particular girl. When I saw her... I could not articulate the feeling... but I was extremely happy when I saw her. (Bette)

<sup>1</sup> This is not the full life course, since my data only covers women aged 28–40.

Compared with the detailed account of her emotional reactions, the interpretation of her affection towards girls was relatively uncertain. This occurrence in childhood was retrospectively used in the present as evidence of her potential lesbianism when she emphasised that she particularly fancied the girl and favoured her among male and female playmates in the neighbourhood. Similarly for Abby, this inarticulate affection towards females did not make sense to her, even in early adolescence.

[At elementary school] you felt like you fancied this person, but were unsure about whether the feeling is so-called love or not. Simply you liked the person. At the time I did not have a clear idea of liking somebody. The strange thing was I might like this person now and then switch to another after a while. [...] The same thing happened when I was in junior high school; I liked this person but soon lost interest. Yeah! I changed my mind easily. I might be rather close to the person for a short time, which means I hung around with her quite often and then I didn't. Thinking back I'd say it was just like pursuing. For example, I would try to please her or that sort of thing. I don't know. I did it that way at the time. (Abby)

In Abby's account, it is obvious that she interpreted these early affections according to her later experiences and understanding of erotic relationships in adulthood. It may be easier to recollect a feeling from the past and reinterpret it in the present than consciously reflect on the process of interpreting and reinterpreting the past. Nic is an exceptional case. Unlike the others, she was the one who actually talked about reflecting back, which others did so less self-consciously. She clarified the difference between 'you knew you liked her at the time' and what happened when 'you recalled the memory and saw it as a liking', and gave me her interpretations of the two.

- Iris: How early did you first discover that you like girls?  
 Nic: Do you mean how I interpret the memory or was I aware of it or not at the time?  
 Iris: Up to you. Do you have different answers for the two questions?  
 Nic: Yes, they are different.  
 Iris: Would you talk about it?  
 Nic: If I traced it back, the first time it happened was in kindergarten.  
 Iris: When did you reflect on the memory?  
 Nic: I reflected on it when I was at university or high school. Well. The university for sure.

Iris: Why did you need to reflect on this?

Nic: Because at the time [in kindergarten] I did not regard it as a behaviour of liking girls.

Nic remembered that when she was in kindergarten she treated girls like boys did. A game they played was an example she gave me. The children set the most beautiful girl on top of the playground equipment and climbed up to get her. The winner should protect her from attacks by other children. She was the only girl who participated in the race. When she reflected on the memory she interpreted it this way:

I thought I'd had feelings towards females at the time. Certainly I had female friends; I considered both my female friends and the particular girl I liked as good friends when I was little. But deep in my mind, somehow I could tell the difference. I explained to myself that she was an especially good friend. That's it. (Nic)

Nic, however, did not have a conscious awareness of homoerotic feelings until junior high school. She claimed that she could not understand why one of her classmates was so upset because they did not have a mutual understanding of their 'friendship'. This girl often wrote her letters and phoned her every night. When she found Nic was closer to other female classmates, she got upset and cried on the phone. Nic was bothered by her at first, but could not ignore her emotional reactions. Thus Nic read through her letters very carefully and realised that this girl liked her but this feeling was not reciprocated. 'I finally realised that a girl might like me as a girl! I did not comprehend it [until she acted this way]. Anyway, I felt sorry for her' (Nic). Her saying that 'I did not realise that same-sex attraction is possible' is indicative of heteronormativity's effects. Nic had difficulties recognising homosexuality even though she had some sense of same-sex attraction in her early life (in kindergarten).

Making sense of ourselves as lesbians contradicts the heteronormative ordering of the social that we have learnt since childhood, which is why there is so much uncertainty about understanding sexual attraction in early life. When being interviewed, participants often made sense of their past by projecting adult understanding back to their childhood and adolescence.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I refer to Gagnon and Simon's (1973) and Jackson and Scott's (2010) research later in this chapter.

Their ways of constructing and reconstructing memories varies. Clarissa is among these; she claimed that she clearly sensed her significant affection towards a female classmate in elementary school and described her first touch of the girl's finger as like an electric shock:

It was during my elementary school days that I first liked a girl. [...] I remember that suddenly the feeling of liking was quite vivid; I liked her so much. Once we touched each other's finger by accident and it felt like an electric shock. A profound effect. [...] I thought she had the same feeling as we looked into each other's eyes for a while. I had no idea for how long it lasted in reality; for me it lasted long enough. (Clarissa)

This is not, however, a happy romantic story. In a restricted heterosexual environment, it is not easy to make sense of feelings towards women; sometimes it involves guilt or anxiety. Clarissa had a hard time when she realised that she had a crush on a girl in the same year at junior high school.

The thing was that I felt very... very depressed at the time; I cried often for no reason [at school]. My classmates had no idea what was happening to me. I couldn't tell them. I knew I was different from anyone else. [...] In my third year of junior high school I knew I was different. Deep down I liked a girl very much, who was in my year at school. So I knew I was different from other people. [...] I felt afraid. I couldn't...I couldn't... be sure that I was different; on the other hand, I liked her so much but I did not and could not voice it. I buried it inside me. I was so miserable and depressed. (Clarissa)

With early awareness of difference and the accompanying anxiety, the default of behaving heterosexually makes it difficult to acknowledge feelings that do not conform to the norm. And it is even more difficult to do it publicly. Furthermore, Clarissa explained how she became aware that she should not tell anybody else.

Probably because that...I supposed that being different was a terrible thing. In addition, I could not help thinking that it would not work between us anyhow in the future. Wasn't it pitiful? Wasn't it pathetic? [...] So why should I keep thinking of her? I was thinking about were there any more chances to talk to her and all sorts of things. In the end I deleted every



thought from my mind; they were all impossible. Then I realised that I could not discuss it with people. (Clarissa)

Similarly, at the age of 24, Vivian found the distinction between friendship and affection very obscure and felt frustrated about the uncertain relationship with her then colleague/flatmate. 'In fact . . . um . . . she was really nice to me. Yes. I didn't have a clue how girls could have intimate relationships. But I found . . . I sensed . . . my affection for her as she was unusually nice to me' (Vivian). At the same time, Vivian felt that her flatmate might have a similar affection and was eager to explore what was happening between them. However, the woman became estranged from her and seemed to evade the issue. Vivian was then afraid to reveal her affection and also avoided asking whether her flatmate liked her or not because she could not afford any mistakes. 'It's even more impossible for me to say "I like you" to her. How dare I! I might lose her as a friend if I said so' (Vivian). Vivian then suffered from depression for a few years until she met her current partner. The bitter taste of hidden secrets is related to the awareness of difference.

What made Clarissa and Vivian decide not to reveal their true feelings? Is there any 'normal' sexual feeling that they were supposed to have constructed prior to their attraction towards other women? How did they think about their same-sex feelings/desires and build up their sexual identity as lesbians, or something other than heterosexual? Most notably, in these first recollections of attraction, participants did not use the term lesbian, or any other variation popular in Taiwanese culture, to (re)interpret their sexual feelings/desires. Instead, they tended to describe their feelings/desires in an instinctive way. If they did not know the category of lesbian at a young age or at the very first awareness of same-sex attraction, how did they learn about it and apply it to themselves? Are there differences between making sense of same-sex attraction and making sense of lesbianism?

Furthermore, in my findings, not everyone was happy to apply the term lesbian to herself, for various reasons. What makes them reject this category and refuse to be labelled? Is there any contradiction between their self-conception and a, so-called, lesbian identity? How do they perceive the social meaning of lesbian? What does lesbian mean to them after they have gained knowledge of it? Before exploring these questions, one crucial process cannot be overlooked: How did people make sense of same-sex attraction? How was it related to the environment they were, and are now, in?

*Making Sense of Same-Sex Attraction at School*

Plummer (1975; 1981: 69; 1989: 206) argues that there are problems within some accounts/observations of early age memories as these ‘may be retrospective interpretation, a reconstruction of the past to fit the present and the future’. Similarly, Whisman found that the sexual stories of homosexuals do not merely recount their experiences, but they are ‘told to fit those experiences into a coherent, conventionalized story’ (1996: 101). Homosexuals tell self-narratives ‘in which they “always knew” they were lesbian or gay or came to “realize” that this was the case—often on the basis of feeling that, as children, they weren’t quite normally (normatively) gendered’ (Jackson 2006: 116). Nonetheless, by interpreting and reinterpreting the past, the sexual self is constructed and reconstructed over time and through experience. Drawing on G.H. Mead’s (1934) idea of the social self, Jackson (2006: 115) argues:

[T]he self is not a fixed structure but is always ‘in process’ by virtue of its constant reflexivity, a product of socially located biographies in which our past and present lives are in dialogue. The past may shape the present, but the present also significantly re-shapes the past in that we are constantly reconstructing our memories, our sense of who and what we are in relation to the present.

The claim that there is a time gap between becoming aware of sexual feelings and the time at which a lesbian identity develops can be found in some studies (e.g. Gagnon and Simon 1967: 251). In his study of gay or bisexual males, Savin-Williams (1998: 3, emphasis in the original) argues that:

Children and adolescents had sexual fantasies and engaged in same-sex behaviour long before they understood the *meaning* of a gay or bisexual identity. Conversely, a gay or bisexual identity gave meaning to their attractions and behaviours.

The time lag between naming same-sex feelings/attractions and labelling oneself as gay or bisexual varies between none to a maximum of 11 years (ibid: 123). Similarly, among non-heterosexual women, Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000: 304) also point out that early feelings towards women are rarely interpreted at the time as same-sex attraction:

The respondents...reported that their first conscious same-sex attraction occurred at a mean age of 15, and they did not consider the relevance of these feelings for sexual identity until a mean age of 16. Once the full range of variability is taken into account, some women show disjunctures of 10 to 20 years between their first recollected experience and their first recollected awareness of same-sex attractions.

Eleven out of 30 participants in my study went to girls' junior or high schools. With these experiences, some of them told me that they saw themselves as no different from anybody else until they entered mixed high schools or university. They realised that they had different objects of desire when they noticed that other girls were mostly attracted to boys. Having no prior heterosexual experiences, Camille and Wilhelmina claimed that they were not aware of their sexuality 'being different' at girls' schools.

When I was in university...during our freshman year male seniors would be pursuing, for example, my [female] flatmates. By then I started thinking...um...probably I was different. You wouldn't be thinking that way until then. Unexpectedly I felt like...Oh?! I was different. [...] Um...and then I was thinking whether or not this was relevant to my experiences at a girls school. (Camille)

[At high school] my classmate was dating a girl. And...no one commented on this. [...] At the time I felt...fine with it. I'd got a feeling that...yeah...after all it's a girls' school; it happens! [...] Liking girls bothered me...oh...this and that. But I did not think that until I went to university. Most of my classmates in university were males. Yes. And you saw them dating females. The majority of people were interested in the opposite sex; girls and boys. I thought about it [the problem of liking girls] only if I was not in an all-girl environment. I would not bother to think about it if I was in an all-girl environment like my high school. At the time the only issue for me was whether she, the girl I liked, liked me or not! (Wilhelmina)

In contrast to these people's homoerotic experiences at girls' schools, Edith provided a different interpretation of same-sex relationships at a mixed school. She had feelings towards boys when in junior high school and has dated her current (and only) partner Abby since high school; both her junior high and high school were mixed schools. She felt more comfortable having intimate relationships with girls than boys in the

mixed-gender environment. Edith's account reveals the ways in which the presumption of heterosexuality, and the policing of heterosexual conduct, masks potential lesbian relationships so that they are read as sexually innocent.

I have no idea why I had such a huge change [after junior high school], but I didn't feel strange about myself and had not been struggling. I thought...um...honestly I preferred to be with this person [her girlfriend Abby]. Yes. I was fine. Um...if you asked me whether I had a thought about boys I'd say 'yes, I did.' However, it was a troublesome business, I'd say. [...] For example, at the time people wouldn't have any thoughts if you went out with a same-sex classmate. But it would be a different thing if you went out with boys. People would be gossiping about this and that. It seemed like a cover. [...] Yeah. We girls went to the toilet together holding hands at the time. You never felt weird about it. It was just an ordinary thing to do. But if you showed such behaviour with boys...you were asking for trouble. The military training instructors would keep an eye on this sort of thing. (Edith)

Jessica had experiences similar to those of Camille and Wilhelmina in girls' junior high school. When she had a sense of being different later in a mixed-gender environment, her instinctive reaction was to keep it secret.

[In high school] I was in a mixed class and noticed that my [female] classmates were all talking about those male seniors. [...] Then I suddenly realised that those I liked...oh...they were all female seniors, female juniors and my female mates in my class or in my year, etc. Yeah! Then I realised that...oh...I might be a bit different from other people. I'd better not talk about this. Do not share with others! (Jessica)

The idea that it is possible for women to love women and to date them was completely beyond comprehension. Jess's earliest awareness did not occur until she dated a girl in high school.

- Jess: The first time I liked a girl...To be honest, I shall say that I did not know the feelings I'd got were called 'liking' before I had my first girlfriend.
- Iris: And these were two different things?
- Jess: Yes. I had favourable impressions of particular girls before dating my first girlfriend. Given little knowledge I just didn't realise that it was so-called 'you liked a girl'.

- Iris: When did it happen?  
 Jess: It was clearer during my junior high school days.  
 Iris: But it was just a feeling?  
 Jess: Yeah. I just felt that I liked her and liked to see her at school. Nothing else happened but this feeling.  
 Iris: Until?  
 Jess: Until I had my first girlfriend in high school. [...] The truth is that such a relationship [with girls] had never come into my mind before. I merely felt like I had feelings towards girls in particular. I did not know this kind of relationship could exist, though. She [the first girlfriend] was rather active... something [good] happened and we started seeing each other.

It seems as though Jess's first girlfriend stepping forward helped trigger her self-discovery. Luce's account provides a crucial point indicating that the idea of same-sex love and relationships were not anticipated in heterosexual surroundings. To a certain extent the gendered construction of compulsory heterosexuality limits awareness of homosexuality and discourages homoerotic desires/feelings.

When I was in... elementary school I knew I liked girls. But the feeling wasn't clear enough. [...] Um... I'd been thinking over the feeling, whether it was a kind of liking happening between friends, [...] or I saw it as affection. I was in this situation all along. I particularly favoured the girl I liked. But I myself kept struggling to clarify the feeling because it could not be defined. There was limited information in my environment. No way. (Luce)

During their schooldays, these women had no access to LGBT information and would have to seek support outside the formal curriculum. Within this social environment, I go on to explore how present lesbian identification accumulated among heterosexualised gendered (daily) interactions; how the women make sense of their sexuality in the given settings and, in the cases of participants who had previous heterosexual experiences, how they interpreted their current identification, their discontinuous pasts and pre-lesbian (or bisexual) selves and embraced a change in identity. Do they sense a discontinuity between present lesbian and pre-lesbian identification, as Whisman (1996) suggested?

### *Heteronormativity's Effects on Sexuality*

Noting the heterosexual assumptions made in families, communities, the media and workplaces, Plummer (1989: 202) indicates four mechanisms which, in the setting of English society in the 1980s, made it difficult for gay youth to become gay. These are:

1. The hidden curriculum, which transmits a message about the centrality of family life, clear gender roles and heterosexuality.
2. The absence of role model[s] who are gay or lesbian.
3. The concrete presence of peer relations organised through heterosexuality.
4. The mechanisms of homophobia that serve, in the last resort, to coerce, control and ultimately punish those who step over the line.

In spite of cultural differences, these four mechanisms are still relevant in explaining young lesbians' lives in Taiwan. Three of my interviewees mentioned that in their early phases of self-awareness they had questioned their female identity in order to justify their feelings towards their own sex; it is impossible to love a girl unless you're a boy. Crocodile was an extreme case; she suggested the idea of having sex-change surgery to her family when she was under 18 and was turned down by a psychiatrist due to her age. Then she had another idea that she wanted to have a funeral for her female body and be reborn officially as a male figure. She was eager to change her social identity and still had this hope before entering university.

During my first and second year of high school I liked that girl so much. I wished I were . . . I hoped . . . at the time I could not embrace being *tong-zhi*. That was, I did not accept the idea that a girl likes another girl. I myself couldn't take it, I suppose. I was thinking that even I couldn't accept that. Thus I dearly wished to pursue her as a boy. I liked her so much, but I couldn't . . . I couldn't like her as myself . . . as a girl. At the time I liked the person too much. And . . . and . . . and, I thought she couldn't be . . . mainly because it was obvious that she was normal and liked boys. She was normal; I wouldn't say that she liked boys very much, but obviously she wouldn't like girls on her own initiative. Moreover, when we were in high school this kind of affection . . . what I meant was me, myself as a girl liked a girl. My interpretation of this situation was that I wished I were a boy. (Crocodile)

Ninny was very sure about her sexuality when she was in elementary school and she initially identified herself as a boy in order to explain herself.

Ninny: When I was little I liked to hang around with girls. And I knew I liked it; it was affection. But you also knew that no one was like you. You know? No one was like you in elementary school.

Iris: The earliest was in elementary school?

Ninny: Elementary school. I knew that I preferred girls and liked to hang out with girls. Yeah, yeah, at the time I did not know myself enough and I thought I was a boy rather than a girl. My Dad called me ‘mei-mei’ (妹妹, little girl) then, I never liked it.

Iris: Unhappy?

Ninny: Unhappy! I really wasn’t happy about it. I felt like I was a boy. Afterwards in junior high school I had some friends who were very much like me. I tried to ask them about it . . . yeah . . . when we were more familiar with each other. And I found that they liked girls as I did. At the time I knew this was, so-called, ‘tong-xing-lian’. Later when I entered high school I made friends with them [current very close friends]; then I realised that we, this kind of people, are called T<sup>3</sup> and you [the interviewer] feminines are called Po.

Unlike Ninny, Wilhelmina had tried to be more T-like and ended up rejecting a T identity and building up her own idea of being a woman who loves women.

Wil: I had a feeling that if a girl liked a girl . . . for example, I liked a girl when I was in high school . . . whether or not I should be more boy-like in order to be qualified to like her. Right. Later when you were grown up you found that this was not necessarily correct. I didn’t need to do it that way. Somehow I pretended to be more boy-like, more so-called T-like. But I didn’t like it! I preferred to be whatever I wanted to be. Yeah, so I didn’t do it on purpose; if people thought that I looked like a T, it was possible that I was born to look like it. For example, my Mom said that I acted like a boy or those sorts of things. That was their saying, but I didn’t like to tag myself as one

<sup>3</sup> Originally an abbreviation for tomboy, the term T refers to a masculine sexual role in the context of the Taiwanese lesbian community. The counterpart of T is the feminine Po, which literally means T’s wife. See [Chapter 1](#) and below.

particular role or identity. I dated women. That's it! 'Nothing else,' I'd tell people. So I accepted that people have their own identity; it's fine with me. Okay. They had their own understanding of themselves. And I have mine. That is, I don't need to claim such an identity.

Iris: When you were in high school what made you feel that you should be more like a boy if you liked a girl? What made you think that way?

Wil: Because I supposed she was looking for a boyfriend. [...] Well, you heard of her breaking up with her 'boyfriend'. But you were looking for... I was in a girls' [high] school; in this environment you got the feeling that if she liked you it was because you looked like a boy or you were like a boy to a certain extent. You had that feeling... subconsciously. But afterwards I didn't think that way.

Acknowledging same-sex attraction under the situation of heteronormativity is never easy. As T and Po in some ways resemble a heterosexual relationship, a T identity might be a way out when lesbians are confused about their 'unusual' feelings/desires towards their own sex, like Ninny and Wilhelmina. However, how they adapted T-Po to themselves and/or into their relationships is related to how they constructed their identities.

### *Previous Heterosexual Relationships*

Twelve out of 30 individuals mentioned past heterosexual experiences in the interviews. Some had had serious relationships or marriages with male partners, while some claimed to have had relatively casual relationships. Apart from Bette, who had a mixed history of boyfriends and girlfriends before she was 25 years old, the others had a distinct divide between heterosexual experiences and same-sex relationships. Similar expressions of the separation can be found in many accounts. Vivian's use of two metaphors for her divided experiences as a 'watershed' and a 'door' give us a clear idea.

Vivian: I feel like my life has been...cut in the middle. [...] *The watershed* seemed to divide it [in two]. [...] When you stepped forward, a door was opened for you and the other was closed behind you. [...] The only thing was whether *the door* was locked or not.

Iris: Then what do you think?



Vivian: At the moment I don't think it is locked, but I wouldn't open it.  
(My emphases)

Bette had been seeing both boys and girls until she was 25 years old. As mentioned in the previous section, her first realisation was as early as four years old, but she had struggled with her unconventional sexuality since then.

[Her feelings towards her female playmate] means that I've liked girls since I was four. But it's a long way to go. Deep down I knew it [my sexuality] is against tradition, isn't it? Boys go with girls, which is the ordinary thing to do. But I couldn't ignore my feelings, particularly towards girls. Yeah. Then you would go through a long process of struggling. I struggled until the first year of high school when I had my first girlfriend. However, I still couldn't get rid of 'men and women' stuff after that. (Bette)

Swinging between heterosexuality and lesbianism could be seen as Bette's way of dealing with her struggles. She described her dating patterns with men and women in turn:

Bette: In fact I didn't decide to like only girls until 20...25...around 24 to 25. I've never dated boys, boyfriends, since then. When I was with boys at school...my pattern is that I would look for a boy's warmth if I was given a hard time by a girl. I was lucky in relationships with boys as they were very nice to me, cared for me and loved me dearly. I was always taken care of by them. But you know there was something missing.

Iris: Missing?

Bette: It's a lack of closeness, no close familiarity. About the feeling I didn't know how to explain. What I could tell was that my need for intimacy, sweetness and close familiarity would be filled up by being with girls. Boys made me feel like a princess, a queen; they would take care of me and love me to death, no matter how childish and naughty I was. My nasty behaviour became an advantage. But when you thought about long-term or close relationships...I don't know...so-called temptation or that sort of thing was absent. I knew clearly that there was a missing piece. Thus I'd dump a boy and turn to a girl. I broke up with boyfriends for this reason. Yeah. So, I don't know. I might be seeing this boy for a while and broke up with him when I met a girl. I often confused boys by breaking up for mysterious reasons.

Bette would not give up heterosexual relationships as she sensed that being with women was ‘against tradition’. Later on in her account, she mentioned that she would introduce her boyfriends to her mother, but would not do the same with her girlfriends until she started her current relationship with Tina, which they both defined as serious.

### *Struggling with Heteronormativity*

Realisation often comes with a feeling of doubt, shock or struggling with normative heterosexuality. Participants who had previous heterosexual experiences, regardless of whether heterosex was involved or not, discussed complex processes of self-acceptance and self-explanation to reassess their prior relationships and the heteronormative assumptions they might have held previously. I identified three strategies that indicate different reactions, understandings of sexuality and of sexuality switching.

#### *Strategy One: De-Gendering/Exceptionalising the Objects of Desire (Jules and Tina)*

In Jules and Tina’s accounts, feeling affection towards one particular person or one particular woman, rather than generalising same-sex attraction, made it easier to self-explain what was going on. Making this particular person/woman an exception often involved a denial of homosexuality in the first instance and happened mostly with those who had had previous heterosexual experiences. Jules started dating boys when she was in her first year in junior college but felt affection towards a female classmate, who had kissed but did not date her.

At the time I supposed that I had feelings only towards her, just one particular individual. Later on I hung out with people off-campus and met other girls. Then I realised that I liked girls, not merely her. (Jules)

I was aware of my affection for her [the girl she kissed], because of that I browsed the internet for ‘nyu-tong-zhi’ and how ‘nyu-tong-zhi’ have sex as I really didn’t know. How women and women . . . I never tried with her. That was why I got involved with my first girlfriend. I asked her to teach me how. (Jules)

Tina met her first girlfriend while her marriage was in trouble. At first, both of them thought affection between women was very pure and did not realise that they had feelings towards each other. Gradually, when Tina

experienced an irresistible attraction to her girlfriend, she began struggling with the idea of lesbianism.

- Tina: Later on when I realised it I refused to accept it. My family education was very traditional. Such a thing was outside my understanding and everyday life! I didn't know women can be 'tong-zhi' until I met her. I thought...
- Iris: You thought 'tong-zhi' is...
- Tina: Men! Right! I supposed only men would do 'tong-zhi' stuff. [i.e. There is no female homosexuality.] Yeah! Then I was enlightened after I met her and recognised some [homosexual] colleagues in my office. There were quite a few and I hadn't realised it. True. Afterwards we started seeing each other when I was still married with a child. What is more serious was that I was very resistant. I couldn't accept myself being a 'tong-zhi'. I merely accepted that I liked one woman only. Yeah. I persuaded myself that I liked this woman, just this one particularly. Yeah. I didn't like women, only this particular one. I was in love with this woman only. This person! The individual! This was how I came to accept myself. Yeah. And we were together for three... three to four years... three years, yeah.

Studies on bisexual and unlabelled women show that, compared to self-identified lesbian groups, they were less likely to view sexual orientation as fixed, being more focused on the 'person, not the gender' (Brooks and Quina 2009). This is consistent with Rust's (2000) finding that bisexual and unlabelled women shared a belief that it is the 'person, not the gender' that fuels attraction and partner preferences, a belief commonly espoused by women with both same- and other-sex attractions. Jules and Tina's experiences support the 'person, not the gender' tendency and embrace gender fluidity in a positive way.

*Strategy Two: An Unconventional Choice of Lifestyle (Theresa)*

Before her first girlfriend, Theresa's first affection for a boy happened in high school and another occurred during her first and second years at university. Her previous heterosexual relationships made her uncertain about same-sex love. 'Thus, I didn't realise that it is possible for me to be in love with girls' (Theresa). Her first girlfriend was junior to her in university; they had known each other for quite a while. She told me that her first homosexual relationship began at a house party and the junior made a move when they stayed over at the friend's house after the party.

- Theresa: It's just that we had arranged to stay in the same room and something happened. (Laughter) Nothing. She initiated a move suddenly which I didn't reject or say no to [at first]. Then I stopped her . . . um . . . as I needed to think about this.
- Iris: Why did you need to think about it?
- Theresa: Because I hadn't been aware that I would like women! And I wasn't aware of my affection for her. No such feeling. No such thought. Even if I indeed had feelings towards her, I didn't know. I didn't think about it. It's just that I sort of had a feeling towards her after she made a move. I thought about it for a day . . . not very long. I wasn't hesitating about identity or that sort of thing. I don't know. But we started seeing each other very soon [after one day's consideration].
- Iris: Then what were you considering?
- Theresa: It's just to make sure whether I liked her or not, rather than to make sure whether I liked women or not.

Theresa went further and articulated her hesitation when she started her first homosexual relationship, but lesbian identity was not her crucial consideration:

- Theresa: Yes. In fact, I merely wanted to confirm my feelings for her; was it affection or not? Once I confirmed the feeling for myself, I knew . . . I would expect a different lifestyle from what I had before.
- Iris: What is the difference, do you think?
- Theresa: It's just that you couldn't really publicise it.
- Iris: [As you've mentioned,] you have a lesbian peer group and there's nothing to be worried about in this circle.
- Theresa: Of course I don't need to worry about it with these friends. But I knew it was impossible to get married and have babies like heterosexuals. I knew this was going to happen at the time, but I didn't care about it. [ . . . ] Yeah, a different choice leads to a different lifestyle.
- Iris: But at the time you were just a fourth-year student at university!
- Theresa: I might not have been seriously considering marriage and children [at the time]. I merely could sense the difference. As you get older, you know it is really different.

*Strategy Three: Self-Questioning Followed by Self-Justification (Evelyn and Theresa)*

Evelyn developed a crush on a female pianist while she was in a heterosexual relationship. Her strong feelings towards the woman while seeing her then-boyfriend confused her very much. Her inner conflict can be seen in her narrative:

I... I kept thinking... um... What happened? What's wrong with me? You know... having been in such a relationship in high school [with a female classmate for a very short time] I thought that I was doing it on a whim or... out of curiosity since I dated boyfriends afterwards. And you know that there was no such kind of people... few... in the environment in Pingtung. I attracted boys, rather than girls when I was young. You [i.e. interviewer] seem to be that kind of person! So I went with the stream... - being with boys. Yeah. So, later on... at the time... when I was working in the hotel... my affection for the woman made me think... In fact, I was very... I kept asking myself: What are you doing? What's wrong with you? Yeah. (Evelyn)

Evelyn tried to clear her confusion and then justified herself with her previous lack of close female friends.

I was wondering... um... I never had good relationships with girls from elementary school to high school. I was alone by myself... or with good students. Other classmates didn't really like me. I wondered, would it be possible that I wanted to be with women as I treasured girls' friendships? I was wondering... I supposed it was the case at the time. (Evelyn)

With such confusion in her mind, Evelyn browsed the Internet and joined a homosexual chat room to figure out her feelings towards women. She also confessed her affection to the female pianist, but did not receive a positive response.

And then, I told her: 'Um... in fact I fancied you at the time.' She was stunned at that moment. I was sure she was shocked as she remained silent on the phone and turned very cold. Then I said: 'Oh... never mind. I just wanted to... tell you. I don't want you... to do anything. It's just that... I... I want you to know about this. You don't need to be worried, be afraid. You don't have to be anxious about how to react. I merely spoke it

out, rather than expecting your answer.' But she still remained silent.  
(Laughter) (Evelyn)

Her confession was not as pleasant as she expected. Evelyn still dated boyfriends afterwards. However, her confusion did not stop bothering her, even when she was in heterosexual relationships:

When I was with them [two following boyfriends], to be honest, I couldn't help thinking...wondering who exactly I was. It was very annoying. I supposed...I might be a bisexual. But at the time...I thought being a bisexual wasn't really a good thing. If you are such a kind of person, you seem to be...ugh! [She clicked her tongue to express a negative opinion referring to the stigma of bisexuality.] You know what? To be honest, I indeed had that idea at the time. Meanwhile I kept wondering who on earth I was. I was wavering all the time. At the end I dated [Christie] and I haven't had boyfriends since. (Evelyn)

Evelyn is one example of Vivian's 'watershed' metaphor; she stopped seeing men after she started having relationships with women. A similar divide could be found in Theresa's account. Unlike Evelyn, the divide for Theresa was her first realisation of her affection towards women, while Evelyn still had two boyfriends after her recognition of same-sex desire. Both of them had been struggling for a while with a confusion over their change of sexuality, as in many accounts in my study.

These strategies are not mutually exclusive. For example, Theresa sensed that she had chosen a different lifestyle from those heterosexuals might have. However, she claimed that she did not think about relationships with males after dating her first girlfriend.

Of course I didn't have that thought at the time [when I was seeing her]. When I realised that I could be in love with women, I never thought about having relationships with males any more. I'd say...I was trapped in a complex situation after splitting up with the junior [her original girlfriend]. I have thousands of friends, including the opposite sex. The situation was: I'd just graduated [from university] and was confused by the end of the relationship with my junior [which wasn't very clear-cut]. I initiated meeting 'la-zi' friends on the Internet. (Theresa)

The confusion and the realisation of a changed sexuality for people who previously identified as heterosexual are different from those who did not

have heterosexual experiences in the first place. Having experiences with males made them feel more uneasy about defining their sexuality. Most of the accounts from people who had had heterosexual experiences or relationships reveal similar concerns, related to their identity and the process of finding a comfortable understanding of themselves.

### *Heterosex/Heterosexual Intimacy*

Vivian had two boyfriends before her first realisation of her feelings towards females, but those relationships had involved little physical intimacy.

At the time I wasn't quite sure about [intimate] relationships between women and women, men and men. Right. It was because I was getting along with the opposite sex before. It's just that I couldn't do it whenever a male wanted to move forward. Holding hands might be all right, but kisses? NO! (Vivian)

Similarly, Sally felt uncomfortable with physical touching by males. Her first dating experience, which she was reluctant to define as a relationship, was with a man when she was 25. They met on a blind date set up by friends; later on they often emailed, went out and held hands. Her phrase in the account 'holding little hands' (牽牽小手) with a childlike passivity echoed her uncertainty about a dating relationship with this man. She described the occasion:

What I felt about 'holding little hands' was more like . . . you know . . . something we were supposed to do [at that stage]. We . . . held hands. But I didn't feel good or comfortable about it. I didn't feel very . . . um. I got a feeling . . . oh . . . this is 'holding hands'. As I'd never held a boy's hand I realised that . . . oh . . . it's so-called holding hands. And I had a very old-fashioned idea that we were supposed to do something further once we'd held each other's hands. (Sally)

Sally made a joke about herself by saying she is sexually 'late-ripened' (晚熟) as she did not have her first experience of hand-holding until 25. However, she did not enjoy being physically touched by the man and it happened only because she thought they should follow a certain provisional picture of a sexual world, which is normatively heterosexual. As Jackson (2006: 114) argues, 'heteronormativity is mobilized and

reproduced in everyday life through routine activities in which gender, sexuality and heterosexuality interconnect'. From books, movies and television Sally knew about heterosexual practices—particularly about heterosexual love and flirtation. And she tried to adopt it by mimicking what she observed and situated herself in women's presumed 'place' within heterosexual relationships. In her narrative, a default process of dating with men should be like this:

I met a man, who was sort of okay. We seemed to get along with each other, so we are supposed to be together. If we are supposed to be dating, there were step one, step two and step three. Step one was holding hands, step two was supposed to be something and so on. I followed the steps instead of my feelings towards him. I wasn't sure whether I liked him or not. You know? I believed there was a certain next step we should do. Then I recalled and imagined what these steps were in the books, TV drama serials and movies. It seemed to be like this and that. But these were things we should do, rather than what I wanted to, as I was not really into him. (Sally)

However, without a provisional picture of lesbian intimacy, Sally's account of the first kiss with her first/current partner showed less hesitation and seemed to be unscripted.

[Clarissa stayed over at Sally's home after a party.] We were chatting late, you know, it often happened to us. We were used to chatting until late at night and leant on each other to sleep. That night we chatted until very late . . . afterwards, we kissed. [ . . . ] On the day [we kissed] I felt . . . um . . . it was really good. And then, I said to her: shall we do that again? [ . . . ] I was quite enjoying the feeling. [ . . . ] Nothing else happened that night. We just kissed and had more kisses. (Laughter) (Sally, couple interview)

Heterosexualised, gendered sexual knowledge from the media has not only influenced how people practise relationships and love, but also (hetero)sexual conduct. From Sally's account physical contact with men was enacted in terms of the institutionalised heterosexual scripts for intimacy that were available to her. She pictured her married life according to her parents when she was little, and still had that idea until her early 20s; 'my husband will be like my father and I'll do the dishes, clean the house and braid my child's hair' (Sally). Her realisation of lesbianism seemed to be a relief to her after struggling with normative heterosex and heterosexual intimacy.



Right. I discovered myself and realised [my sexuality] when I came back to Taiwan [starting a relationship with Clarissa.] The reason why I couldn't have intimate relationships with them [i.e. men] was me [i.e. my sexuality]. I found that I might not like them, but like to be friends with them. (Sally)

Moreover, she explained that she did not realise her uneasiness and anxiety about penis-in-vagina sex until accidentally watching pornography.

I couldn't imagine being penetrated by men's 'things', the feeling of [vaginal] penetration. I've never tried, but I couldn't stand such a scene. I would be scared to cry if I happened to watch that sort of film [i.e. pornography] or saw this kind of a sight on TV. (Sally)

It is worth noting that her avoidance of direct language happened only in speaking of heterosex and the male sex organ. Talking about sex openly is no longer taboo in Taiwanese society; however, even some sex workers have difficulties reporting their sexual acts and use 'that thing' instead of more explicit references to sex (Chen 2008: 108). Interestingly, she avoided heterosex language, but seemed to be relatively direct when talking about lesbian sex.

Sally talked about how she used to imagine her future marriage, which showed her anxiety about heterosex as a necessity for marriage and reproduction.

I'd say...I'm so glad that I'm not a heterosexual. What if I love men? Wouldn't it be a disaster as I couldn't stand him doing it like that? [...] If I were married, my husband and I [would do it] once, once only. And we wouldn't sleep together after having a baby. Right. Once we completed this job, having a baby, we wouldn't sleep in the same room. In separate rooms, we'd live together like good friends without [having] that thing [i.e. sex]. [...] That's why I thought that luckily I am not a heterosexual. Otherwise my marriage would be a disaster. Don't you think so? Well...or I shall say that luckily I discovered my homosexuality now. I didn't fix on the idea that I was a straight and would get married—I wouldn't have a happy marriage, would I? It wouldn't bring happiness and would cause harm to the other person. It'd be even worse if children were involved. (Sally)

Jackson and Scott (2010: 117) argue that 'since heterosexuality is the privileged norm, self-reflectivity about it is not integral to heterosexuals' emergent sexual selfhood'. Being heterosexual is simply taken for granted.

In contrast, a feeling of doubt and uncertainty about themselves occurred in some of my participants when they first realised their sexuality. A different account came from Lisbeth, who had an adventure and intended to have casual sex with a man while seeing her first girlfriend.

I thought I liked boys since I was little. Am I bisexual? Do I like boys? Did I fall in love with my first girlfriend out of curiosity? If so, wasn't it a sad thing? I was terrified about the idea that I didn't truly like her. I couldn't help wondering: did I like you and date you just because you were nice to me and I was feeling alone at the time? Yet I hadn't had sex with males and that sort of thing. Do I really love females? I wasn't sure whether I liked her [i.e. then girlfriend] or not as I had liked boys since I was little. [...] I kept thinking... I just wondered when I was with my [first] girlfriend whether my choice of being a lesbian and seeing a girlfriend was not a good idea or a false decision as I had never dated a man. [...] Yes. Yes. I confirmed that [when it comes to sex] my girlfriend was better and more considerate than a male. Though, I also found that boys were not unlovable as I could have sex with them. What I realised [from the experience] was I didn't detest males, in fact I had no problem loving them. I didn't mean to identify myself as bisexual. I'd rather be defined as ambisexual. Regardless of their sexuality, men, women, Mr. or Miss transgender, as long as I love them, it's supposed to be all right for me to date them and have sex with them. It is after all just human flesh. (Lisbeth)

From these accounts, previous heterosexual experiences play a crucial role in identity. For those who had had heterosexual experiences, regardless of the sexual conduct involved, their struggle with previous experiences became considerable when defining their sexuality. The stigma of bisexuality or impure lesbianism existed and may still have an influence in the lesbian community. By acknowledging the difference between realisation and forming a lesbian identity, I will now consider how lesbians form their identities in different situations.

## LESBIAN IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ROLES

### *Social Spaces Where We Learn the Label Lesbian*

As McDermott (2010: 205, citations in the original) has pointed out, drawing on earlier research (Ettore 1980; Jenness 1992; McIntosh 1968), 'in order to identify as lesbian there must be an environment where the

social construct “lesbian” exists, regardless of how it is understood’. However, opportunities to glean information about gender and sexuality from the formal curriculum at school or in other social environments are very limited. Gay bars/nightclubs and the Internet are the most frequently mentioned alternative sources of support and friendship for Taiwanese LGBT populations, through which they establish supportive networks and seek information. Different social spaces and communities where women learn about the lesbian label—for example in school, university and other peer groups—create different subcultures and norms of lesbianism, particularly in relation to T (masculine) and Po (feminine) roles.

In school settings, the lack of positive support may be a reason for establishing lesbian peer groups; some participants mentioned that the peer groups they were involved in mostly formed at school or university. Early in her junior high school days, Ninny recognised some other lesbian classmates from their T-like appearances. Having shared interests, they started spending time together and gradually came out to each other. The label ‘tong-xing-lian’ was first learnt among these friends, with whom she has since retained a good relationship. When they were young, this group shared the same house and supported each other emotionally and financially. As in many T peer groups in Taiwan, which were led by ‘da-ge’ (大哥, big brothers), Ninny had watched her ‘big brother’ and others and had developed her notion of T–Po roles from their interactions with girlfriends. Among this peer group, people like the big brother and other T friends presented themselves as tougher and more masculine than their feminine Po girlfriends. It is possible for T to date straight women because ‘Po was not recognisable at the time’ (Ninny); however, straight women are obviously different from Po in terms of their single-mindedness and exclusiveness towards T. Moreover, sexual role-playing was strictly divided between T and Po, with no ‘bu-fen’ category in between, and also involved an institutionalised gender division of labour in their households. For example, ‘keeping house’ was what ‘the girls’ were expected to do and ‘paying the bills’ was a T’s responsibility. Ninny and her T friends shared all their household spending, ‘very rarely would we use girls’ money’ (Ninny). The big brother had taught Ninny that being rich was one of the essentials for a T.

What she [the big brother] meant was . . . [For those girls] it’s difficult to be in a relationship with females; it’s even harder if we make them suffer from

poverty. We'd have to be aware of this because we won't be protected by laws like heterosexuals. (Ninny)

In Ninny's big-brother-headed group, the division between T and their partners was legitimated by a lack of wider social support and the romanticism of being a supportive T. These T friends did not identify themselves as men. On the contrary, not being men has burdened them with taking on men's responsibilities as a compensation for their partners. In turn, the traditional 'female's' responsibility has been enhanced in the division of T/Po roles. I argue that by naming their partners 'girls', regardless of the fact that they were all girls, these T had confirmed the clear division between T and Po.

More peer groups are created from immediate friendship networks and student unions/clubs at university. In addition to feminism-oriented clubs and relevant student unions, the sports club is another possible social environment in which lesbians can come out. Jess and Theresa both joined the same sports club at university, members of which, according to them, were mostly lesbians. They regard this peer group as lifelong friends and had shared their lives since they were young. This group has more than five couples and is not an unusual structure among the Taiwanese lesbian population. T-Po sexual roles are not very favoured in Jess and Theresa's peer group. Theresa noticed that most claimed they were 'bu-fen' instead of Po, as the Po identity had increasingly been abandoned, although she still identified herself as Po. To her, being T or being Po does not really matter; these are tentative allocations when people first meet others. Once they knew more about each other, there was no need to classify them. Also, the couples in this group tended not to follow T-Po roles in their relationships. However, Theresa observed signs that some couples were in unbalanced relationships, in which one was always the carer and the other was always a receiver. In her current relationship with Jess, both of them agreed that they took turns in playing roles. She concluded that there is no fixed T-Po relationship or absolute T or Po role; each couple makes their own style of interaction, whether they identify themselves as T, Po, 'bu-fen' or anything else.

For some people, belonging to lesbian clubs may suggest acceptance of the label and identity of lesbian. LGBT clubs at universities may have different beliefs or criteria for membership; some are very specific, while some may be keen to explore variety and have fewer requirements. Yet, for an individual, remaining outside or becoming an insider may lead them to re/think adopting the label of lesbian. Friends of Crocodile at university

were relatively active in LGBT rights on campus; one of them was head of the lesbian club at their university. Despite these good friendships, Crocodile refused to join the lesbian club as she did not have such an identity at the time. However, the idea that she might be a lesbian emerged in her mind when she helped out at an anti-discrimination protest on the campus with lesbians and then realised that they were in the same group. The greatest benefit from this experience of 'being included in the circle' was that 'it's completely different to be in love with tong-zhi than with straight women. I felt no guilt loving a woman [in the same circle]' (Crocodile).

The Internet plays a very important role in exploring sexuality, seeking information and connecting with other lesbians, and particularly offers 'new discoverers' an anonymous and effective way of engaging with lesbianism. Searching for information on the Internet was often the first thought for less-experienced participants to find out what it was like to be a lesbian and how to be intimate with their own sex. Many of them mentioned that the Internet provided their initial understandings of lesbianism. Among social networks, I found that BBS (Bulletin Board Systems)<sup>4</sup> gained popularity among lesbians during the 1990s, also functioning as chat rooms and providing a space for small communities to gather. Participants often started using BBS when they were at university as some BBS web spaces are provided by the universities; for example, one of the most popular lesbian BBS is based on 'Dan-juan' (蛋捲, egg rolls) of Tamkang University. Other well-known sites, such as 'To-Get-Her' (which ran from November 1996 to March 2006), 'Huai-nu-er' (壞女兒, bad daughters, which has already been closed), '5466' (similar-sounding to 'I am lala', an abbreviation of lesbian) and 'Dear Box', were all frequently mentioned by participants. Puns or metaphors for lesbianism

<sup>4</sup> A BBS (Bulletin Board System) is an independently run computer system that allows users to dial in using a modem and terminal software. Once connected, the visitor can download files, read news, exchange messages with other users or view other content provided on the BBS. Before the Internet went graphic with the World Wide Web, the text-based BBS provided the first taste of online connectivity for many people. However, the emergence of the Internet has not overwhelmingly replaced BBS. Many BBS sites are now accessible over telnet and BBS are still an extremely popular form of communication among Taiwanese youth. LGBT BBS sites have faded in popularity but retain their supportive functions for LGBT people. For further academic studies on LGBT BBS sites, see Shelley Correll (1995) and Terri Chih-Yin He (2008).

have often been used for lesbian BBS or website titles, given that the usage and meaning are familiar to the particular language and its culture. On the other hand, lesbian users might feel safer mentioning these names as they are not easily recognisable to outsiders.

In addition to the well-known BBS and other websites listed above, some individual websites also effectively functioned as social networks. Interestingly, it seems to be a trend for cafés and restaurants to construct their own websites and attract people with particular preferences. For example, Tina and Bette got to know each other by posting personal information on the website of an LGBT café. Jules was an enthusiastic website builder and was keen to know what it was like to be a lesbian as she was confused about her early attraction towards females during her school days. In 1997 she started gathering information on the Internet about lesbianism and shared what she found and what she thought about being a lesbian on her own website, which provided a chat room function. The website not only enabled the exchange of information among users, but also offered a space for people to practise disclosure and to build online friendships by using the chat room. Jules' website gave her a chance to make friends who initially had the same sexual preference and, at some point, appreciated her. Her website attracted people based on similar interests and thus formed the basis of her current friendships.

All of my current immediate friends were met in the chat room [of the website].

I think this is good, isn't it? I felt like I made a selection of my friends. (Jules)

To take the celebrated lesbian website 'Way way<sup>5</sup> de xiao wo' (維維的小窩, Way-way's home) as another example, this began with an individual blog space and became an influential repository of information about LGBT issues. Today, users of Way-way's home can update themselves about the latest LGBT news, find all sorts of useful web-links, read Way-way's diary of her romances as a lesbian and join the fleshmeet. Revealing an individual's lifestyle but remaining anonymous may help to reduce viewers' anxieties about lesbian life; on the other hand, it creates one kind of lesbian culture and gathers people who share common values.

<sup>5</sup> 'Way-way' is not the usual romanisation for '維維', which should be romanised as 'wei-wei' in Hanyu Pinyin. I keep the original English title on her website for both pronunciation and translation.

Among my participants, Clarissa was the one with most experience of channels connecting lesbians. Her multiple channels started with forming online friendships on the Internet and extended to connections with the wider LGBT community. Similar to Ninny's 'da-ge' headed group but less hierarchical, Clarissa's peer group based on BBS was also headed by a big brother. Big brother represented a stereotypical T figure and a leader of the group who took good care of her T followers, 'xiao-di' (小弟, younger brothers). Big brother could decide where to meet up and would pay the bills. 'Xiao-di' would consult big brother whenever they had problems with pursuing girlfriends. However, Clarissa only retained her friendship with this peer group for a few years as members came and went. Although she claimed that she did not broaden her idea of sexuality until coming into contact with other communities, she valued this group as a connection with real people:

The influence [of the peer group] to me is that I found a group with the same colour. We could chat and wouldn't feel friendless. I could talk and see them very much in the flesh, rather than an air of unreality in the cyber-world. Also, we could share things with each other. (Clarissa)

By observing how people identified themselves and what kind of partners they were looking for, Clarissa acquired some ideas about being a lesbian, particularly performing as a T. Within this peer group, sexual roles were clearly divided into T and Po and the norms of T-Po relations were relatively fixed. Members of the peer group, who were identified as T, sometimes brought their partners with them when meeting up, on which occasions they were introduced as girlfriends or wives. Clarissa learnt what a Po is like and how they behave by observing T-Po interactions:

What I've observed about them, those Po, was...um...they often sat down beside their T and kept quiet. Very rarely you would come across amazing 'han Po' (悍婆, brave/tough Po), who would impress us by speaking out freely and joining in our conversations, for example, when suggesting who to pursue, who to be with and where we should go, these sorts of things. (Clarissa)

Gradually, Clarissa learnt more about lesbian culture on the Internet and later in the activist community. She then met many Po who had obviously

adopted an independent Po identity and were not attached to a T. More interactions between lesbians were learnt on BBS, lesbian websites or chat rooms. In particular, chat rooms have been found to provide a lively field for becoming familiar with the culture through conversations with people. Clarissa learnt a lot not only from reading other people's conversations but also from people's reactions to her. Mimmi's experiences of using BBS explained more about the T-Po culture on the Internet. She started writing articles on BBS in 2000 and knew nothing about T/Po culture, which prevailed in all the BBS at the time. Her first encounter with the T term was a question through a text-to-text chat from another user: 'Are you a "T"?' Mimmi was stunned by this question and had no idea what the user was talking about. She figured that this might be the first step for some people searching for potential partners or 'same gender' pals.

I began watching people. If the person claimed herself as a T, I would observe her. [ . . . ] I would pay attention to what she said and build up the notion of being a T! For example, she would rather die than wear skirts, or being a maid of honour is a great pain, etc. I seemed to be the same. If I were her, I'd have the same feeling. And then I thought I might be a T?! (Mimmi)

Mimmi's previous identity was not very certain, although she adopted a T identity for more than ten years before changing it. She learnt that the division of sexual roles in lesbian culture was fixed and a clear identification was compulsory. Since 'bu-fen' and other categories had not yet gained popularity among the lesbian community at the time, there seemed to be only T or Po tags for her to choose from. If wearing skirts was the greatest concern, Mimmi's initial instinct was to reject Po and to take the only other option.

I felt like I was a T because I didn't like wearing skirts. I simply thought people who don't like wearing skirts are T. Aren't they? And people who do wear skirts, look like girls, dress themselves up, wear nail varnish and earrings are Po. I didn't seem to be like that type, so I was T. That's it. *I wouldn't have categorised myself into any of them if there was no category. Since everybody adopted one, I had to have one.* I thought perhaps I was this type. (Mimmi, my emphasis)

However, Mimmi did not feel comfortable with the T role and questioned the standardised T figure and behaviours. She mentions wearing short



hair, carrying heavy things, opening car doors for Po or giving Po a lift as the collective norms of being a T. She refused to follow these norms and would not give up her long hair; at the same time, she wondered whether she should identify herself as T or not. In the end, Mimmi compromised between T identity and wearing long hair and reluctantly made her debut in the community as a 'T with long hair'. T/Po sexual roles at some point help people to ease the anxiety of being different and to form a collective identification. Mimmi's partner Lisbeth gave me a simple explanation: 'I dated T, thus I was no doubt a Po.' A similar description from Evelyn demonstrated one of the functions of T-Po role-playing, 'I've always dated T. When my T partner commented on my not-like-Po behaviours, I felt confused about whether I misunderstood myself' (Evelyn).

I have also found that T/Po role-playing is sometimes essential and useful as part of the social courtesies in the lesbian community. When I contacted Evelyn as a potential interviewee (most of whom I contacted through emails or MSN), she asked to have a chat with me on MSN before making her decision. After exchanging greetings, she suddenly asked me to use a picture of myself instead of my best friend's son in the personal profile since she wanted to know my sexual role from my appearance. Also, she specifically asked me a few crucial questions about sexual role identification, for example, which sexual role I adopted and which sexual role I have dated. The sexual role of the person she was talking to seemed to be important to her. She explained to me that she then knew how to behave and what to say after recognising the opposite party. Not only in the conversation with me but on any occasion with other lesbians, there seems to be a set of unspoken rules operating in T/Po interactions.

After some brain-storming, Luce kindly explained me what the 'social courtesies' of T-Po relations in the lesbian community are, with examples! She started with the function of using the term T in the friendship network. This term has brought T people together and creates sameness among them:

They would treat you as the same circle. The funny bit is if you claim that you're bu-fen, T would stare at you with confusion. [...] Then it takes quite a long time of observations to make sure whether I should treat you as 'same-sex' or 'opposite-sex'. (Luce)

What does Luce mean by same-sex and opposite-sex? Do these lesbians not identify themselves as females? In fact, the idea of sameness and

difference is based on erotic matching/coupledness among T people and those women who desire T and are desired by them. The recognition of T people is thus important for her and her T friends to tell who is approachable or unapproachable. Luce's terms 'eatable or uneatable' are more vivid and sexually active. Once a T has made sure the person is not her type, 'uneatable', she would feel relaxed when approaching her; if the person is 'eatable', she would be more concerned about manners, appearances and topics of conversation.

Let me explain it. Imagine there is a straight woman, ok, put her aside...doesn't click on me. If she is a T, ok, buddy-buddy, put her on another list. An unknown grey type is created between T and Po...um...which situation is what I'm afraid of. At the other end of my scale there is Po. It is good when people specifically claim 'I am Po'. No doubt I'll put them into the 'opposite-sex' file. Comparatively, she is 'opposite-sex' in possible sexual relationships. (Luce)

Luce was very aware of her use of heterosexual terms and models; however, 'since we are biologically the same, it is more convenient for me to recognise people' (Luce). Although she did not agree with heterosexual gender divisions, and she claimed that she was only borrowing the terms, it did not seem to be a problem for her to use it as a functional model, instead of copying the practice. As Butler (1990: 123) argued:

Within lesbian contexts, the 'identification' with masculinity that appears as butch identity is not a simple assimilation of lesbianism back into the terms of heterosexuality. As one lesbian femme explained, she likes her boys to be girls, meaning that 'being a girl' contextualizes and resignifies 'masculinity' in a butch identity. As a result, that masculinity, if that is what it can be called, is always brought into relief against a culturally intelligible 'female body'. It is precisely this dissonant juxtaposition and the sexual tension that its transgression generates that constitute the object of desire. In other words, the object [and clearly, there is not just one] of lesbian-femme desire is neither some decontextualized female body nor a discrete yet superimposed masculine identity, but the destabilization of both terms as they come into erotic interplay.

The contextualised and re-signified butch/T masculinity (and also femme/Po femininity) emerges not only in sexual relationships, but also in social interactions. Within the invisible norms between T and Po, what

really creates a problem is when 'I don't know what to do with you' (Luce). The ambiguity caused Luce's anxiety when she met people with unknown/unspecified sexual roles as she would not know what kind of courtesies she should use. There is a huge difference in behaviours when hanging out with T friends and Po friends, according to Luce. These are what Luce described as the 'social courtesies' in the lesbian community. Proper manners were required and ruled the interactions between T and Po. It matters because a T would not do anything rude to a Po. Luce gave me an example, when someone happened to run out of cigarettes:

When a T yelled out 'oh, cigarettes, I have none with me', what I would do is throw her a whole pack directly and say 'take it'. On the contrary, if a Po is speaking, I would eagerly hand it to her and politely say 'you may want to have mine'. (Luce)

The set of social courtesies are implicit in the community and are practised by some lesbians. Luce did not agree that it is a universal rule for every lesbian in every community; however, she could tell some of the details from her lesbian friends. Another example she gave is 'opening the door', which she explained as similar to the manner of men with ladies. If Luce (as T) insisted on opening a door for a T friend, 'it would shock her to death (laughter)' and make the other party uncomfortable. Interestingly, Po also played an important part in the social courtesy system. Regardless of being in relationships or friendships, Po knew what they could do to T as Po; playing cute and being served. Luce mimicked Po's soft, high-pitched voices when they requested T to do things for them, such as:

'I'm so thirsty; is there any water?' Then you would see a 'xiao-si' (小厮, archaic term for a young manservant) offering a glass of water with both hands (laughter). The delicacy in T/Po relationships is implicit but still visible. Also, [you could tell from] the one who would be driving, couldn't you? There are many connotations of being in the driver's seat (Luce)

Interestingly, Luce and her partner Rachel were very careful about the unbalanced dynamic in their relationship; each of them was assigned a car to drive or a motorbike to ride. They might be more relaxed about being

tagged as T/Po by others than by themselves. We might have learnt what a lesbian is like from different approaches; however, it is another matter for individuals to think of the self, to perceive others and to practise interactions with others.

In Western debates, a common critique of role-playing in the lesbian community comes from the radical lesbian-feminist belief that all role-playing replicates the very (hetero)sexual structure from which lesbians are supposedly free. According to Rich's article 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980), compulsory heterosexuality exists to perpetuate male dominance, which does not exist naturally but must be reinforced through the institutionalisation of male-female roles. However, butch-femme role-playing between women cannot be simply an imitation of heterosexual roles—a woman in the butch role is still a woman, without access to male privilege and with nothing invested in the systematic subordination of women. In one of the first essays to emerge in defence of butch-femme role-playing in 1950s lesbian communities, Nestle (1996) argues from personal experience against the feminist critique that butch-femme role-playing is an inferior imitation of the male-female roles of heterosexuality (see also Halberstam 1998).

In my research findings, however, there is no obvious evidence of a connection between Western feminist influence and individuals being against T-Po role-playing. Also, the adoption of T identification does not represent a lack of feminist inspiration. T-Po role-playing and Western feminist debates are not necessarily connected in the context of the Taiwanese lesbian community. While certain university-based lesbian activists/scholars might have developed ideas based on Western thought, in their daily practices, lesbians are not necessarily aware of Western debates on butch-femme role-playing. An individual's daily practice of sexuality does not conflict with her feminist stance. Also, the transition or amendment of role-playing cannot be seen as wholly influenced by Western radical feminist thought because identities are negotiated in local contexts. As Blackwood and Wieringa (2007: 18) argue:

Equally apparent throughout Asia in both cities and rural areas are butch or masculine 'lesbians' whose own identities are firmly located in local patriarchies as well as in global signifiers apparent in the proliferating forms of the English term 'tomboy' with which they identify themselves. TB, tom, and tomboy are some of the variations used in Hong Kong, Thailand and Indonesia respectively (other terms are also used in each location). Their

women partners see themselves variously as normative women, who do not fit into a marked category of sexual identity, or as different than heterosexual women because of their attraction to masculine 'lesbians.' These individuals, like their activist peers, are influenced by global feminist and queer processes as well as by local processes that are negotiated to construct the particular forms of sexuality and gender evident in Asia today. These seemingly divergent subjectivities—the lesbian activists and the partners in a butch/femme relationship—appear at the conjuncture of decidedly local and global processes.

Researching 'Chi-Tou T'<sup>6</sup> in non-urban areas in Yilan in Taiwan, Wu (2004) focused on how Chi-Tou T formed their groups by blood-drinking oaths and 'brotherhood' gang rules while urban lesbians gathered through magazines, the Internet or T-bars. To emphasise their brotherhood, Chi-Tou T have symbolic tattoos, a shared surname (to show that they belong to the same community) and rank members by middle names; they have male-like body aesthetics and restricted T–Po role identifications, which all challenge the mainstream urban-centred lesbian discourses in Taiwan. Indeed, these groups are maintained by brotherhood leadership, helping people in the same community and against other people from different groups if necessary. T–Po culture in a Chi-Tou T group is a parallel of heterosexuality, where T are masculine and Po are soft and feminine. With Butler's idea of performativity in mind, Wu (2004: 95) was very careful about the background when her interviewees repeated the idea of what a man is like or mimicked how a man would behave. Wu (2004: 96–98) agreed that Chi-Tou T built up masculinity through, and no doubt in, a heterosexual patriarchal society, where they copy gender divisions and segregation. However, she also found subversiveness in Chi-Tou T in multiple (lesbian) spaces and the practices of sexuality. Chi-Tou T were very aware of their female bodies, which benefit them when dating females; they were socialised as females in the first place and thus they knew what a woman would like in a partner (Wu 2004: 98–99). Furthermore, Chi-Tou T's hiding of their female bodies when having sex has been overturned by Po's curiosity about T's female bodies. The assumption that 'Po love men' encouraged Chi-Tou T to hide their female bodies by refusing to take off their clothes when having sex with Po and by

<sup>6</sup> They are mostly not well-educated and work as a kind of market trader.

purchasing male outfits; at the same time, they satisfied themselves by successfully passing as men when having sex with females because they assumed that Po would like it. However, this might not be the case; female sexuality is not necessarily limited to heterosexual relationships. In Wu's (2004: 106) study, Po were curious about and keen to see T's female bodies. One extreme case was that a Po took a peep at her T when she was changing clothes. Wu's research did not specify but did reveal the fact that it is not only T but Po (or female partners identified as others) and their interactions that subvert heterosexuality.

### *T Identity Formation*

Two Asian authors, Chao (2001) and Lai (2007), have discussed tomboys in the contexts of Taiwan and Hong Kong societies; both are more focused on lesbian masculinity and their interaction with feminine counterparts. Researching the history of lao-T (old T) alongside the flourishing of T-bars since 1985, Chao (2001) distinguished the difference between earlier lesbians (around the 1960s before T-bars emerged) and contemporary T-bar-oriented ones. Early tomboys 'considered themselves real men despite a lack of something congenitally "essential" in gender terms', while 'present Ts largely consider themselves only "Ts"' (ibid: 191). In 1960s Taipei, early tomboys:

wore masculine outfits, including ties, tuxedos, pants, male underwear, and short hair, as well as conducted [sic] 'non-feminine' acts, such as smoking, consuming alcohol, yelling swearwords, and gesturing and speaking in a 'mannish' manner in both public and private domains. (Chao 2001: 186)

In the scenario of T-bars, which Chao (2001: 192) analysed as a performative site for lesbians to act out their sexual identities, lesbians perform their sexual bodies by playing erotic tensions with Po and establishing brotherhood with T buddies. There are 'the rules' when T and Po meet in the T-bars; for example, to govern amorous T-Po relationships, younger T and older Po would greet each other as sisters and brothers. Furthermore, by telling love stories (mostly sad and failed), which functioned in establishing proper T-Po relationships, the T story-teller and the Po story-listener negotiated their sexual roles. Chao (2001: 200–201) found that 'story-telling is one of the performative acts a T takes on in the bar so as to produce a T-ness. Likewise, it is a performative act for a

Po-listener to display her Po-ness by acting as a patient, understanding, and responsive listener.’ Similarly, Lai (2007: 170) talked about the prevalence of TB (tomboy)/TBG (tomboy’s girl) role-playing among Hong Kong lesbians as many couples comprised one masculine lesbian and one feminine lesbian:

Conventionally, a TB has a masculine appearance and plays a masculine role in a relationship; a TBG, in contrast, looks feminine and plays a feminine role. A TB takes up ‘men’s’ responsibilities such as paying bills and carrying her girlfriend’s handbag, as well as escorting her girlfriend home.

However, Lai (2007: 171) noted that the division of role-playing among Hong Kong lesbians is negotiable when both partners have paid jobs or the feminine one earns more than her masculine partner. Considering the rising rates of employment among heterosexual married women in Asia and the steady rise in the cost of living in Hong Kong, it is practically impossible for a feminine partner to quit her job and rely on a single salary. As a result, the clear distinction between TB/TBG roles seems to be easing among double-income households, where the couple would have to negotiate household chores. According to Lai (2007: 172), TB/TBG role-playing is still influenced by a conventional division of labour and is like an expressive performance to highlight ‘the role difference within the TB/TBG role-play’.

Despite having a model lesbian couple in mind, my participants did not think of themselves and their relationships in this way. My research findings suggest that women who identified as T may face a contradiction between being masculine and feminine. Luce shared her experience when encountering an ‘Uncle T’ couple who were born around 1966:

Luce: She presented herself in white shirt, trousers and...um...she would chain the keys and mobile phone to her belt. She was wearing ‘xi zhuang tou’ (西裝頭, short back and sides; literally meaning ‘suit hairstyle’ in Mandarin Chinese) and had it parted on one side. Her glasses are framed in thin gold colour...*gold* (original emphasis)...

Iris: Oh my god! It’s such a classic style of ‘Uncle’! And then?

Luce: Um...and her...[Paused and searched for the proper word for it] her partner was busy preparing nibbles for us in the kitchen. She sat down by her partner’s side when she finally had her job done and

said 'welcome to our house it's nice to meet you today.' It's so classic and so stunning!

We shared the same idea of what an 'Uncle T' is like, which we both associated with old T-bars. The partner of the 'Uncle T' was described as very feminine and seemed to follow certain courtesies like a traditional Chinese wife, who prepares the food and greets guests. Luce was surprised by the couple and was very aware of the difference between herself and the 'Uncle T' style. Luce was not an exception. In my research findings, participants had their own understanding of T/Po identity and roles, which they had learnt from various sources. Being well aware of the differences between collective norms/labels and individual practices, most had thought about their applicability to themselves. As a result, most had constructed their own perspectives on being a lesbian, both in the lesbian community and in wider society. Luce's reaction when encountering an Uncle T suggested her awareness of generational differences. Women who identify themselves as T often have their philosophies of being T, which have adopted collective norms from T/Po culture to varying degrees. My findings suggest, and I would argue, that these revisions of cultural rules in the lesbian community have replaced individual conformity and lesbians today have developed independence when situating themselves in the community. The philosophy of being T is shaped by how they interpreted and reinterpreted the community norms. What we have learnt in the community and other approaches has no doubt had an impact on us, but lesbians might not feel comfortable with fixed roles and clear divisions. After all, you have to take on the label before you begin to question it.

Luce and I were not the only ones who had encountered Uncle T figures; Clarissa, who first made her debut in a big-brother-headed group, had her own observations of the big brother, although she focused more on the big brother's personality than her appearance. The big brother wore clean short hair and casual masculine outfits, for example Polo shirts and a blazer. Clarissa agreed that this kind of appearance is no doubt very masculine. However, she pointed out that big brother was different from 'men in suit and tie' and 'young T wearing trendy hairstyles'.

She [the big brother] is not rough or rude like a man. But I am not able to articulate how I feel about her. I'm running out of vocabulary. She is very moderate and gentle. You can tell how strong-minded she is from her eyes.



She cares about her appearance, but doesn't work too much on it. When she talks, she talks succinctly and effectively. She is well-organised. In general, she gave me the impression that she is . . . um . . . *a nice liberal father on the TV shows*. (Clarissa, my emphasis)

Speaking about being a T, Luce, who never wears long hair and struggles with wearing skirts, had found benefits in being in the intermediate grey area. During her schooldays, she did not feel alone being a short-haired and boyish girl. There were a few girls in the sports team who looked like her. Indeed, she could tell the difference between these boyish girls and those sweet charming girls who wore ponytails. However, she did not feel uncomfortable about being that kind of girl and found benefits in it. Luce explained that in the elementary school setting boys and girls were in different camps and would purposely keep a distance from each other. She was not part of this gender segregation; on the contrary, her being in the middle helped her to make friends on both sides. People were 'crazy' about comic books at the time. She had the opportunity to read both boys' and girls' preferences.

Thus, I don't think there are any conflicts in being a T and being a girl at the same time. On the contrary, there is a space-without-rules for me. I was not regulated either as a male or a female. You couldn't ask me to be a man. Why should I bother to learn what a man is supposed to do since I am exactly a woman? Be lady-like? Um . . . sorry, I can do neither of them (laughter). I am in the middle. (Luce)

Being a T for Luce is more like being something between female and male, which is where the benefits come from. The T label created a space for women who identified themselves as female but preferred not to follow what women were supposed to be like. However, there does not seem to be a clear idea of what a T is like. People use the term T as though we share a common T figure but no one is able to explain exactly what a T is, although we do have an approximate figure in our minds. As discussed in the previous section, lesbians practise what they think about being a lesbian from what they have learnt. Variations exist due to each individual's interpretations. The idea of T women varies in the conversations with different people in different contexts. This might explain why people hesitated to adopt any of the labels. In practical terms, labelling simplifies the process of knowing each other as part of the social courtesies among

the lesbian community. Many participants mentioned T identification; however, they tended to hesitate before confirming their current identification and were keen to explain what kind of T idea they were practising. They might perform as masculine and feminine at the same time; the percentage varies. The most important part is that they retained fluidity. Interestingly, most of the T identified interviewees had loosened their T practices over the course of their relationships. As Mimmi said, ‘my replacement of T identity with Po couldn’t be more relevant to her [the current partner]’.

When researching individuals’ sexual stories and identification, I found that they formed their sexual identity not only by themselves in interactions with others, but also within the relationships with their partners. T and Po identities, especially T, might be changed in relationships with different partners. Some participants were encouraged to loosen their insistence on being T by partners; among these, Mimmi has even changed her T identity into a Po identity. Some gave up their T role as their partners do not believe in T–Po culture. Some couples avoid being seen as a T and Po couple because this culture has been criticised for a long time. Moreover, some identified themselves according to their partner’s identity. In these cases, individual sexuality and practices were negotiated between partners and the balance of the relationships varied with a partner’s philosophy of being a lesbian.

Discussing Gagnon and Simon’s (1973) concept of ‘sexual scripts’, Jackson and Scott (2010: 815) argue, ‘even the most conventional of erotic sequences “derives from a complicated set of layered symbolic meanings” which might not be the same even for participants in the same sexual “drama”. Scripts are, therefore, fluid improvisations involving ongoing processes of interpretation and negotiation.’ The three aspects of scripting—the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic—explain ‘how sexual scripts emerge, evolve and change and are sustained culturally, interpersonally and subjectively’ (ibid.). In actual relationships and individual sexual practices, the interacting self negotiates with others through ‘everyday interaction where wider cultural scenarios are interactively reworked, negotiated or contested’ (ibid.) and internally reflects her own desires and thoughts. Human sexuality is not determined by the community; located in wider socio-cultural contexts, the process of becoming and being sexual is embedded in cultural scenarios or scripts, which ‘are available to us as cultural resources that enable us to make sense of the sexual’ (ibid.). My research findings have confirmed that the lesbian community and the

wider social surroundings have provided channels for lesbians to make sense of lesbianism; however, it does not limit what individuals do in their daily interactions with friends or, what I found most crucial, in their relationships.

### *Backlash Against Stereotyped Lesbian Figures and T-Po Role-Playing*

It did not seem to be difficult for the T women I interviewed to talk about their identity formation and individual histories of becoming T. This was not the case for Po women. It is more difficult to find reflections on being Po as Po identity formation is more difficult to notice. Compared with the initiative of T identifying, Po identity is passive and in most cases identified in relation to their desiring partners. In other words, Po women would not initiate their Po-ness and Po identification; furthermore, they hesitated or even refused to adopt a Po identity even when they were coupled with T counterparts. Bu-fen identity was developed when lesbians did not identify as either T or Po; they called themselves bu-fen because they were in between or they could adopt both labels. However, other lesbians who might be seen as bu-fen claimed that they had no concept of category and, thus, would place bu-fen outside lesbian identifications in the community.

As mentioned in previous sections, some women tried to fix themselves in the collective ideas of being a lesbian/T/Po/other first, while some participants, who hold on to a label-free identity, kept a distance from the general rules of the community. Participants reflected on the differences between collective identification and their own identities when describing their experiences of learning lesbian culture. Some of them had found contradictions, questioned the adaptability of cultural norms and even kept a distance from the community. In some cases, the way people identify themselves may not be identical to how they label others; however, people who are less flexible with collective norms of identification may label others the same as they identify themselves.

Although Helen had been in a marriage and same-sex relationships, which might have led to her being defined as bisexual in the community, she did not define herself as lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual. Sexuality or identification was never an issue to her until some 'circle-insiders' asked her specifically. Helen was anxious about possible questions relevant to sexuality and self-identification and thus had never consented to an interview before.

I talked to Jessica 'What should I say? To what extent should I reveal myself?' If I'd ever disclosed my previous marriage, the interviewer would start digging out my sexuality and self-identification. But I have no answer. What can I do? (Helen)

Nevertheless, the most uneasy situation was in the community as people might not sense her concerns. Helen avoided hanging out with people in the community, including lesbian activists. She was afraid that people would guess that she was bisexual due to her previous marriage. At the same time, she would not be happy if people judged her simply according to her experiences. Helen was comfortable without a sexual identity, whether she was dating males or females. She tried to avoid identifying herself as either a lesbian now or as a bisexual regarding her previous marriage. Sexual identity became a problem for her only if people were keen to identify her.

However, it is not avoidable if the identity query is from a partner. Clara had been in heterosexual relationships and refused to identify her sexuality. She adopted neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality as 'I don't think I have any preferences for either sex. This has been confusing me for a long time' (Clara); yet, she was reluctant to identify herself as bisexual, which her partner Angie suggested. In the individual interview with Clara, she expressed her understanding of the reason why Angie encouraged her to think about her identity. Clara sensed that Angie connected self-realisation of identity with commitment to the relationship; thus, Clara's unsettled sexuality suggested a neglect of the fact that she was dating a female. It seems that if Clara did not have a clear idea of her own sexuality, she might not be brave enough or ready to be in her current relationship. However, this has remained an issue between the couple for years since they started their long, stable relationship and the debate in Clara's mind had not come to a conclusion.

I have thought about this question. Yeah . . . In fact, I . . . um . . . Let me put it this way; I don't know whether the thing 'gender' [or sexuality] matters to me or not. (Clara)

Kitty first encountered gay and lesbian friends when she was in high school, and at the time she had no experiences of dating either sex. They met in a featured café based at a theatre. Staff and café-goers were mostly LGBT people and grouped as a feminism-oriented small community, in

which members had challenged gender stereotypes. Kitty was attracted by its comfortable and unrestricted ambience of being gender-liberal and became very familiar with the surroundings in the café. She claimed that she advocated feminism and was fed up with patriarchal and heterosexual environments. In such a community, members with an unconventional sexuality would not regulate themselves or other people with traditional gender divisions. 'As a result, I would not hear any hatred in conversations with them' (Kitty). Her antipathy towards male-female patterns had influenced her point of view on T-Po roles.

I think it's too pretentious and also ridiculous to fit T-Po roles into traditional gender divisions and to force a T to mimic a male's role and responsibilities. (Kitty)

She seemed to accept T's masculine appearance of wearing short hair, loose jeans and T-shirts, 'I wouldn't demand that they wear pink lace' (Kitty); but she could not tolerate the inequality between T and Po. Her observation of T-Po relationships since high school was that they mimicked the unequal pattern of heterosexuality; 'even worse', she commented.

They often have the idea that 'my Po is going to be married someday.' To avoid this situation, T would make their best efforts to do both male and female work, which means they earn money for the household and clean the houses. (Kitty)

Her explanation of the unbalanced relationships between T and Po situated lesbians in a wider society where heterosexuality rules people's choices of marriage. Po were often said to be less committed to same-sex relationships as they were not genuine lesbians. As a result, the competitive nature of T encouraged them to perform better than men in order to keep their partners. Interestingly, Kitty found that some Po-looking girls with a strong identification and awareness had changed T-Po relationships over the decades. These girls may look very much like Po figures if we borrow the notion of T-Po appearances but seem to be more committed to same-sex relationships.

They in fact have very strong 'tong-zhi' identity. There are more and more girls like them and in turn they have influenced T roles, T identity and T

behaviour. This is a mutual relationship; T may not like to do extra work, but can't do anything about it if their girlfriends threaten them so: 'I will go and get married if you don't treat me well, if you can't afford my spending and if you don't do household chores.' (Kitty)

According to Kitty, the changed Po character has ensured more security in lesbian love and has opened up a new era of T-Po relationships. What she supports is a more flexible T-Po relationship rather than a collapse of T-Po culture. Her beliefs have also influenced her current relationship with Nan. In relationships, lesbians amend their practice of identification and have more opportunities to re/interpret their own sexuality and sexual roles in order to get along with their partners. However, there are more discoveries and details to be found about the relationships in the couple interviews.

## CONCLUSION

Individual sexual stories revealed how lesbians made sense of same-sex attraction and the different ways in which they formed lesbian identities. It often involved a time lag between these two experiences, whether they had prior heterosexual relationships or not. It was difficult in both situations; however, for those who had, their realisation of same-sex attraction often meant that they had to cope with their discontinuous pasts. I identified three strategies that these women developed when becoming aware of their feelings towards other women.

Situational contexts were crucial when making sense of lesbianism. Different social spaces fostered different kinds of communities and created different subcultures and group norms. However, participants' notions of what a lesbian is like are not fixed. Although most lesbians learnt about sexual identities and gender roles in the community, it was still an individual's choice whether to accept these norms or not. Individuals might also amend their lesbian identities to varying degrees in their interactions with friends and partners. Participants who changed their previous identity because of their current relationship were evidence of this argument.

Accounts of these first recollections of same-sex attraction often involved participants hesitating about revealing their feelings to others. The default of behaving heterosexually makes it difficult to acknowledge feelings that do not conform to the norm. And it is even more difficult to do so publicly. These women tended not to come out to

their families of origin if they were not fully prepared. However, it is possible for lesbian daughters to negotiate lesbian sexuality in their families of origin whether they come out to them or not. In the next chapter I discuss lesbian daughters' negotiations in heterosexual families and explore the ways in which they introduced their partners to their families of origin.

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## Lesbian Daughters in Their Families

The continuation of the family line is an important factor in understanding Chinese families. Lineage preservation explains various aspects of Chinese family practices. For example, ‘given that lineage preservation is a main objective of many Chinese family members, it is not difficult to imagine the practice of ancestral worship as a necessary ritual to express gratitude to the progenitor, and filial piety as an essential custom to show respect to the lineage guardian immediately before’ (Chu and Yu 2010: 1). This also explains why raising offspring and taking care of elderly relatives/parents matter so much in the context of Chinese families. Deviating from the right track, for example, by objecting to marriage or living unconventional lifestyles, violates the core elements of lineage preservation. Furthermore, the emphasis on the family rather than individuals, which ensures its continuation, enriches intrafamily interactions and tightens family connections.

In this chapter, I discuss how lesbian daughters practised their sexuality in, and negotiated with, their families of origin in various ways. At the same time, in response to their lesbian daughters’ sexuality and unconventional lifestyle choices, whether disclosed or not, how parents accommodated themselves to the changed situation and the contradiction between good family relations and surveillance of their daughters’ sexuality. Acknowledging social change in the context of Taiwanese society, parents tend to operate silent knowing strategies towards their lesbian daughters’ sexuality and lifelong relationships with females. However, social changes

like delaying marriage and declining marriage rates may prevent lesbian sexuality and sex from becoming visible, as lesbian 'single' women are more able to pass as heterosexual. On the other hand, due to Chinese kinship terminology, both heterosexual parents and lesbian daughters struggle to place daughters' female partners within families. However, stories of parents integrating their lesbian daughters' partners indicate that Chinese familialism can, in fact, co-operate with lesbianism in the context of contemporary Taiwan.

### COMING OUT

Coming out in contemporary Taiwanese society may not be impossible but it is not at all easy. There are degrees of acceptance among parents of non-heterosexual children when their lesbian daughters and gay sons come out to them. Positive coming out cases also have their limitations, in particular negotiating with partners' families of origin. According to Chu and Yu (*ibid.*: 2), 'the lineage-continuation objective naturally fosters the practice of sex discrimination against females, both in resource allocation, and in the types of marriage'. However, in a changing society, contemporary Taiwanese lesbian daughters and their families negotiate and compromise between family values and individual practices for daughters struggling with filial piety and parents who cannot afford to lose their daughters, which thus gives them some bargaining power. Wang et al.'s (2009) study of Taiwanese gay men notes similar conflicts when coming out to parents. A son's familial responsibility in Chinese culture is to produce an heir to ensure continuity of the paternal line. Disclosing his gayness to the family might imply 'a refusal to produce a male heir and thus constitutes a major conflict within their family' (*ibid.*: 285). Wang et al.'s findings confirmed that, in using various strategies, 'the decision to come out was often motivated by the son's perception of his parents' attitude towards homosexuality. Respondents worked hard to prepare for coming out and to minimize the risk and the impacts of the process' (*ibid.*).

In the traditional Chinese family, parents are responsible for ensuring heterosexual order and retaining patriarchal dominance by keeping their children on the right, 'normal' track. Parents who fail to do so might lose face and be gossiped about for their bad parenting. Losing family face is a very big matter in the context of Chinese customs. Under the responsibility of filial piety, Taiwanese lesbian daughters thus struggle with

whether/when/how to disclose their sexuality to their families of origin. However, disclosure may not necessarily lead to a loss of family face; it depends on how their sexuality was disclosed and whether ‘outsiders’ (外人, those outside the family) were involved. It is possible that parents are supportive of their daughters’ sexuality and lifestyle choices, but are cautious and want to keep secrets within the family. Take Helen’s mother as an example:

Yes. My mother said . . . her attitude towards me now is that she has accepted it but we need to keep it secret from relatives! And I think I don’t mind that.  
Yeah. (Helen)

Helen did not realise her lesbian sexuality until her late twenties and started her relationship with Jessica aged around 30; she decided to tell her mother at the very beginning of their relationship. She carefully planned how and when to disclose her sexuality and her current relationship. She said that she knew her mother well enough to find a perfect moment and scenario. Her mother did not seem to fully understand what a lesbian was like, but still saw them as a couple and urged them to arrange their old age together. Helen’s mother is not an unusual case; some parents of my participants have changed or transferred marriage expectations on to a second-best plan for their daughters’ old age.

It might be easier to disclose to siblings than to parents as siblings have less authority; there are also stories about only mothers knowing sexuality secrets and not telling fathers. As Weston (1997: 54) suggested, ‘[s]iblings in general were presumed to be more accepting than either fathers or mothers’, as they ‘might feel obligated to profess more understanding than parents’; however, ‘this did not necessarily make them less hetero-sexist’. My study suggests a different scenario (see [Table 5.1](#)). It seems that there is a consistency in remaining closeted; when lesbians decided not to disclose to parents, very rarely would they tell their siblings. Among the eleven lesbians who had not told their parents, only two of them had come out to their siblings. Abby is one of the rare cases; she has both brother and sister, but had only disclosed to her sister, who is also a lesbian. On the other hand, six out of 17 who had not disclosed to their siblings had disclosed to at least one of their parents, whether voluntarily or not.

The pattern of disclosure to siblings shows that lesbians are more willing to disclose sexuality to their sisters than their brothers, which may

Table 5.1 Disclosure to families of origin

	<i>Assumed name (Age)</i>	<i>Parents' marital status</i>	<i>Parents (Father/Mother)</i>	<i>Siblings (Brothers/Sisters)</i>
01	Clarissa (36)	Married	Yes	Yes
	Sally (36)	Married	Yes	N/A
02	Jessica (35)	Married	Yes	Yes
	Helen (34)	Divorced & remarried	Yes	N/A
03	Evelyn (30)	Separated	N/A	Yes
	Ninny (30)	Married	Unsure	No
04	Wilhelmina (32)	Married	No	Yes
	Vivian (35)	Married	No	Yes
05	Camille (31)	Married	Yes	No
	Petra (32)	Married	Yes	Yes
06	Maggie (32)	Married	Yes	N/A
	Angel (30)	Married	No	N/A
07	Angie (37)	Married	Unsure	No
	Clara (37)	Married	No	No
08	Edith (32)	Married	No	N/A
	Abby (32)	Married	No	No
09	Lisbeth (35)	Mother widowed	N/A	Yes
	Mimmi (40)	Married	No	N/A
10	Rachel (32)	Married	No	Yes
	Luce (32)	Married	Yes	N/A
11	Nic (29)	Married	Yes	No
	Jules (34)	Married	No	N/A
12	Crocodile (35)	Married	Yes	Yes
	Zoe (29)	Married	No	No
13	Tina (32)	Mother widowed	N/A	N/A
	Bette (34)	Married	Yes	No
14	Theresa (31)	Divorced	No	Yes
	Jess (32)	Married	No	No
15	Kitty (31)	Divorced	N/A	No
	Nan (28)	Married	Yes	N/A

suggest a weaker/less intimate relation between brothers and lesbian sisters than straight sisters and lesbian sisters. Of those with siblings, only six out of 18 had come out to their brothers and twelve out of 20 had come out to their sisters; among those who had not come out to their brothers, six had disclosed to parents. Interestingly, it is predictable that lesbian sisters would disclose their sexuality to each other. The majority of participants who have lesbian sisters had come out to each other, except for the case of Edith. She had chosen not to do so because of 'bad' sister relationships, rather than issues about sexuality disclosure.

In Mimmi's family of origin, her father's constant absence might have loosened his patriarchal authority to some degree. The husband/father's annual return home reminds the mother of her negligence in disciplining her daughters' sexuality, which she is supposed to take over when there is no obvious signifier of patriarchy. Recognising a daughter's relationship does not mean recognising sexual relationships. Whether in the cases of disclosed lesbianism or in other situations, many accounts suggest that parents, mothers in particular, tend to overlook the fact that their daughters are indeed sexual beings; they monitor their daughters' sexuality and avoid explicit discussions about sexuality or sexual activities. Like her lesbian sister, Mimmi had disclosed her sexuality and formally introduced her partner to her mother as a 'girlfriend'. Her mother did not raise any objections, but despite her seemingly liberal views of her two daughters' lesbianism as she found it hard to accept lesbian sexuality.

She didn't accept this . . . right away. I knew it. She has never read any of my books<sup>1</sup> until now. I intentionally brought up this issue once; I said to her 'Mummy, you don't read my books. I've written more than ten books now!' And she said 'Oh, I've got presbyopia now. I struggle to read a lot. [The small print in the books is] too difficult for me to read. I don't even read newspapers.' Later, one idea came to my mind when I was talking with her. I asked her: 'Is it the case that you avoid reading my books because my stories about two naked women having sex would remind you that your daughter may do the same thing? Are you still struggling with my sexuality?' She said 'Yes, a bit. I don't think I can handle it.' (Mimmi)

<sup>1</sup> Mimmi is a very successful writer.

Mimmi's mother was only one example. Although they had been together over ten years, Rachel claimed that her parents did not include sex lives between their daughter and her partner. They believed that they were merely living as life partners without sex involved. Also in over ten years' relationship, Clarissa did not specify her lesbianism and erotic relationship with Sally to her mother. Instead, she said that she wanted to be in the relationship with Sally for life:

She clearly asked me whether we two share the same bed or not. At first I said 'No, we don't sleep in the same bed.' I didn't want to terrify her. But later on I told her that the weather is very hot and it's a waste of money if we have two air conditioners on in separate rooms. So, we sleep in the same bed. (Clarissa, couple interview)

Jules's mother, who has not been told about her daughter's lesbianism, presented an extreme case among these stories. Before Jules started lesbian relationships, she had spontaneously 'run away from home' with her best friend in high school, who was rumoured to have had a suspiciously unconventional relationship with Jules. Her mother was only concerned about whether they had slept together when she came back home the next day. Instead of specifying 'having sex', the mother asked 'You two spent one night together. Did you do "that"?'(Jules) and was satisfied with the answer received, 'No'. A few years later, despite her previous suspicions, her mother accepted all the reasons why she cohabited and shared a bed with females. Furthermore, her mother kept silent when she found a sex toy in Jules's bedside drawer. Jules saw her closing the drawer and of course both of them knew what was inside, but neither mentioned 'that thing' at all.

The cases above demonstrate that, whether they are informed of their daughters' lesbianism or not, these mothers chose not to go further and avoided asking any relevant questions about sexuality or sex. Like many Taiwanese parents whose daughters have disclosed their lesbianism, as well as those who had a suspicion, silent knowing keeps them away from their daughters' sexuality and thus makes sexual lesbians invisible in heterosexual families. Conventional understandings of gender, sex and sexuality limits their imagining of lesbian sexuality; on the other hand, ignorance about lesbian sex may help parents to acknowledge their daughters' unconventional lifestyle choices. Instead of raising objections, parents keep to silent knowing and choose not to break the peace. Parents'

attitudes towards ‘good’ family relationships lead to one question: Why do they avoid mentioning their daughters’ unconventional sexuality when they are trying to maintain conventional lives? As Chu and Yu (2010: 5), in their study on the Chinese family, argue:

Intuitively, when family members have tighter mutual attachment, their objectives, tolerance, and cost of conflicts are also different. Moreover, the tighter connection may also play the role of disciplining defiant behaviour of family members. This in turn strengthens the family tie and further influences the behaviour of members.

Nan’s coming out story completed a picture of lesbianism in tight family connections, and shows different interactions between parents, siblings and other relatives. She is the eldest child, with a younger brother, and is well-loved by her parents, who are based in the south; her father educated her younger brother from a very early age to take care of her regardless of her marital status and, if she remained single, to have one of his offspring adopted by her. These demands by her father signify how patriarchal his beliefs are, in which single women are destined to be vulnerable and their spirits after death will not be worshipped, and how much he wants to protect his daughter in his own way. Nan’s mother is also a very traditional housewife; she satisfied her husband’s expectations of being a good mother and helpful wife. Nan’s parents were suspicious of her sexuality but did not ask her directly. They asked her younger brother instead. This young straight man, who strongly believed in unconditional love between family members, confirmed his sister’s lesbianism. He had known about his sister’s sexuality since junior high school days. His positive thinking towards her lesbianism encouraged him to say to their terrified mother, after she had realised her daughter’s unconventional sexuality:

My brother was really a humorous guy; he said to my mom: ‘You should be happy that your son isn’t gay so you could still possibly have grandchildren. Your daughter is a lesbian. Does it matter? Take it just as if she is not going to be married anyway.’ (Nan)

Nan’s parents were not brave enough to talk about this with her until two years later. Like many traditional Taiwanese fathers, her father would not express his feelings and emotions towards his children, so he asked her mother to talk with her. Both parents struggled with traditional normative

ideas and their love for their daughter. They worried very much about her unconventional lifestyle but could not deny the fact that they merely wanted her to be happy. Her mother seemed to be gradually convinced by her fashionable ideas on marriage and sexuality. Nan thought that her mother could not understand or accept lesbianism; but she showed her generosity to Nan's ex-girlfriends as she tried very hard to love the person her daughter was in love with. On the other hand, her father would avoid commenting on her sexuality verbally but expressed his great concern when she broke up with a previous girlfriend by buying her a car. Material comfort was the only method he could think of, instead of saying: 'I know you are suffering and I hope this will make you happier.' (Nan)

Compared with Nan's younger brother, her cousins, 'equal in the generational hierarchy' in her terms, seemed to be more silent about sexuality. Nan's family of origin (her parents, younger brother and herself) live as a nuclear family separate from other relatives; however, they interact very closely with both paternal and maternal relatives as if they are a big joint family. Nan did not hide her sexuality and relationships with females from her parents' generation or her cousins after coming out to her parents. Before coming out, many of her cousins seemed to be able to sense her lesbianism, but did not say a word. They seemed to believe in the policy of silent acknowledgement: 'If you didn't talk about it, we wouldn't ask you when you will get married or date a boyfriend. They want peace at the table. Everything is all right if no one breaks the silence' (Nan). Unexpectedly, on a very normal occasion, her younger brother again revealed her relationship with females to their cousins and received silent consent. One of their aunts had an interesting comment on her sexuality:

My affinal eldest aunt is really funny. They are from A-Island. She said, 'I knew this kind of thing; it's all about genes. There was a female couple in our village at the time [...] they weren't married and lived together. This must be genetic destiny.' Villages in A-Island aren't big and it's easy to trace back to the same original family. This is really interesting. They don't have higher education, but they are tolerant of you anyway because you're a member of the family. I'm much luckier and much more well-loved than many other people in terms of coming out. Very well-loved. I'm very well-loved by my family. (Nan)

The aunt-in-law found reasons for Nan's lesbianism and helped to make the unconventional issue lighter in the family. According to Nan, the



family accepted her lesbianism because of love and family closeness rather than any understanding or acceptance of homosexuality. The close relations between the family members also affect Nan's intimate relationship with her current partner Kitty. The sense of family and heritage of familism have ruled parents' methods of surveillance over their daughters' sexuality; daughters are supposed to move securely from their fathers' homes to their husbands'. This idea causes difficulties for parents when they place their daughter's female partner into their family of origin.

However, coming out may become painful for other families with lesbian daughters. In many of the negative cases, lesbians were unexpectedly caught out by parents or their partners' parents, in particular when they were teenagers. Since the deviant lifestyles of lesbian daughters may bring stigma and loss of face, parental surveillance of their daughters' sexuality safeguards a family's decent reputation. Unconventional sexuality can be a private matter inside the family; however, it is a different matter when outsiders are involved. Several interviewees had experienced telephone threats from partners' parents trying to stop their relationship. Take Nic as an example; her then girlfriend was found to have an 'unusual affection towards a female' by her family and her mother contacted Nic's mother to uncover their relationship. Nic's mother went into shock and has not yet recovered from depression because of her 'good' daughter's 'bad' behaviour. Being discovered by outsiders exacerbated the problem as Nic's family was accused of failing in their parental responsibilities. As a result, parental power would be reinforced over their daughters to retain both parental surveillance of the daughter and family face. Maggie is another case; her father received a phone call from her girlfriend's mother. Unlike Nic, Maggie fought for her sexuality and had a hard time with her father.

Um...her mother called and uncovered everything to...the worst part...to my father. He rarely picked up the landline at home. Unfortunately, he happened to be the one who picked it up. We might have kept him unaware if my mother had picked it up. Well...but it was him not her. That was a serious matter. My father was extremely irritated. I think he was...angry...astonished...too astonished. This is how I interpreted it. He was more astonished than irritated as he had never encountered this kind of thing. [Lesbianism] is something out of his world and imagination. He might learn from newspapers that homosexual people were stigmatised and excluded by society. He couldn't believe that his daughter was involved.

I think what really made him angry was that I didn't listen to him because of this thing. We had a big fight and I wouldn't give way. (Maggie)

Nevertheless, parents may not be able to specify their concern about their daughters' sexuality. Luce's parents did not specify her lesbianism but blamed her for easily being distracted. Her parents had no sense of lesbianism. They sensed their daughter's masculine appearance and being too close to female classmates and stigmatised her unconventional behaviour. Her parents tried to stop her by saying: 'Don't you dare fool around. Don't you dare trick us as if we don't know the thing you're doing' (Luce), without articulating her intimate relationships with females. As well as demanding a better school performance, her parents took Luce to a psychic medium<sup>2</sup> and wished her affections towards females could be sorted out.

### LESBIAN DAUGHTERS AND PATRIARCHALISM

Unlike Weston's 'families we choose' (1997), which may include friendships, my participants defined 'families' exclusively by blood or partnerships and, in one particular case, their pet. The families of origin of each partner have a great impact on how lesbians practise their own families in many ways, whether their families are aware of the lesbian relationships or not. Parental power did not seem to lose its impact on lesbian daughters when they became financially independent, moved away from their parents' home or were old enough to take responsibility as an adult. This becomes a major concern for lesbians when they are thinking about disclosure to their family. Jules (aged 35 when interviewed) lives apart from her parents in a different city and has had a stable, full-time job for years, yet she claimed that she would never come out to her family until the day her parents lose their power over her. Jules did not mention a specific time or situation when her parents would finally give up their parental power over their daughters. However, many other participants associated this transition with caring for parents in old age. A similar

<sup>2</sup> It is common for Taiwanese people, in particular the older generation, to consult the opinions of deities from the spiritual world via psychics or the temples to get things sorted out. For example, to organise a wedding day in terms of the groom's and bride's birthdays, to tell their fortune and wish for a better future, and so on.

concern has worried Jess for years, in particular during the peak years of being expected to marry; she struggled with the irreconcilable conflict between taking on the responsibility of being a good daughter who ‘does well’, and practising her sexuality. What caused her to struggle the most was the responsibility of being the first child and the eldest daughter:

She [Jess’s mother] has absolute faith that I’m going to be married. [...] This became her major concern when our family became freer from financial crisis these last few years. [...] Yes, my role in the family is very different. (Jess)

Studies on the seniority and gender of Chinese children suggest that sons are more favoured by the family and parents, in particular the eldest sons, who are expected to lead and inherit the patrilineal families. As the old Chinese saying goes: ‘the eldest brother is like a father to his siblings (長兄如父)’, and ‘[w]hen the eldest son happens to be the family’s firstborn, his seniority in the sibship further legitimizes his entitlement to paternal authority’ (Yu and Su 2006: 1058). Yu and Su’s research also shows that the privilege for firstborns does not extend to daughters in terms of educational investment. On the contrary, firstborn females are often expected to be caring and devoted, as the latter half of the old saying reflects: ‘the eldest sister is like a mother (長姐如母)’. Unlike married/heterosexual daughters, ‘single’ lesbian daughters who seem not to have the burden of their own families appear to be more responsible for their elderly parents than their married brothers. With the benefit of extended compulsory education and changing values about children’s gender in recent decades, there was no obvious difference in family investments between my firstborn participants and their younger brothers. My findings suggest that firstborn participants are more willing to take care of their parents in old age than their younger siblings. The idea of ‘being good, doing well’ as the firstborn child may also discourage them or cause them conflict when considering whether to disclose their sexuality.

In their single-parent family, Jess’s mother relied on her very much and did not favour her less than her younger brother. The high expectations and responsibilities of the first child in the Chinese family have resulted in pressure on Jess in many ways. The first child, regardless of gender, is expected to be the best and the first ‘good’ model and in most cases the first one to get married, which makes Jess’s role, according to her, very different.

- Iris: Do you imagine there will be a moment when you have to tell your mother?
- Jess: I suppose that'd be the time when she really needs me.
- Iris: Does that make any difference?
- Jess: If, at that stage, her biggest regret is that I haven't got married, I'll tell her that I have someone and I'm not alone. I'll tell her if my remaining single worries her too much in her last hours. That'd be the only chance I can think of.

Social changes (delaying marriage and declining marriage rates) may have loosened heterosexual surveillance over daughters; however, it does not seem that lesbian daughters themselves can get away from patriarchy and family politics. Camille (aged 31 when interviewed, a first child with a younger brother) was another example. She was having problems with her mother due to her sexuality and they had given each other a hard time for three years since she moved in with her partner. Even so, she wanted to be reconciled with her parents as taking care of the elderly and her disabled younger brother were her main concerns. As a result, 'the responsibility of the elder (and single) daughter in the family' has been included into her and her partner Petra's future plans. The following extract from the couple interview with Camille (a first child) and Petra (a youngest child) shows the different responsibilities for their parents' old age between the couple in terms of their birth order among siblings.

- Iris: So, haven't you thought about your parents' old age? Haven't you arranged things around that as a couple?
- Petra: I'm not in a position to arrange things for them.
- Camille: You don't need to when it comes to responsibility.
- Petra: Yes, I don't need to. I don't have much responsibility.
- Camille: But I do because I'm the first child. I was thinking...
- Iris: That's another complicated issue, isn't it?
- Camille: Very true. Because... like I said... I... well... Of course I really hope they would understand [our relationship], then we could have a closer relationship and take care of each other. If we keep a distance from each other like we have these past years, I can't do anything for them if something happens. They didn't... my mother wouldn't tell me anything, like what happened last week. My father was in the emergency room and I didn't know until this week. My mom never disclosed a word to me. Not to mention I was on the phone with my dad that afternoon. My mom mentioned it casually... 'Oh... your father took a day off

that day because he was in the emergency room in the morning.’  
 I said ‘He stayed at home all day and he didn’t tell me?!’ My  
 mom answered, ‘why bother?’ (Sigh) ... it’s ... (sigh).

In contrast to my findings from lesbian couples in their thirties, family responsibilities like taking care of elderly parents are not a concern for younger generations. Researching young lesbians (mostly under 25 years old), Wei-Ling Chen (2005: 40) argued that the priorities of marriage and motherhood have changed over the past two decades due to the impact of Western discourses of individualism and individuals’ personal experiences. She found that both her lesbian participants and their parents had changed their ideas about the necessity of marriage and reproduction. The expansion of education and financial independence has increased daughters’ individual autonomy and lessened family obligations. Independence and autonomy are emphasised and encouraged by both Taiwanese parents and their daughters. Another Taiwanese author, Chen Jou-Yin (陳柔吟 2006: 42–43), has confirmed these findings; instead of pushing daughters into the marriage market, parents in Taipei tended to encourage their daughters to gain higher educational achievements and have more career-oriented lifestyles. Although individualism in the context of familism sometimes creates conflict, individualism may be one of the approaches enabling daughters to negotiate with patriarchy. The idea of individualism often affects lesbians’ decisions to leave home. In addition, they tell their families that they intend to stay single for life. In so doing, young lesbians can take control of their lives and develop a distance from their families of origin. Financial support connects daughters and parents as one of the family ties; however, untying financial support does not necessarily mean gaining independence from the family.

When thinking about leaving home, Wei-Ling Chen’s (2005: 42–43) participants tended to ignore the fact that their sexuality affected their life plans; instead, they claimed that the major motivation for moving out was to look for individual freedom. Sexuality may not be the chief concern for lesbians when making decisions about whether or not they are open with their families; however, situated in the wider context of family and society, sexual selves, desires and thoughts are, in fact, negotiated within daily interactions. This denial of the importance of sexuality has confirmed that it is invisible or absent when daughters fight for their own identity and independence.

Researching single heterosexual daughters' motivations to move out, Chen Jou-Yin (2006: 33–36) argued that there is a conflict between the patriarchalism of parents and the self-oriented accomplishments of daughters, and this motivates daughters to leave home. For more privacy, daughters sought opportunities to move out and develop their own identity to 'be at home'. They may have their own room but the line between private and public is not clear and it is easy for parents to cross the line when showing their 'concern'. Powerlessness in marriage decisions, space management and even living habits make daughters feel homeless; Chen Jou-Yin (2006: 36) argued that, for daughters, 'leaving home' is the start of a search for 'being home'. However, leaving home before marriage challenges the traditional expectation that unmarried daughters should live under the family roof (Chen Jou-Yin 2006: 36–38). Daughters who left home early or before marriage would attract gossip about the family as it is believed that this only happens to problem families. Both parents and daughters have a fear of 'family disorder'. As a result, 'good' daughters would be expected to put the completeness of the family before their own happiness. On the other hand, as marriage was (and often still is) the only way out, single daughters took marriage into consideration even if it was not (yet) in their life plans. Lesbian studies like Cheng's (1997) have noticed that this strategy, getting into heterosexual marriage at an early age, was sometimes adopted by young lesbians who were keen to escape family authority, even though they might find themselves in another patriarchal cage in the end. In these cases, lesbian daughters negotiated general individual autonomy in the family instead of fighting for sexual autonomy, which again makes lesbian sexuality invisible.

In her study on Shanghai 'lala' women (a localised informal term for lesbians) in 2005–2007, Kam (2010: 93) found that the majority of her 25 participants had been under pressure to marry. Seven of them were in heterosexual marriages or about to get married. Familial pressure to marry has forced lesbian women and gay men in Shanghai to find alternative ways to make themselves look 'normal', in particular co-operative marriage with opposite-sex homosexual people (Kam 2010: 87). Being normal and having a normal life is a very strong social expectation in China; thus, 'contemporary parents, who have grown up in a uniform society in which any politically or socially deviant behaviour would affect their livelihood severely, are now actively taking up the role of the guard to ensure that their children are leading a normative heterosexual life and do not become a deviant in any sense' (ibid.: 93).

In relation to expectations of marriage, my participants suggested a different picture of relations with families of origin regarding living arrangements. It is a challenge for daughters *at any age* in patriarchal families to negotiate with their parents about 'moving out', whether they are under marriage pressure or not. Apart from three participants who had been married, only a few of my participants have been pushed about marriage or had seriously considered their parents' expectations about marriage; among these women, most of them regarded their parents' expectations as negotiable and did not intend to change their lifestyles in response. As time goes by, the reversal of provider and receiver seems to ease the tension between parents and lesbian daughters. As Jules, Jess and others said, 'until the time when they need me', parents seem not to let go of power over their daughters. Angie's account made the situation clearer. She moved out of her parents' home many years ago and lives in a different city. She has visited very regularly in recent years since her father became ill. She helped with heavy household chores and delivered things her father needed in hospital. Both she and her parents realised that she had built up her own place and would not stay over at their home even on New Year's Eve. Angie said:

It's a long time since we had to listen to them and were pinned down until we reached a certain age. Considering the neediness of others, my parents need me much more than I need them now. When I was much younger, I needed their help and support. Yes, the situation has been reversed now. I sense that my parents have realised that and only hope for my well-being. They wouldn't push you or specify the issue, but they sometimes ask you about possibilities [of marriage]. (Angie)

Like Angie's parents, instead of marriage expectations, some parents tend to persuade their daughters into thinking more about elderly care plans when they realise that their daughters are not going to get married. Both Evelyn and Ninny's families of origin have similar ideas about being married. It seems to them that marriage and children are insurance for women's old age. A well-prepared plan for old age is a practical matter and, considering the difficulties of living as an unmarried woman in Taiwanese society, it is more important than marriage itself. Evelyn's mother, for example, still has the hope that her daughter will get married some day if she gets tired of her lesbian relationship. However, her mother does not push her but reminds her to have a 'cushion' plan.

Helen's mother is an interesting example. She claimed that marriage was the most secure plan in a woman's life, although her own marriage was not successful. She had divorced Helen's father and was in her second marriage. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Helen had disclosed her sexuality and her current relationship with Jessica to her mother. Since this couple had been friends for years, Helen's mother had known Jessica as a lesbian friend way before Helen came out. The mother assumed Jessica to be a 'husband' in their relationship and expected them to behave according to her imagination of lesbian role-playing.

Helen: My mom may not . . . no, she must not know about 'la-zi'! That's why she thought she [Jessica] takes the role of husband. She asked me 'Does she earn money? Does she do housework?'

Jessica: (laughing out loud) I don't have a job at the moment, so I do most of the housework! (laughter) I am the wife!

Furthermore, Helen's mother showed higher expectations of Jessica when she learnt they had upgraded their relationship. She saw Jessica as her daughter's partner (rather than a friend like before) and took it for granted that Jessica should meet certain requirements as a spouse, which she didn't care about when they were friends. Being a good and faithful partner is at the top of the list:

My mom said 'This person doesn't look good. She doesn't look like she would be faithful to love.' (Laughter) (Helen, couple interview)

Helen's mother also worried about their old age as she thought that Helen did not have a good investment and finance plan; her mother kept nagging about this issue and demanded that Jessica helped her to plan.

Helen: Every single time when we were on the phone, the final topic on her nagging list was all about elderly planning. 'Neither of you two are public servants and will receive good benefits in retirement. You have to think carefully about how much you will need for your old age!' She is very much focused on our old age and reminds us to plan it as early as possible. Because . . .

Iris: Does she count you as a couple?

Helen: Count us a couple? In fact, she . . . yes . . . counted us together because she thought she is my husband. Thus we two are coupled together.



- Iris: That's why she is asked to earn money and do housework?!
- Jessica: (talking to Helen) Husband, you'd better talk to your mother!  
I'm your wife and I'm not earning money. Besides I have to cook!

There is no doubt that over the decades, with more and more women refusing to obey patriarchal norms, the trends of delayed marriage and emerging independent habitation have changed the existing patriarchal family structure. It seems that the virtue of filial piety and patriarchal obligation have loosened their hold on contemporary lesbian daughters. However, reasons like individual independence and lifestyle choices are not persuasive enough for all parents in the context of Taiwanese society.

There is a similarity between the contexts of modern Taiwanese and Japanese societies. Kamano and Khor (2008: 175) argued that the trend of delayed marriage and the decline in the rate of marriage 'makes it possible for a lesbian to "pass" and find a niche in society as single (heterosexual) women'. However, the passing 'keeps lesbians invisible in society and makes it difficult for individual lesbians to publicly share the fulfilment of living a life with a woman' (ibid.). Indeed, some lesbian daughters may have benefitted from the niche by passing themselves off as single women and finding more spaces outside the family. It is not easy when two women move into a new place, whether the relationship has been disclosed or not. Most lesbians adopt convenient justifications, or 'camouflage' as Kamano and Khor (2008: 172) called it, for the move; for example, to shorten the journey to work. The interviewee Kumiko in Kamano and Khor's (2008: 173) study 'used the workplace as the major reason for the move'; however, this justification did not overcome her mother's objections, as 'marriage could solve such problems too'. Thus, Kumiko 'ended up leaving home as if she were running away' (ibid.). As about 80% of never-married Japanese women aged between 25 and 34 were living with their parents in 2005 (Kamano and Khor 2008: 162), leaving home is an important issue for both lesbian daughters and their families.

In my study leaving the parents' home was often followed by moving in with partners, which creates more of a challenge for lesbian daughters and their families of origin. As Kamano and Khor (2008: 171) argued, except for those who have moved out of their parents' houses already, 'to "justify" the move to their family of origin is "a bigger problem"'; '[a]t the same time, moving out and living together could also make the (lesbian) relationship more "visible", and provoke various reactions from

their parents and other people.’ In my study, this issue worried not only those who had not yet moved out, but also those who had been living apart from their families. In the accounts of my participants who had not yet come out, there were difficulties in finding a way to explain to their families why the couple were moving into the same place.

There are various justifications for leaving home in these cases, although the results vary with parents’ attitudes. Among all the reasons for leaving home in the accounts, ease of commuting between home and work may be the most convenient excuse. Although many of my participants had experienced studying in different cities, none of them mentioned these experiences when talking about ‘leaving home’. Living apart from family when going to study, in a sense, is still under the parents’ roof. As Maggie, who had lived in university accommodation for years and was studying abroad when interviewed, said: ‘I will be genuinely leaving home when I move in with my partner some day.’ Leaving her parents’ home meant that she thought she would lose their support financially and emotionally as she is an open lesbian in the family and they are ashamed of her sexuality. This may explain why people regard moving in with partners as a form of commitment to their relationship. However, this commitment is often accompanied by incomprehension from the family. Most of my participants left home to move in with their partners whether commitment was a concern or not.

Nevertheless, finding a job away from home was not much help in getting off the parental hook when Nic and Camille planned to settle down with their partners in Taipei. In both cases their parents asked them to live with relatives, who are regarded as an extension of parental authority. Nic was luckier; she constantly stayed over at her partner’s place and was not caught out as the substitute parental authority did not work as her mother wished.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Camille’s frequent absences concerned her parents a lot. They had been arguing about living arrangements, together with sexuality and lesbian relationships, for a year and Camille finally made up her mind to vacate her grandmother’s house to move in with her partner Petra. Petra, who was much less connected with her family of

<sup>3</sup> During the two years of living apart from her parents, Nic lived in her relatives’ home but was absent all the time. Her mother expected to be informed of details by the relatives. However, they did not want to worry her and also did not want to snitch on Nic.

origin and had refused to live with her elder sister in Taipei, convinced Camille to keep a 'necessary' distance from her family of origin as their relationship would be the most important one in the future.

Having been in their relationship for ten years without formally coming out to either family, Wilhelmina and Vivian did not have much trouble arranging where to live. Vivian was from the south and living independently in Taipei after graduating from university. As the eldest sister in the family, her house often became a temporary shelter for her younger sisters and brother. However, once she had settled down with Wilhelmina, they were very aware of private space and their life as a couple. Wilhelmina was a Taipei local; she moved in with Vivian when her elder brother married and her parents moved to the suburbs. They left Wilhelmina and her elder sister (12 years older) a spacious house in Taipei. When they were about to redecorate the house for the sisters, their mother suggested that Vivian moved in. However, the couple had a different plan. Although their parents were not informed about the lesbian relationship, Vivian's constant visits had made a positive impression on Wilhelmina's mother, who was supportive of their decision not to live with her elder sister. Wilhelmina's elder sister was very supportive, too. She made a space for the lesbian couple to justify the move in the patriarchal neighbourhood.

In normal Taiwanese families, unmarried daughters would live together in the parents' home if they were in our situation. Neighbours would question why the younger sister did not live here. She [elder sister] would take the role of scapegoat and say that she is not an easy-going elder sister and that young people like living apart. She said the same to her friends, too. I don't know how she explained it to her friends [about Wilhelmina's sexuality]. Some knew and some didn't. It depends, I suppose. She became the scapegoat to be blamed. People learnt that she is too difficult to live with. But this is not the fact. (Wilhelmina)

Furthermore, the decision to purchase new houses together also complicates the issue. Parents often meddled in their daughters' house-buying in many ways; some objected to co-ownership as this might cause serious quarrels between 'friends' and some offered financial support as a variation on monitoring. Camille and Petra were offered financial support by their families of origin when they planned to buy a house of their own. They were very aware of how difficult it is to buy a house in Taipei without parents' help; however, to retain their liberty, they preferred to reject the

offer and rely on their own salaries. Jess and Theresa are an extreme case; after a few years of renting houses together, they planned to buy a house of their own and to register co-ownership when they both had settled jobs in Taipei. They did not need an explanation for living together when they rented houses but they did need one now, as buying a house together demonstrates an intimate relationship and only happens between couples. Very afraid of being caught by Jess's mother, they ended up with the solution of buying two houses; a big one under Theresa's name for cohabitation and a smaller (under Jess's name) for rental. They told their parents that they would have to live together because Jess could not afford the instalment payments. Therefore, Jess would pay rent to Theresa and invest in her own house with the rental from a tenant.

### PARTNERS' FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Human relationships are difficult to measure; however, in their accounts my interviewees seemed to have their own measurement when talking about how intimate their relationships were with their partners' families of origin. Eating together, asking opinions, frequently visiting houses and helping out with household chores were often mentioned and signified the relations between partners and their families of origin. As Jamieson (2011) defines it, 'practices of intimacy refer to practices which cumulatively and in combination enable, create and sustain a sense of close and special quality of a relationship between people'; however, instead of mutual self-disclosure, intimacy in my participants' families was built through doing things together. By so doing, partners would get more involved in the family of origin and have closer relationships with parents and siblings. Daughters would make the effort to make their partners known and accepted by their families, even if their relationship had not yet been disclosed. On the other hand, people who were anxious about disclosure would avoid such things. For example, Edith and Abby had paid very few visits to each other's homes over 16 years. They said it was fine when they were young as they were classmates hanging out together all the time, but over the past few years they had avoided appearing as a couple because they were expected to date men at the right age.

Retaining good relationships with partners' families of origin may make disclosure in the future easier and more possible. However, this was not the case when Sally came out to her mother. Her partner Clarissa was her best friend and their friendship was well-understood by her parents. When

they turned friendship into an erotic relationship, Sally's mother regarded Clarissa as a traitor and was not able to understand why the friend had become a girlfriend.

In other cases of relationships known to the family, keeping close contact with partners' families of origin became necessary to fulfil the obligations of Chinese families. Nevertheless, meeting partners' expectations and playing the proper/expected roles in partners' families of origin is not a simple task for lesbians. Due to the lack of a concept of affinity through lesbian relationships, lesbians and their families often have difficulties when positioning their female partners in the kinship or generational hierarchy. In addition to naming, family obligations and expected roles in families often confuse lesbian daughters and sometimes raise issues between the couple when it comes to gender roles. A masculine appearance and a T identity are often associated with sons-in-law, coupled with feminine daughters-in-law. Heterosexual affinity has led to a stressing of gender role-playing between lesbian couples. On the other hand, in the context of Chinese family structures, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law are not treated equally as spouses. It is more than a matter of title or position in the families. Should the partners of daughters be named and treated as sons-in-law as they are the spouse of the daughter? Or should they be seen as daughters-in-law according to their gender?

A long time before the interviews, Camille and Petra had discussed affinity appellation and how they expected to name each other. They reviewed the conversations with me separately in the individual interviews regarding the titles/positions they expected, how they wanted to name their partners and what they thought their parents would comprehend if they disclosed the relationship and introduced each other to their families of origin. Camille pretended that she was in her mother's situation and said: 'What else would she be? She is the other half (另一半, literally means such) of my daughter.' Here she used 'the other half' instead of any terms signifying gender segregation; for example, daughter-in-law or son-in-law. However, although 'the other half', together with 'spouse (配偶)' and 'partner (伴; 伴侣)', seem to be linguistically neutral, they are very much heterosexual in terms of culture and gender. In the context of heterosexual affinity, the spouse of a woman could not be anything else but a man. This idea also came to Camille's mind when she continued: 'Yeah, because I wouldn't think... I don't want to see her as a son-in-law' because 'She doesn't take on such a role and responsibility. She isn't. She's a female!'

Camille did not see Petra as a daughter-in-law either because 'Being a daughter-in-law sounds very poor'.

Camille's objection to either affinity appellation also applied to herself. She would feel uncomfortable with the title son-in-law in Petra's family of origin and stressed her 'non-acceptance' of being a daughter-in-law. However, Camille thought that her partner Petra did not seem to share these ideas.

Camille: We talked about this before. Petra said, 'Hum, you wouldn't qualify as a daughter-in-law in my family if you do this.' It's just...

Iris: Did she say such a thing to you?

Camille: Yes, she did. And I replied, 'Why should I be the daughter-in-law? Who is the daughter-in-law? No one is a daughter-in-law. You're a daughter-in-law in my family of origin, if you should know.' She also warned me about her mother, that 'my mom isn't very easy-going; she is a tough mother-in-law.' Ha-ha! That's all right. My mom is tough, too.

On the other hand, Petra (also in the separate interview) was more concerned about whether her family of origin could perceive Camille as a particular someone rather than how/what they perceived. She used different titles and descriptions throughout the interview, like 'my girlfriend', 'a person who is around me', 'partner' and 'my other half'. Petra even made a joke about her partner that 'she might be a maid'. In fact, none of these titles satisfy her because there is no existing specific title she can adopt for her partner when she needs to justify their relationship to her family of origin. She became inarticulate when she tried very hard to explain to me what 'role' she expected Camille to have in her family of origin. The issue to her is not a confusion about what the female spouse of a daughter can be named in the family, but a combination of problems that there is no proper name for the female spouse of a daughter and, in response to this, there is no justification for a daughter to situate her partner in her family of origin. This quote shows her contradictions:

If we tried to squeeze it [the relationship] into a format... ah... I wouldn't ask her to play a poor little daughter-in-law role. But at least I hope that she is entitled to go home with me. What I mean 'to be able to bring home' is (Petra)

As family affinity through lesbian relationships has not yet been created, Petra found a tentative solution by mapping her partner into her family tree.

If they could accept her . . . um . . . I suppose [she would be] another daughter of the family. I hope . . . I only hope that my dad and my mom can see her as another daughter. Treat her as well as they treat me, expect the same responsibility as they expect from me! (Petra)

This is not the only case in my study; parents, especially the mothers in my study, tend to see their daughters' particular someone as also their daughters due to a lack of naming. Also, to see them as another daughter may show more intimacy/friendship as a family and have less to do with sex. Wilhelmina had not disclosed her sexuality and her relationship with Vivian to her parents; but both her elder sister and elder brother were informed or had noticed it. Wilhelmina's mother might not realise their relationship or had a different understanding of it, but she treated Vivian by her own category of kinship.

- Wil (in the couple interview): When we women in our family go out shopping in the supermarket . . .
- Vivian: [I would] go together.
- Wil: Yes, [she would] go together. People like security and neighbours would ask 'are these all your daughters?' And my mom would say 'yes' to that. Last time my mom was in hospital, people asked her the same question. [ . . . ] But she [Vivian] wasn't identical to our family; we are chubbier (laughter). [ . . . ] So, the lady asked her 'is this one your daughter, too?' My mom responded that 'although she is not my daughter, she is just like my daughter.'

A lack of affinity naming through lesbian relationships has also confused lesbian partners when they tried to situate themselves in their partners' families of origin. Vivian and Wilhelmina's mother get along with each other quite well. The mother, who used to speak the Taiwanese dialect Minnanyu before marrying a Mandarin-speaking husband, is very happy speaking dialect with Vivian, who has a similar background. This

coincidence has made their relationship smoother and closer. Although Wilhelmina's mother did not see Vivian as a daughter-in-law, Vivian thought of her role in Wilhelmina's family of origin as more or less the same thing.

- Iris: How are you getting along with each other?  
 Wil: I think they're doing alright. Yeah . . .  
 Vivian: Do you mean me and her mother?  
 Iris: Yes. How are you treated in her family of origin?  
 Vivian: Like a good daughter-in-law.  
 Iris: Really?  
 Vivian: Yes, I think so.  
 Wil: This is her own opinion.  
 Iris: If you say so . . .  
 Wil: She thinks she is a good daughter-in-law.  
 Vivian: Her mother uses 'good daughter-in-law' washing up liquid.<sup>4</sup>  
 (Laughter)  
 Wil: She . . . for example . . .  
 Vivian: I'd go and peel the fruit [after meals]. She [Wil's mother] would say 'OK, OK, go ahead.' And then I'd do it.  
 Iris: Really? Is that really?  
 Wil: My mom wouldn't see her as a guest. (Vivian echoed: Yeah.)

Wilhelmina is the youngest daughter with two siblings who are both more than ten years older than her. Her brother is married and they therefore have a 'legal' daughter-in-law in the family. It seems that Vivian is more like a daughter-in-law than Wilhelmina's 'legal' sister-in-law. Besides, Wilhelmina's mother felt less distance from Vivian than her 'legal' daughter-in-law.

- Wil: She loves to compare herself with my sister-in-law. As if she IS a daughter-in-law, too.  
 Iris: Any details?  
 Wil: She said that 'your sister-in-law never peeled the fruit, but I would.'  
 Iris: Why do you volunteer to peel the fruit?

<sup>4</sup> Vivian was cracking a joke about herself as she was a bit shy when Wilhelmina mentioned her self-definition as a good daughter-in-law.



- Vivian: Volunteer? Not really. Sometimes her mother would tell me to peel the fruit and I'd say yes. When her mother feels tired of peeling fruit, I'd say 'oh, I'll do it.' Her mother doesn't care about presentation of the fruit; I think I'd better do it.
- Wil: It became a common thing in my parents' household.
- Vivian: Gradually, this has become my thing.
- Wil: She visits my parents' house very frequently. In contrast, she [her sister-in-law] is a stamped<sup>5</sup> daughter-in-law. My mom feels uneasy asking her to do housework. [...] My sister-in-law doesn't live with my mom, so they are not as close as her and Vivian. They are not very familiar with each other. My mom would not ask her to do household chores out of manners.

Compared with Vivian's self-assigned daughter-in-law role, Kitty was wary about being attached to her partner Nan's family of origin. Nan's close and caring family had already integrated her younger brother's girlfriend as a future daughter-in-law. When Nan's younger brother went on his compulsory military service for one year, the parents arranged for his girlfriend to live upstairs, apart from them in order not to go against tradition as they had not yet got married. This family adopted and amended traditions at the same time. Although they had managed to keep the fiancée living apart from the main house while their son was absent, they still accepted the couple's previous cohabitation and treated her as a genuine daughter-in-law. Both Nan and Kitty were fully aware of how Nan's sister-in-law-to-be was integrated into the family and had lost her own individuality; they both agreed that Kitty would not be like a daughter-in-law, but they had very different notions of family. Nan expected Kitty to be more attached to her family, while Kitty expected to form their own family and to keep a close relationship with both families of origin. Nan wanted a new family member for her family of origin, while Kitty wanted a new family with Nan. However, Kitty knew that Nan had compromised between her own idea of family and Kitty's.

- Kitty: You'll have to give up part of yourself and devote it to the family. Taking time management as an example, all she wants is to have her

<sup>5</sup> The original wording 'you gai zhang di' (有蓋章的) was spoken in the Taiwanese dialect Minnanyu, which means she has been stamped on the certificate, as Wilhelmina wanted to stress the legitimacy of her sister-in-law through marriage.

own time and to stay at home watching TV, the Japanese drama is on now. But it's family time; she will have to drag herself to the dinner table or play mah-jongg together. That's it. To their family, this is how you get involved.

Nan: Yes, a necessary way.

Kitty: [This is] disappearance of partial self.

Nan: But she [Kitty] prefers not to.

Iris: That's why she won't be treated like your sister-in-law.

Nan: No, I don't think this is necessary.

Kitty: She knows me well enough.

Different notions of family and family background also meant that they had struggled to get along with each other's family. Nonetheless, Kitty and Nan were both willing to play the expected role in front of each family of origin. In the individual interview, Kitty talked about what she knew about Nan's idea of making a new family with her, which she thought might be related not only to Nan's idea of T-Po roles but also to her belief in traditional marriage customs:

If you married out to your husband's family, you then belonged to that family. She is anyway not marrying out. Thus she expects to bring her partner into her family. I think either way contributes to her belief. (Kitty)

Fairly speaking, Kitty knew that Nan did not expect her partner to be a traditional daughter-in-law; instead Nan wanted her partner to become one member of the big family and get along well with family members. Kitty had learnt from friends that T-Po role-playing could easily be interpreted as mimicking typical heterosexual kinship.

Kitty: It shouldn't in the first place. But such a notion of family [Nan's traditional perspective of marriage and family] in the extreme typical T-Po relationship would encourage a copy [of heterosexual kinships]. A friend of mine, it's quite funny, she is very T and her family all realised about her sexuality. Her family would expect her partner to fulfil the role of daughter-in-law. Same as herself! She defined her other half as a daughter-in-law.

Iris: There indeed are people like that.

Kitty: I think they're amazing.

Iris: Um . . . we have our own perspectives.

Kitty: Right. I can imagine people like that. But I can't do that. I can't live like that.

It is possible that a female partner of a daughter is titled and treated as a daughter-in-law in certain circumstances. In Kitty's case, a strong antipathy towards the role of daughter-in-law in heterosexual marriages enhanced her objections to adopting such a title/role, whether this was a parallel of heterosexuality or not.

Rachel, who had been with her partner Luce for 13 years since university, was from a religious family with two closeted lesbian daughters. However, Luce was very much accepted in Rachel's family of origin without being formally introduced as Rachel's partner. When they were at university, they both lived in school accommodation and both Rachel's and Luce's parents were aware of their close 'friendship'. Rachel was not sure whether her parents realised their lesbian relationship or not; nonetheless, the way her parents treated them relieved her anxiety.

Oh dear, I can't recall all the details. I only remember how nervous I was on the day my father told me that he wanted to invite Luce for dinner because it's not a difficult thing to trace and uncover our relationship. Yeah. But I thought we'd be fine; we were just eating together. So we went for dinner. Yeah, and then my father asked her whether she wanted to have beer and she said yes. My father toasted her after filling her glass, this is what our family will do [to the guest], and my father said '*Luce, my daughter is your responsibility from now on.*' I was stunned and so was Luce. She froze and the glass in her hand might have been crushed into pieces, I sensed that. (Rachel, my emphasis)

Due to their religion, Rachel understood that she would never be able to articulate their relationship unless her parents gave up their beliefs. But the parents have shown their greatest support to the couple. As Luce said in the individual interview recounting her first meeting with Rachel's family:

I was thinking 'Is her father serious?' My first instinct was 'Is her father serious?' Um, I always have the idea that her father knows...knew our relationship at first sight, yes, according to his gesture on that day. *He did not say it, though he did face it.* This is his way. He made us realise how he felt about our relationship. (Luce, my emphasis)

Luce felt that she belonged to Rachel's family when Rachel's father had had a stroke the previous year and the whole family, Luce included, gathered at the hospital. 'At that moment I knew we were family' (Luce). She realised that it did not matter that they were both females and there was no formal ceremony/acknowledgement of their relationship. In turn, Luce was enthusiastic about developing a good and close relationship with Rachel's parents. Luce was involved a lot in Rachel's family of origin; she constantly visited Rachel's parents' home when Rachel was studying abroad and helped with annual house-cleaning during lunar new years. Neither of them mentioned affinity naming or heterosexual concepts of affinal relationships with partners' families of origin. Remaining unknown/unspoken does not stop frequent interactions between the lesbian couple and their families of origin. Their relationship was not challenged when the family was in crisis, which shows the parents' acceptance of Luce as Rachel's partner for life, even if their relationship was never named.

## CONCLUSION

Negotiating lesbianism with families of origin in the context of Taiwanese society is complicated by the burden of Chinese familial tradition and heterosexual affinal relations. Despite this burden, many families can still manage to acknowledge their daughters' lifestyle choices and integrate their daughters' female partners into their families. However, this often reflects their ignorance of their daughters' sexuality and sex in lesbian relationships. The majority of parents who had a sense of their daughter's close relationship with another woman tended to keep silent about the erotic aspect of that relationship. Whether they realised their daughter's lesbianism or not, the fact that they had someone with whom to plan their old age satisfied parental expectations. This seemed to be the most important element in heterosexual marriage that parents expect today.

Another reason for parents who have lesbian daughters to maintain 'silent knowing' about their daughters' lesbianism is their concern about good parent-daughter relationships. Nearly all of my participants were in their thirties and lived independently. Parents had a reduced power over their daughters but they loved them and wanted to keep them around. The parents of my participants often expressed this tendency. To varying degrees they acknowledged their daughters' lifestyle choices and appeared to be willing to include their daughters' female partners into their own

families. Their acceptance might be unspoken (e.g. Rachel's religious parents), conditional (e.g. Helen's mother asking to keep it secret) or individual-defined (e.g. Wilhelmina's mother treated Vivian as more intimate than her legal daughter-in-law).

Once their parents had accepted their relationship, naming daughters' female partners brings up another issue. A lack of kinship naming for lesbian relationships accentuated the difficulties of integrating daughters' female partners into the heterosexual affinal system in Taiwan. However, this was not only an issue for parents, but might also become a problem between the couple. For example, neither Camille nor Petra were happy to be a daughter-in-law in each other's families of origin because this kinship term connotes subordination. They had to seek a better way of introducing their partner.

However, coming out to family was still challenging. A relationship without family support could cause conflicts between the couple. In the next chapter I discuss reasons for conflict and explore whether or not the lack of family acceptance leads to inharmonious relationships. Before I can analyse tension and conflict in the relationships, however, I shall begin with their stories of becoming a couple and their relationship histories.

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## Relationships Over Time

Chapter 4 explored different social spaces for making sense of lesbianism and discussed how Taiwanese lesbians establish supportive networks and friendships mainly through the Internet, at school and in LGBT communities. Most of my participants met their current partners at school or university, while four couples met in the workplace and four met on the Internet/in chat rooms. In the case of schoolmates and colleagues, they often develop close friendships for quite a long time before getting into an intimate relationship. However, mutual friendship networks did not seem to be an easy way to meet possible girlfriends. There was only one couple who became known to each other via a mutual lesbian friend and then developed their intimate relationship.

Since my aim is to contextualise how Taiwanese lesbians commit themselves to a relationship without legislative support, this chapter begins with their stories of becoming a couple and their relationship histories. I then go on to explore the tensions and conflicts that occurred in their relationships, and to examine those factors that influenced a harmonious relationship. The final part of this chapter includes a discussion of the ways in which lesbian couples anticipate making a commitment (private, public and institutionalised), how this relates to their views on commitment ceremonies and whether or not legal recognition is bound up in lesbians' notions of commitment.

## THIS IS HOW THE STORY STARTED...

Clarissa claimed that she developed a crush on Sally at first sight when they were at university. Their close friendship kept them connected throughout their campus lives and Sally's few years of studying abroad. However, their friendship went nowhere until they were both ready to take it further. In terms of sexuality, Clarissa had realised her lesbianism when she was young, while Sally had no experience of dating either sex and did not think too much about heterosexual hegemony. Clarissa was aware of her affection towards Sally, which she initially suppressed because:

Once I was waiting for her [Sally], my classmate saw me and commented: 'you're just like a boyfriend who's waiting for his girlfriend.' I was suddenly shocked. I blamed myself for doing such a risky thing [showing her feelings]! I monitored my feelings very carefully. At the time I buried my affections towards her. [Iris: Why did you do that?] I couldn't afford to lose her. She might not accept me being gay. I didn't dare to show my true colours until we'd known each other for three or four years. (Clarissa)

The risk that their friendship might be permanently damaged left Clarissa no choice and she struggled with whether she could confess her affection for Sally. Nonetheless, she did so twice and received a polite rejection. On the third occasion Clarissa had the chance to bring up the issue, they both made a move. This did not happen until after a friendship of almost ten years, when Clarissa was in another relationship and Sally was planning to come back to Taiwan. Their reunion made Sally realise that she might need to review her 'friendship' with Clarissa, her feelings towards this woman and her ideal life partner. At the same time, Clarissa knew that Sally's return would make some impact on her life; she would have to deal with her strong feelings towards Sally as she would be struggling with her existing relationship when Sally was around. Clarissa wished to maintain a respectful distance from Sally and suppress her feelings if Sally could not accept her love. It was not an easy decision for Sally either. She had no intention of becoming involved in Clarissa's relationship and making Clarissa a two-timer. However, Sally could not afford to lose her best friend for life and had just realised her feelings towards Clarissa. In Sally's account, she felt guilty when Clarissa was distracted from her relationship. At the same time she was struggling, according to Sally, she was forced to review her notion of life partners and relationships. She found that Clarissa



was the ideal candidate to fulfil everything she expected, apart from her sex.

She matches all the requirements on my checklist. The only thing that concerned me at the time was that... the only thing was that... um... she's a girl. Or it was because she was committed to her previous relationship, even though she was dealing with it. She had not ended it, which made me feel a bit guilty. Yeah, that's how I felt. Other than that, she resembles what my ideal partner is like. Before Clarissa, when I thought about my future partner, I imagined 'HE' is like this and that. It was 'him' no doubt. When I met her, I found... um... she's the perfect one for me if there's no requirement of sex. (Sally, couple interview)

The fact that Clarissa was female concerned Sally more than disturbing somebody else's relationship. However, she started to reflect on it and to convince herself about her 'requirement' of sex and to explore her sexuality when she kissed Clarissa one night.

You know that we girls were taught to marry boys. I was brought up to believe that. I didn't have another thought. Of course I knew that there's homosexuality in the world. It's OK and I'm OK with it. A couple of friends of mine are gay, but I never thought that I could be in a gay relationship anyway. No, never thought about it. I guess our first kiss on that night had triggered me... um... it was a starting point. Yeah. Before that I didn't have a chance or even a thought to develop any intimacy with girls. And I found... yes, that feels so good, much better than with boys. My body responds to it and I've made a new discovery. I think it might explain why I don't want to have intimacy with boys. I never do. I didn't know why I couldn't go further with men than being very good friends. That might be the reason that I didn't have boyfriends. I didn't realise it before. (Sally, couple interview)

It was not exceptional among my interviewees that they started their current relationship while one of them was still in another. No matter how much people believe in monogamy, reasons may vary when they change their mind and leave a previous relationship; for example, desiring a better relationship or simply being unable to resist the new smile. On the other hand, it is not easier for the single one, whether she has triggered the switch or not. In Sally's account, she felt guilty when Clarissa was distracted from her previous relationship and tried to avoid disturbing it.

Staying monogamous was not necessarily a value that was appreciated when people talked about how their relationships began; however, not breaking it seems to be a hidden rule. This may explain, in these overlapping cases, why people sought evidence and signs before starting a relationship and often had an official date or event to clarify the two stages of their relationship.

Rachel and Luce were another example. Luce was in her previous relationship when she first met Rachel; they had been friends for a year before their intimate relationship began. In the individual interview, Rachel told stories about significant events when they were still friends, which she regarded as 'little but very important details'. She remembered that:

I thought she had an interest in me since then. She cared so much about me . . . too much for a friend. We did things for each other that you wouldn't do for friends. There must be something between us more than friendship, but we would never do things that friends wouldn't do. In the end we got together; it was just a matter of timing. It seems like we had been pursuing each other for a long time. (Rachel)

There seems to be a thin line between a very good friendship and taking it further. Both Rachel and Luce knew that it was more than friendship, yet neither of them dared to challenge the thin line as Luce had not officially put an end to her previous relationship. They avoided having sex and saying 'I love you' to keep the thin line in place:

I tried to make a pass at her. I leaned on her thigh chatting and she said she felt like she was hounded to the cliff by me. I said, 'what if I push you off the cliff?' and she said she didn't know. I was very sad; I knew we liked each other so much. But it is also true that she was still in another relationship. I wouldn't force her to end it. (Rachel)

It was difficult for Rachel to make the crucial move as she claimed that she was reluctant to be the affair in Luce's previous relationship.

I couldn't do it on moral grounds . . . um. It's morally wrong because I would be having a love affair with a person who is seeing somebody else. Although I knew they had problems, I knew the whole thing, but still I was making her cheat, which is immoral. (Rachel)

Compared with the two couples discussed above, Helen and Jessica appeared to be more relaxed about monogamy when they started their relationship. After eight years of being colleagues and friends, these two women developed an intimacy and realised that something was cooking up between them while Jessica's old relationship overlapped with the new one for a month. In the couple interview, Jessica was first to tell the story:

We were friends before. At the same time we were looking for jobs when she came back from Britain and me from Australia. We became more familiar with each other on the basis of mutual sympathy during our job-hunting; and then we upped the level of our friendship. Besides, both of us were in unhappy relationships... I mean she and her previous one, me and my then-partner. Something was cooking up between us on the basis of common experiences, failure in job-hunting and other things. All right, it's your turn! (Jessica, couple interview)

Helen did not seem to be satisfied with Jessica's narrative. She pointed out that Jessica was in another relationship during their first month.

It wasn't that simple! [Helen turned to Jessica] Is it OK to say that? Um. She was going to end her previous relationship. I spent one more month waiting. But she jumped the gun during that month. Something happened. (Laughter) [...] And we count it as an official start right after she ended her previous relationship. (Helen, couple interview)

Interestingly, I found that a crucial date and event to mark when the relationship had started was often mentioned, regardless of the fact that they may have already started their relationship. They may not celebrate anniversaries, although an 'official' start to the relationship symbolises the end of struggling/dealing with their previous ones and makes a clean break for a brand new relationship.

In [Chapter 4](#) I discussed women who currently identify as lesbians but who had had previous hetero-experiences and used various strategies and had struggled with heteronormativity when they felt their first same-sex attraction. Vivian was one of those examples, who was suffering from feeling different and unacknowledged same-sex affection. However, she seemed to be a different person when she met her current partner Wilhelmina. They became web-pals via a BBS forum for half a year and did not meet each other in person until Vivian made a move. Vivian sent a

message to Wilhelmina saying, ‘I miss you’, when she could not get access to the Internet. They started chatting on the phone and then they arranged their first meeting. Wilhelmina went to the airport to meet Vivian, ‘When we stepped out of the airport, she took my hand and I...and then we started it. No one said, “shall we start seeing each other?” or that sort of thing’ (Wilhelmina, couple interview). Everything went very smoothly and fast, according to this couple. With some knowledge of Vivian’s past, Wilhelmina understood that Vivian was very straightforward and could not bear ambiguity. Vivian had no fear when she found Wilhelmina attractive, she confessed her affection towards Wilhelmina and they took their friendship further.

*I guess I feared nothing because I knew she liked girls before. If she didn’t like me, she didn’t like me being me, rather than me being a woman. (Vivian, my emphasis)*

Similarly to Vivian’s carefree feeling with her first same-sex relationship, Clara claimed that she was not struggling at all when she realised her feelings towards Angie. However, she felt more stressed when they started dating. Angie and Clara had known each other in their workplace for a few months before their relationship. With no experience of same-sex attraction before, Clara confessed her love to Angie.

She is a very nice person. I admire her and got to know more about her later on. Um... I knew that she was my type regardless of her sex; I wouldn’t care if she was a male or a female. I knew I liked her. I had no experience of struggling. But I guess I struggled afterwards. I mean... I don’t think about what will come next if I have a crush on a person. It must be the case that I’m in love with the person, when I feel certain about the relationship, and then I realise that ‘oops, she’s a female’. These issues wouldn’t pop up in my mind before that. (Clara)

Getting into same-sex relationships can be hard under the assumptions of heteronormativity. The stories of starting same-sex relationships sometimes overlap their narratives with the first realisation of same-sex attraction. These all indicate the difficulty of lesbian identification in a patriarchal society. Other stories involved one partner’s previous relationship; these couples were challenged by their notion of monogamy at the beginning of their relationship, while other couples might have to face

infidelity during their relationship. However, infidelity was one of the tensions and conflicts that occurred between these couples. The following two sections talk about how they survived these obstacles and built up their commitment.

## TENSIONS AND CONFLICTS IN RELATIONSHIPS

### *Institutional Denial and Insecurity of the Relationships*

Many Western scholars believe that non-heterosexuals are freer to invent patterns of relationships and, thus, are more likely to move beyond gendered roles because there are no cultural guidelines or ready-made relationship modes (cf. Weston 1997; Dunne 1997; Weeks et al. 2001). Due to a lack of legislative recognition in most of the world, commitments between non-heterosexual couples, as a result, are based on mutual trust rather than depending on any institutional backing (Weeks et al. 2001: 107). Even in countries where homosexual marriage or partnership are available, making commitments and changing the boundaries of relationships can be creative and fluid as the relationships develop. Weeks et al. (2001: 107) put it like this:

This sense of the fluidity of relationships is clearly shaped by the lack of a sanctioned institutional framework for intimate relationships in the non-heterosexual world, but is also seen as an opportunity for creativity and choice that is still largely denied to the heterosexual world. The freely chosen, equal relationship is the ideal.

However, this optimism about freedom opening up choice among non-heterosexuals and their relationships might not, for many, help to ease the insecurity generated by institutional denial and legal oppression. According to Maggie, when she talked about her future relationship, due to the lack of legal support for non-heterosexual couple relationships in Taiwan, the sense of security and commitment has almost nothing to support it. Maggie's insecurity in her relationship started to emerge when her partner Angel was offered a permanent job while she was still striving towards her degree. Angel's wish to buy a house (of her own) that she and Maggie could move into together and take a step further in their relationship troubled Maggie because of the potential inequality and imbalance of power. In contrast to Angel's implicit power of being a provider, Maggie

was very aware of her lack of power in their relationship, yet there was little she could do at the time.

Maggie: I can't be sure that . . . about how we build up a home, a family of our own together; and, when can we do that. Perhaps we need to work on the sense of trust or security in our relationship. So far I would still draw a clear line between your home and my home.

Iris: You mean your parents' home.

Maggie: Also, if I ever imagined a house in our future, I would imagine that it's her home. What I'm saying when I say 'her home' is . . . To the home we may have in the future, I have little power or rights over it. Which means I don't have full, I can't say I don't have any power over the space. Her parents might have more power than me. Her parents, her sisters or her relatives can rule the space. In contrast, I can't; I know I might be less powerful than they are. *Legally speaking, there is no kinship bond between us. All we have is our relationship or commitment solely based on love, which could go up in smoke at any minute.* Again we will have to go back to the old issue of insecurity and the sense of mutual trust. I think I will have a sense of belonging if I share the payments for the house in terms of making it our home. That's another dangerous thing, if I put my money into the house; if we split up, our shared investment in the house will make it very difficult. My ideal is, only if I'm lucky enough to get a stable job, I want a house of my own and she has hers as well. Then we can discuss in which house we want to settle our lives, or we could live apart. Either way would make me feel more . . . *I gather that the sense of co-ownership of a home relies on equality between us. My entire anxiety now comes from the fact that I might be financially dependent on her in the future.* (My emphasis)

Maggie assumed that legal recognition would support her relational rights and could also help to build up her self-esteem and confidence in her relationship, whether or not legal recognition really does help in consolidating a good lesbian relationship.

### *'In-law' Conflicts in Disclosure/Non-Disclosure Households*

Tina and Bette had such a 'quick and intense' start that they often cracked jokes about it; at the beginning of their relationship, Bette confessed to

Tina that she had a baby girl<sup>1</sup> and right away Tina moved into Bette's mother's house with Bette's family on a separate floor. Bette was keen to build up a family with Tina for her child and relied a lot on Tina to take care of the child when she realised that her family of origin could only give emotional support or occasional baby-sitting rather than practical support in child-rearing. However, Bette's mother knew nothing about Bette's lesbian relationship or the new tenant in her household; not to mention Bette's preparations to leave her household to create a new one.

Tina: So I was blamed for not being honest at the beginning. Her mother heard of my failed marriage and felt bad that she was not being told about it by us. That's one of the reasons that her mother didn't like me. She had a bad impression of me. I had a bad record of not being honest. Besides, I moved in without giving her family notice, which was very rude.

Bette: That was my fault. I took it for granted...

Tina: Her mother couldn't take it at all. She treated me as an enemy and I knew nothing about it.

Bette: Because...I lived in my own little world. You know what? (Laughter)

Tina: Oh, that's so true!

Bette: I used to let my mom know if I brought girlfriends home to stay overnight or to live for a while. My mom didn't comment on it much. At least she wouldn't say anything in front of me. She might have been nagging my elder sister and brother instead of me when I moved out with girlfriends into another house of my mom's. But my sister and brother are protective of me and would comfort my mom like this: 'Don't think too much about it. She's responsible for her own life and choices.' At the time [when I started seeing Tina] I was living with my mom, she moved in and I didn't tell my mom in advance. I lived on my own planet and didn't realise that my mom wasn't informed about her moving in. She just moved in and it felt like a natural flow. My mom was upset for not being respected. And the kid is involved. I was so keen to make a home of our own.

Tina: We got a house-viewing done and moved into the new house within six months. Everything happened in six months.

<sup>1</sup> Bette is the child's social rather than biological mother. This child had been brought up in Bette's household since she was born.

- Bette: Very quickly. Yeah. My mom couldn't understand why things happened at the same time. This person showed up and then her daughter and granddaughter were gone. She became an evil figure who took my mother's loved ones away. No, she couldn't understand that. Besides I am not expressive, to my mom, no.
- Tina: That happens daily in their household. They don't say things to each other. They don't communicate. They... [Bette: No, we don't.] live their lives separately under the same roof!

Before starting her relationship with Tina, Bette had not considered disclosing her sexuality to her parents. As described above, her elder sister and brother knew about her lesbianism and would explain it away when their parents asked about it; 'they would say to my parents: "Why does it really matter? Why not let her like whoever she likes as long as she's not breaking the law?"' (Bette). Her father had bumped into her and her previous girlfriend kissing at home. Bette could only say she was no more than a good friend when her father asked her if there was only friendship between them. Her way of getting away from those embarrassing moments was to move out of her parents' house and live with her girlfriends. As she emphasised, her sexuality had never been out in the open. Also, the household arrangements gave Bette more privacy. It was possible not to bump into any of her family because each member occupied one floor of the house.

Bette used to be very close to her mother and built her life around her mother and the child before her relationship with Tina. Her mother supported her decision to have a child in her life without marriage or any other support; but Bette was so excited and focused so much on making a new home with Tina for the child that she neglected her relationship with her mother. Later, Tina suffered from Bette's neglect of communication with her family of origin. Tina noticed that Bette had poor communication with her mother about their decision to make a new home and was struggling about hiding things from her mother.

I know her mother means a lot to her. But she wasn't ready to disclose to her mother at the time. I could feel that there was a hollow in her relationship with her mom. That makes me think... I don't know... I love to challenge difficulties. This is my personality that I want to overcome those obstacles when people don't think you can make it. So I prioritised her relationship with her mother [rather than ours] because I couldn't bear to see her



suffering. I told her that she should make up with her mother and I suggested to her what to do about it. (Tina, couple interview)

With much help from Tina, Bette started to repair her relationship with her mother. Yet, Bette and Tina's relationship remained in the closet and the conflicts accumulated. It seems that it was too much for Bette's mother to take all at once; Tina brought new changes to her household that she could not bear. As they said in their accounts, being an uninvited guest had left a bad impression at the beginning. 'At least you get rent paid if you rent a room out to a tenant; but her mother had got nothing, no explanation or respect' (Tina, couple interview), which was followed with more conflict over childcare matters. Soon, when they lived together, Tina became the gatekeeper to the child and provided continuing emotional closeness. She had a very different point of view about child education from Bette's family of origin; she changed Bette's attitude to the child's education and left Bette to change her mother's, which got her into more trouble.

They used to spoil the child too much; buy her whatever she wanted, whenever she was clamouring. This is not going to work in the long-term. So I told Bette: 'you can't do it like that and you will have to tell the rest of your family.' Her mother is rather sensitive about her change and questions her: 'you used to be like that. Why have you changed? Is it all because of her?' (Tina, couple interview)

Tina was aware of her situation in Bette's family; from Bette's mother's point of view she was an uninvited person who lived in her household with a suspicious influence over her daughter and granddaughter. So was Bette. At the same time as the family was having an implicit 'in-law tension', Bette was tempted to buy a new house and leave behind the storm which might break out at any time. Bette chose the location of their new house, closer to Tina's mother in a different city, to make it easier to have close and regular contact with Tina's widowed mother, who could temporarily help. Bette's mother, obviously, was excluded from their new family plan. The fact was that Bette failed to consider her mother's feelings.

The housing came next. Her mother went house-viewing with her and expected her to make the best decision after repeated viewings and comparisons. But she couldn't wait. She, first of all, she is not a patient person.

Second, she felt tired viewing those houses after work and courses. She didn't want to spend her time travelling around and checking the details of each property. She rushed into settling down and was impatient. I know that she was keen to settle in [City] because of me. Her hasty decision turned out to be my fault. Why? Because of me, I made her so hurried. (Laughter) (Tina, couple interview)

From Bette's mother's point of view, she had lost her husband and used to have a sweet daughter and a granddaughter around on whom she relied; so the mother's heartbreak was not surprising. However, Bette did not expect her mother's frustration and was not prepared to deal with it. Bette's coming out to her mother was very passive; her mother could not tolerate the tremendous changes Bette was going through and all the pressure and the blame went on Tina. With Bette's elder brother's support, they finally broke the ice and talked over everything with Bette's mother. For the first time Bette considered coming out to her mother and she did. In the individual interview, Bette talked about her fear of coming out to her mother but the necessity of doing so for Tina and the child.

I can't see her [Tina] suffering like that. We've got a little one and they need stable lives. She has been tolerating me for so long. She can't live like that; it's tiresome taking care of the child and dealing with my mom. Having a child in a lesbian relationship is stressful enough, now what? Should I make her more uneasy with my mom? No! Besides, living under great pressure is no good for the child or for her either. That's why I decided to tell my mom. In fact, I think being a child you can never hide from your parents. They know everything about you. You know what? Parents just know it. When I came out to my mom, she said 'I knew it long before you told me.' My mom knew it; she just doesn't want to nail this lie. [...] Tina is the only one among my girlfriends that I want to tell my mom about; she's the one I want to be with. I want to plan my future with her. And I'm pretty sure she will get two daughters instead of losing one. Tina had made it. I believed in her. (Bette)

As in many lesbian coming out stories in Taiwan (cf. Cheng 1997), Bette's account of her fear about coming out was not surprising. Her relationship with Tina and her wish to make a good connection between the three generations had triggered her disclosure.

Bette: You know women of her age... she relies on me so much and I can't let her down. We're so important in her life; if we let her

down she would be lonelier. And she will think about rubbish things. In turn, we will be suffering from that. So I go back home during the weekends as long as I have leisure time, watching TV, eating her food. She is so happy whenever she sees me at home. She cooks for me, all my favourite dishes. She is happy seeing me eating. If we don't have time to travel back to Taipei, I will tell her to visit us. She would come and stay over the weekend. That's great. I'm very satisfied with our relationship now. And she doesn't think that now we two have a house and a family she will be ignored and abandoned since we live separately from her. No, she doesn't worry about that.

Iris: So, did you decide to keep a room for your mother when you bought this house?

Tina: Yes. We decided it at the beginning. The master bedroom belongs to her mother. Her mother is coming to live with us when she retires. That's true. We thought about it and have arranged the rooms already. This is her mother's, here is ours and the one at the end is for the little one. Guests can only settle on this sofa. (Laughter)

Tina and Bette's mother got along very well afterwards; according to their accounts, Bette's mother liked hearing Tina's opinions and being in her company. They believed that Tina had won the trust of Bette's mother.

As discussed in [Chapter 5](#), lesbian daughters and their partners were very cautious about maintaining good relationships with parents and siblings, whether they were aware of their sexuality or not. Particularly, the partners of lesbian daughters would show reasonable respect, or at least basic social politeness, towards their partners' families of origin. Similarly, parents' attitudes towards their daughters' partners were more likely to be described as either being polite with knowledge of their sexualities or being friendly without. If there were conflicts, they mostly happened between lesbian daughters and their parents, rather than partners and their 'in-laws'.

Very rarely did I come across problems between partners and families of origin in my study. There were interviewees who were unhappy about their partners' families of origin for some reason, but they would not bring up those problems openly or create a dilemma for their partners. However, unlike in the case of Tina and Bette's family, it did not seem to make things easier when 'in-law' tension appeared on the table in those disclosure cases. Lisbeth and Mimmi were one example; both of them had come

out to their families of origin a long time before their relationship had begun. Their mothers particularly seemed to be quite supportive.

Lisbeth: When her mother visits their relatives, who are our neighbours, she will go and say hello to my mom at her store. In fact, things were far more complicated at the beginning. I didn't want to date girlfriends when she started pursuing me. She kept coming to me at the time and her mother is very passionate...um... Let's put it this way. Mimmi is the eldest sister in her family and the family relied on her. Her younger sisters take her opinions seriously and so does her mother. She is respected and important in her family. Her mother of course wouldn't know how she lowered herself to pursue me at the time. Well, the point is that her mother only knew that her daughter had split up with the previous one and now had a crush on me. Her mother was very enthusiastic about us; I shall say, that was too much for me to take at the time. She was too meddlesome in other people's business. It was so ironic that I was keen to meet my ex's parents but failed. Guess what? Now her mother is so much like a typical mother who tries hard to help her daughter to push me through. But what she didn't know was that she had crossed the line! I didn't even want to be with anyone, but auntie got too much into that. That makes me...um...

Mimmi: In short, she and my mom didn't click. Yeah...

Lisbeth: Very much. We didn't click! For sure there was a story behind it. I've heard of things that auntie had done to them when Mimmi was little. I can't stand it. That was none of my business, but... I wouldn't appreciate that kind of personality. And then, with this affair I was so annoyed. 'I would be dating your daughter because of her, not you. You can't tell me who to be with.' She was doing a disservice. Oh, her mother isn't against her lesbianism. Instead, her mother wanted to match us by all means. I may exaggerate it. She thinks her daughter is good. Her daughter is good no doubt. But the fact is that she wasn't helping at all. She would only embarrass her daughter. This kind of thing is not okay, is it?

Mimmi: I told my mom not to... I would take care of my own business, and she could keep her friendship with Lisbeth's mom as before.

Lisbeth: Yes, yes, that's a different thing. Their friendship is another matter. But I have to admit that I can't be very close to her mother. Yes, she is the elder and she is not a bad person. I just

don't appreciate her personality. I am like that. I have no stereotypes of people when we first meet. I make my own judgement from interactions with people. You know what? Elders are human beings, different kinds of human beings; and she fits into a type I don't appreciate. Simple as that!

Lisbeth did not hide her feelings about Mimmi's mother in front of Mimmi or her mother. Mimmi knew that Lisbeth might not be ill-mannered towards her mother, but that she would express her opinions and judgements without scruple, which concerned her very much. Mimmi would try to avoid occasions when they might meet each other and visited her mother's home alone. She expressed her worries in the individual interview:

This will take a long time. But I can't avoid it every time . . . For instance, she invited my mom to the family party on Mother's Day this year. In fact I was very surprised that she asked. Lisbeth's family had arranged a big dinner party to celebrate Mother's Day. Her mother, grandmother and her uncle were there . . . at a nice restaurant. And she said to me 'bring your mother with us' and I thought 'oh, no, it can't be true. Why on earth would you invite my mother for dinner? You hate my mom, don't you?' Oh my, I hoped this was not going to happen. This was exactly what I was avoiding. What if you two started fighting at the dinner table? I would get into trouble. And it did! All right, but I still gave my mom a ring on her landline since she asked. I was hoping that she wasn't at home or was too busy to pick up the phone. But she did and she was happy to be invited. On that day, the fire nearly broke out when they started a conversation about politics. They support different parties! I was so glad that the party was about to end and it ended peacefully. I confirmed once again that they didn't click. But I knew she was trying. At least you thought of my mother on mother's day and treated her well. So, before bedtime, I told her that I was very happy today. She asked why. I said 'because you invited my mother for dinner today and I was very happy.' She said 'she is your mother after all. I can't treat her badly.' She said that. But they remain the same now. It takes time. (Mimmi)

On the other hand, Mimmi's mother was more tolerant of the situation. Her mother still wanted to help. She tried to help and solve problems in her daughter's relationship as she knew her daughter's feelings towards Lisbeth. Mimmi appreciated her mother's generosity yet she could do little about changing Lisbeth's mind.

My mom won't [get upset]. She feels fine with it because she knows Lisbeth is the one I love. Even though Lisbeth doesn't respect my mom much, my mom would say 'oh, that's all right; it's important that you love her.' I can only comfort my mom that she is like that. She is irritable even when she talks with her mom. She would fight with her mom. I wouldn't fight with my mom any way, but she would. 'So please bear with her bad temper if she ever offends you.' This is just the way she is. My mom is fine with it. My mom thinks of her very often; when my mom prepares things for worshipping the Gods, she would buy vegetarian biscuits and would ask me to take them back to Lisbeth. If I've ever mentioned her favourite snack, my mom would buy a big pile of it and would ask me to take them back. I would tell her 'my mom bought this for you.' I know my mom wishes to get closer to her because she and Lisbeth's mother are good friends. My mom wouldn't care about the conflict much. After all, Lisbeth is the younger generation. But I know this is not the case for Lisbeth. This is so her; once she has said 'I dislike your mother', it's impossible for her to change it to 'I like her so much'. She thought she would lose face. (Mimmi)

At the same time, Mimmi was faced with a dilemma. She felt frustrated with Lisbeth's stubbornness but she also knew she could not argue with her.

She had never been to my mother's house when my mother was there. I live with her family of origin but she never visits mine. The only occasions when she will go to my mom's house is when my mom is away and I need to come back to feed the pets. She will come along with me because I have to go back. Only when my mom is away then she will. She can't bear the fact that she has to share the same space with my mom. She doesn't like my mom's behaviour. She really hates it, but she can't fight with my mom. So she decided not to meet my mom and keep everything out of sight. I am very happy with it. Don't meet. Don't force them before they're ready. I'm so tired. I can't handle it. (Mimmi)

Furthermore, Mimmi found that there was a battle for love between Lisbeth and Mimmi's mother. Due to Lisbeth's previous, not so good, experiences with her ex-girlfriends, Mimmi was cautious not to push her forward too fast. Lisbeth had been prohibited from visiting her ex's parents and was not even allowed to visit their house. Her ex had not come out yet and would protect her secret to the death. Lisbeth was hurt because she thought she was not as important as her ex's parents.

I don't want her to feel that again. I always tell her, 'you are the most important'. That's also the truth. 'My mom has other daughters, but you are my only lover. I want to let you know that you are the most important person.' But sometimes I would have to . . . she is my mother after all. I need to take care of her. I do care for her. I won't care for my mom more than I care for you. I won't prioritise my mom. I don't want her to feel that I am just like her previous ones. 'Oh well your parents are more important than I am.' I know she's so childish saying that. But that person is my mom. What can I do about it? I find it more difficult taking care of this because they don't get along with each other. But all I can do is that I text my mom a lot instead of ringing her or visiting her in person. I don't think I can see her quite so often. Maximum once a week or every ten days I will have dinner with her. I'm sorry that I can't go back every day and my mom is at home on her own. (Mimmi)

As a tentative solution, Mimmi brought up a comparison between their lesbian relationship and heterosexual ones. She believed that the in-law tension was easier to deal with in non-heterosexual couples (without legal recognition) than in heterosexual marriages. In addition to a lack of a legal basis, non-heterosexuals were believed to be freer from the constraints of family bonds and to find it easier to set boundaries and limits with partners, according to Mimmi:

This is my greatest difficulty in our relationship at the moment. I, of course, want this problem to be solved gradually. No need to hurry. The best part is that you didn't marry me and I didn't marry you. If that was the case, you would have to deal with my mom face to face no matter what she's like. *This problem is less painful in our relationship because we can take our time to solve it only because we are not in a traditional heterosexual marriage.* It won't burst out now. But considering our long-term happiness, I expect her . . . I didn't want her to please my mom; at least, I would be a happy bunny if you two can sit down and have a meal without fighting. This is the minimum. (Mimmi, my emphasis)

Mimmi's situation was unique among my participants. Although her explanation might not fit every case, their story showed that relations with partners' families of origin can cause influential tension and conflict between the couple. There was still a distance between parents and their lesbian daughters' partners. A non-heterosexual couple might be legally less responsible to their partner's families of origin, but these relationships,

whether they saw each other as in-laws or not, were often discussed on the assumptions of heteronormativity. However, my discussion in [Chapter 5](#) indicated the possibility of forming relationships outside heterosexual family norms.

### *Infidelity: A Crisis or a Change?*

In my study, among those crises that the couples had been through or that might be seen as a challenge in the future, infidelity was the only reason that had actually caused breakups. Retaining long-distance relationships might be challenging, yet it was not impossible. Constant fighting, for some people, kept communications going. However, being unfaithful, regardless of whether sex was involved or not, often led to the end of a relationship or, for three of my participants, Petra, Abby and Nic, a temporary break in their relationship. After a few days, weeks or months, they came back to their partners while their partners were still trying to recover from the pain or having the faith that they would get back together. Their partners all stated that the ‘cheaters’ had paid the price in order to get them back. Also, implicitly or explicitly, they let their partners know that there was no second chance for them if they did it again. As Edith said:

Making up? Yes, we did. But there were hard feelings between us. I had bad feelings towards her. We did make up and got back together. Quite often I would, oh poor her, be out of line because I didn’t want to let go of the thing. I would lose my temper about a tiny thing that reminded me of the thing. She couldn’t do or say anything and would have to bear with it. She was the one who cheated. So she has to let me. (Edith)

It took them several years to repair the sense of trust. Edith described trustworthiness as a measurable scale: ‘It’s like you have 100 dollars in my bank, every time you lose my trust you lose ten dollars. On the day when the account is empty, we will say goodbye’ (Edith). Both of them had to learn new ways of getting along with each other.

A crisis might hurt, yet it could also bring opportunity and change. Petra and Camille made a crisis into a change. They frequently had serious fights before they split up for one month and Petra went to other girls. Petra used to rush out of their house when they had a fight because she was too angry to say anything. After one month of failing in her pursuit of



another girl, Petra came back to Camille and they came to an agreement between them. She promised to stay when they had fights and respect Camille's feelings and concerns. Unlike other couples who had broken up, Camille had gained more security in their relationship after their one month split. As Camille said, 'I feel relieved because I know she will be there, she wouldn't go anyway.' Then they could talk after a while. For Petra, this splitting up made her learn that she had to communicate with her partner instead of running away. Also, they both realised that their relationship would not be sustained if they did not get through the one-month split. They were not the only case that found crisis led to a change. Nic had another relationship outside of her relationship with Jules and thus they split up. They regarded this as the greatest crisis in their relationship, but it was also a trigger for them to make a better relationship afterwards. Besides a broken heart, Jules acknowledged their breakdown for seven months, 'She didn't have the courage to communicate with me; neither did I have a chance to change myself' (Jules, couple interview).

These breakdown experiences had helped my participants to build long-lasting relationships, which was a slightly different finding from that of Carter (2012). Researching young heterosexual women's views of commitment, Carter (2012: 144) found that 'sexual exclusivity, it seems, is a prerequisite for commitment'; in other words, 'Ideally, monogamy (being in a sexual relationship with one person at one time) and fidelity (being sexually faithful to that one person) constitute a basic level of commitment, for my participants at least, without which a relationship is considered not worth having.' Both monogamy and fidelity were crucial and non-negotiable (none of them had agreed on an open relationship) for the couples in my study, which confirmed Carter's research; however, an act of infidelity might not result in the ending of a relationship. There are other forms of commitment that sustain erotic lesbian relationships.

## COMMITMENT AND FORMS OF COMMITMENT

In line with Carter's (2012) analysis of contemporary commitment among young Western heterosexual women, which appears to encompass both wanting to stay together because of 'pull' elements (love, fidelity and longevity) and not wanting to separate because of 'push' elements (social expectations and relationship investments), I found notable similarities and, of course, differences in the narratives of lesbian commitment. As discussed in the previous section, fidelity was the ideal and a general

agreement among the lesbian couples that I interviewed; however, in practice, none of those who had been through infidelity ended up with a breakdown in their relationships. Not only that, some of them claimed that they were more committed afterwards because they had either gained experience in communicating (for example, Camille and Petra) or their relationships were strengthened in a more meaningful way (for example, Jules and Nic). However, relationships that survived a partner's unfaithfulness demonstrated other important elements of lesbian commitment.

The major difference between Carter's (2012) discussion and the accounts in my study is whether their rituals of commitment were legally and socially approved. Although Carter's (2012: 150) young female participants thought that 'a committed relationship did not need marriage (even though they saw marriage as an ideal)', marriage was still an option for them as were alternative relationship forms in Western culture. In many Western societies, same-sex marriage now exists, whereas this is not the case in Taiwan. A lack of institutional backing may make Taiwanese lesbians think about commitment in a different way. In addition, the meaning of marriage in the Chinese family is very bound up in the patriarchal lineage; therefore, a romantic, wedding-like ceremony does not seem to be as popular as in Western societies.

### *Couple Rituals/Commitment Ceremonies*

Smart (2007) conducted interviews with same-sex couples in the UK who were undertaking commitment ceremonies (before civil partnerships became legally available) and civil partnerships (once they were available). She identified three different kinds of account of the decision to have a ceremony or civil partnership, where people see commitment as: (1) a promise for the future; (2) a relational process together with love, which is embedded in ordinary everyday activities; (3) an external support for recognition of a potentially fragile relationship and, in the form of a public ceremony, a potential protection against disintegration.

In the context of Taiwanese society, where gay marriage or civil partnerships are not legally available, many of the accounts showed that verbal commitment was not identical to the feeling of being committed. Instead, the symbolic value of a couple ritual, whether public or not, might make some lesbians feel committed; while others would not see ritual (either public or private ceremonies) as part of commitment at all. Those who held such views claimed that rituals would not mean anything without a

legal basis. On the other hand, for some lesbian couples, legal recognition (if it existed) would only provide practical support rather than signalling romantic commitment.

In the accounts of committing, I identified three forms of commitment, where each experience may merge or overlap with another. This happened when lesbians were privately committed. In some cases private commitment was followed by a next step when they were ready to bring their relationship forward into the public domain. These experiences involved disclosure to a third person, for example, friends or their families of origin. The third form of commitment, institutionalised commitment, was related to external reinforcement applying as a mutual bond in the relationship, for example shared financial investment or insurance benefits. Those who had thought of, or actually engaged in, external reinforcement did not aim to keep the relationship strong and together by so doing; instead, they sought alternative ways to parallel what heterosexuals gain from the law.

### *Private Commitment*

Given that there is no legal recognition for non-heterosexuals in Taiwan, none of the lesbian women that I interviewed were registered or married as partners in other countries where such recognition was available. Being committed could be very private and only between the two people, whether their relationship was disclosed to their families of origin or not. In other words, external support or recognition from family or society played little part when lesbians were making their life decisions. Very few of them had considered making their commitment public when I interviewed them; some couples did mention the possibility of a public ceremony in the future or a legal contract when available; however, only one couple among 15, Rachel and Luce, had had a public ceremony (only open to their friends), which will be discussed in the next section. Some of them regarded commitment and the way they made it as very personal and needing no one else's approval; however, they still considered these commitment ceremonies fairly meaningful, as serious as those made in public. Unlike most heterosexual couples in Taiwan, who wished to gain family acceptance before getting married, lesbians in my study did not establish their relationships or commitments on the basis of family acknowledgement, acceptance or support. This attitude showed in their act of commitment to each other, without any family involvement.

Neither Petra nor Camille's families of origin were supportive of their relationship, although they had been together for 13 years at the time of

being interviewed. Camille and her mother were still having a difficult time due to her lesbianism; Petra had no intention of coming out to her parents. Just before their eleventh anniversary of being together, Petra asked Camille a searching question:

‘Hey, in which anniversary, the eleventh or twelfth, do you fancy a proposal? We can make it a milestone that indicates our being together for a certain number of years. It would be a significant moment in our story. What do you say?’ She answered that she preferred twelve because it’s an even number. And I thought, ‘no way, I like prime numbers.’ (Petra, couple interview)

When Petra made a statement about commitment, it was not a big event, at least not conventionally romantic. That was the morning before Camille’s birthday; they were rushing out to meet friends for a holiday. Time was ticking by and the luggage was not yet packed. Petra was shivering and her hands were sweating because she had a secret that she was keeping close and her rehearsed vow was ready to come out.

Petra: We had the weirdest conversation on that day, anyway. I seemed to say ‘well, you sit down first’ and I pushed her to sit on the bed. I said, ‘hum . . . this is for you’ and gave her the box. She wondered what was inside and was about to open it. And I started saying my script.

Camille: You were talking a pile of nonsense.

Petra: Yup, nonsense. At least I said the most important thing at the end, ‘would you spend the rest of your life with me?’ something like that.

Camille: You proposed to spend the next fifty years together, did you?

Petra: Yes, I did. My prepared script completely disappeared. Not to mention that my hands trembled when I was speaking that line. I couldn’t help it.

Camille: Oh, don’t be silly. That’s fine. I didn’t notice it at all. I giggled throughout. I was all smiles on my face because I was so touched. I didn’t know how to respond; neither did I show my tears. I just giggled.

Petra: Not an exciting scene, was it? Anyway, she accepted it in silence.

The claim that they were fully committed was not transparent in this small act; the setting was no more than their daily lives, Petra could not even

remember what she had promised in her vow and Camille's reaction was said to be 'not exciting'. Furthermore, 'love' was not articulated in Petra's commitment, instead, her vow confirmed a lifelong companionship. Their relationship was not optimistic at the beginning and they could have broken up when Petra had an affair. Both in the individual and couple interviews, they described how they got through hard times together and their philosophy of sustaining a long-term relationship. Change and transition in their lives did not drive them apart. They constantly reviewed their relationship, which was based on the assumption of a shared future in which love, care and friendship had accumulated. As Petra said '[making] it a milestone that indicates our being together for a certain number of years', which placed her commitment in the context of the length and depth of their established relationship.

I think our relationship has improved since I proposed to her on the day before her birthday last year. In my mind, although there were two of us making a small act, I feel more secure in our relationship and that it is more stable than ever. I know we will walk side by side into the future. And I have a more confident belief that we can make a family together, to plan ahead and more. I got this idea confirmed last year. (Petra, couple interview)

However, they did not plan this small act together (Petra asked Camille's opinion in advance, but did not follow it up) and promising a commitment (by giving a ring and saying her vow) was Petra's own idea. Indeed Camille accepted the ring and was happy with Petra's vow, but Petra did not find that they lived happily ever after. They had a serious conflict which made Petra realise her vulnerability in their relationship and she blamed it on a lack of mutuality in the commitment. The whole thing started when Petra was unemployed for a few months; during this period of stress, Petra became sensitive when they had disagreements. They managed to sort out Petra's financial insecurity and promised to prioritise each other's emotions. But this did not help with Petra's vulnerability. She pushed Camille to complete the other half of their commitment.

The next year after I proposed, that was our twelfth year of being together, I found that it had become problematic. I don't mean that our relationship was problematic, but... I had a feeling that my proposal had not been responded to in a mutual way. Take that [one of their conflicts when Petra was unemployed] as an example, she was not always on my side. I proposed

to her, I gave my commitment to her, but I hadn't yet received her commitment. So I told all my lesbian friends that a proposal can't be one sided. The proposal must be a mutual act in which both partners have to make an equal effort. I devoted myself to you and it's fair to expect you to show the same devotion to me. Both of the couple deserve an equal response and feeling of commitment. This is a complete commitment in my opinion. *We are not like ordinary people, having no ordinary weddings; we don't exchange vows or commitments at weddings.* For me, this proposal was a one-sided commitment, me to you, that's how I felt afterwards. (Petra, my emphasis)

Petra did not choose to enact her proposal in public or make it as big as a heterosexual wedding in her account, neither did she intend to discuss a 'complete' plan of commitment with Camille. Instead, interestingly, she riskily threw the ball to Camille and also had confidence in it being reciprocated on the grounds of mutual understanding and their shared history. In terms of Smart's (2007) analysis of commitment, Petra's notion and act of commitment to a loving relationship could be seen as a relational process that confirmed their past and was also a promise for the future.

On the other hand, from Camille's point of view, she had committed to the relationship way before Petra's proposal. Camille had lived with her grandmother when she came back to Taiwan at her mother's insistence. During the year of living apart from Petra, Camille struggled to obey her family's expectations, which went against her lifestyle choice. There seemed to be no middle ground for her between being a good daughter and a committed partner. Making a commitment is not always associated with romantic acts, but a painful split with the family of origin. Camille made up her mind and moved out of her grandmother's house. That split was her act of committing to the relationship.

At the time, I thought about those difficulties we've been through together. It wasn't easy for us to sustain our relationship over the years. If I stay in my comfort zone today . . . I was very passive, I listened to my parents and I tried to calm them with compromises. I obeyed what my parents said and did what a good girl should do. At some point I couldn't live my life in their shadow anymore. This was the moment when I had to decide whether I wanted to be a good daughter as before and give up this unblessed relationship; or that this relationship was so very important to me my family had to understand it. If not, I would have to leave. That was the moment I realised

the depth and the importance of our relationship. The decision provoked me to take our relationship seriously, to take this relationship forward and to plan ahead for each other. . . . I had no hesitation, no confusion in our relationship. I thought I had enough faith in our love. But sometimes weariness grows. I was sick and tired of protecting my relationship against my family. I couldn't handle it if my family kept bothering me. It's a shame that my lesbian relationship will never be accepted and blessed by my family of origin. Why not? It's so unfair. I used to struggle with this. My relationship would only be blessed if I married a man, not a woman. I was so furious with this when I was younger. There's no point in arguing further now. I understand my parents have their limits. (Camille, couple interview)

This couple did not plan to have any form of public ceremony to reinforce or to announce their commitment in the future. To Petra and Camille, they had to be equally devoted, their commitment was private and was not necessarily made at one event.

Carter (2012) talked about 'push' elements in relational commitments; as one of the structuring obligations, having children together provided a moral bond and a commitment that was thought to be the strongest tie. The decision to have a child together could be greater than for childless cohabitation or marriage; '[having] children in itself creates a commitment between a couple and, moreover, is one that is above and beyond that needed to marry or live together' (Carter 2012: 147). Believing that they would never have children Zoe and Crocodile regarded having pets together (as if they were having children) as representing their commitment, because of the moral obligation to engage in a long-term, stable relationship.

- Crocodile: We had the obligation to be together for a long time when we adopted Pippi [their dog]. Otherwise, Pippi would have no home if we broke up.
- Zoe: That's true. And so we started . . .
- Crocodile: Pippi is just like a child.
- Zoe: We started thinking about buying a house.
- Crocodile: Yes, Pippi is our commitment. You may say that. It's like we had a baby and we have the responsibility to take care of her together.

The family was growing and developing when they took on a kitten 'son', Little Eight, one year later. The family developed accordingly. The

commitment bonded by their pets was applied to the relationship itself. Crocodile and Zoe made their lives around their pets and found that they defined their relationship by their pet ‘daughter’ and ‘son’.

My colleagues all know her as Pippi’s godmother, my daughter’s godmother. I am Pippi’s mother and she is the godmother. The vet clinic will contact me to pick Pippi up. It’s always me. So they thought Pippi was my dog. They didn’t notice that Pippi was registered in [Zoe’s] name until I corrected them. [Laughter] Yes, Zoe didn’t ask me before she put her name on the microchip registration. Not my name. But, well, Pippi is her daughter, too. (Crocodile, couple interview)

Both of their families of origin knew about their lesbian relationship and had a sense of its stability. However, they did not and would not work on a public ceremony or any commitment events. They introduced lesbian marriage in the interviews when talking about their lesbian friends’ wedding. Seeing people making a big commitment strengthened their decision to stay private. It was not because they were afraid of coming out, as they had, in some sense, already disclosed their relationship to kin and friends. Zoe did not think a wedding (in any form) was their style and did not fancy a big event or ceremony. She suggested that weddings were for their brothers, not daughters in the family:

I’m fine [with not having public things]. Crocodile has a younger brother; it’s way enough for a family to have one wedding [of the younger generation]. Her younger brother will get married, that’s enough. And, in my family of origin, my elder brother has a girlfriend. They are getting married. That’d be enough. We don’t really like all the public things. No, that’s too much for us. No. (Zoe)

One of the significances of lesbian commitment in my study was the declaration of longevity; doing substantial things together, for example, making plans for their old age and buying a house, were the most frequently mentioned signifiers of commitment. The accounts that referred to these sorts of decisions often emphasised that they depended on the priority of commitments. It was this term that Theresa and Jess used when managing to buy two houses together within a short time:

True. I wouldn’t plan a big thing like that with her if I had no confidence and faith in our relationship. (Theresa, couple interview)



We have plans for our future. This is commitment. A couple will not be able to plan their future if they are not able to commit. (Jess)

Thus, a mutual expectation of a lifelong relationship would emerge prior to an actual commitment in any form. Commitment, in these cases, had grown in the process of their relationship. To make a commitment and to achieve what you had committed to seemed unnatural to Clarissa:

But, for us, committing to a long-term relationship . . . We were fully committing to each other at the beginning of our relationship. There is no need to make such a commitment. We didn't do one thing in particular and said from now on we were committed. There was none. (Clarissa)

However, Clarissa and her partner Sally became 'more' committed in terms of legal responsibility when they bought a house together in both their names. Signing legal contracts for a joint mortgage and joint ownership when buying a house, in some sense, was a form of private ceremony to them. It was not a commitment but a strengthening of the committed relationship between them. This was because they would be tied even more closely and legally when they were both responsible for the mortgage and the ownership of the house.

Angie and Clara had a similar belief about committing themselves as a mutual promise at the beginning of their relationship. They wear couple rings to proclaim their 'being together' to the public rather than as a commitment between them. This means they did not commit to each other by exchanging rings; neither do these rings represent their internal commitment. Couple rings or couple jewellery, however, would only be worn together in those circumstances where they felt comfortable about disclosing their relationship.

Clara: Well . . . I don't mean certain situations, but it's more likely in a public space when we go out or so [that we would wear couple rings]. We might know people or not in that space, which is not absolutely safe. But, at least, [if we wear couple rings] we would need to be sure that we wouldn't cause trouble to people we know in that situation.

Iris: For example?

Angie: That is, we wouldn't wear couple things when we visit her family together, nor my family. No, we wouldn't do that, because . . .

Clara: That in fact is to challenge people. I couldn't be bothered to challenge people; I don't want the situation to end up as something I can't handle.

Their view of gay marriage or civil partnerships, which might happen in the future, was similar. They saw legal recognition as external support to ensure each other's rights and welfare, but nothing to do with their internal promise of a long-lasting relationship from the beginning of their time together.

Both these couples had planned their old age together in the belief that their relationship would be lifelong. They then made their relationships legal by sharing the responsibility of a house mortgage and each making the other their insurance beneficiary.

Jules and Nic had experienced most acts of commitment. They wanted to have a commitment ceremony, which would be challenging considering their closeted sexuality and relationship. Over the years, they worked on forms of commitment and substitutes for the marriage ceremony.

Nic: She said she wanted marriage. But it's impossible to get married. Oh, the photograph album. We weren't thinking too much, were we?

Jules: That was at the very beginning of our relationship.

Nic: At a very early stage, in our first year, we had a studio photography shoot and made it into a photograph album.

Iris: Dressing up in a wedding gown?

Nic: Not really, not a wedding gown. A wedding gown would be too luxurious. We were kind of dressed up at the time, but not really as fancy as couture. Does that count as a ceremony?

Jules: No!

Nic: No? All right. I don't mind having a ceremony if possible. But that will be very difficult.

Iris: You are really thinking about it, are you?

Jules: We don't have to do it right now. I know this is a long way off, if we ever make it in my lifetime.

A pre-wedding photo shoot has become a must for every wedding event in Taiwan. Taking bridal and couple portraits at a professional studio is like part of the wedding, rather than merely a 'pre'-wedding event. In Nic's account, she sensed that a photograph album had a relative value associated with a wedding ceremony although they might have done it on

impulse. Jules disagreed with the wedding-like feature and was expecting formality for their ceremony. Thinking of the desire that inspired them to take couple portraits, alternative commitment events were more than substitutes for wedding ceremonies. Their disappointment and frustration at what was available to them in reality encouraged them to experience different forms of commitment. They talked about marrying and marriage certificates in ironic terms:

Jules: In terms of marriage, a long time ago I said to her that I really wanted a marriage ceremony; just a simple ceremony for two would do. I always tell her that we can buy a marriage certificate at any of the stationery shops, you sign your name and I sign mine. This is enough for me.

Nic: Right. In that sense, we were married at 9 pm, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2010.<sup>2</sup>

Jules: Yeah, we said so. We couldn't be bothered to buy the piece of paper.

Nic: We were both too tired to get that piece of paper at the stationery shop. So we said 'all right, let's get married today.'

Jules: We can buy the paper some other day and sign it, anyway.  
(Laughter)

In addition to this small gesture, their feeling of being fully committed emerged over the years. The most significant act was the naming of each other by the very heterosexual-like titles, 'lao-gong (老公, husband)' and 'lao-po (老婆, wife)'. Nic was not able to respond simultaneously when Jules first called her 'lao-gong' until she had a long think and was ready to announce Jules as her 'lao-po'. It seemed that the heterosexual titles of a married couple signified their commitment more than a marriage ceremony. They claimed that to address each other as husband and wife and to name each other accordingly both in public (but not with their families) and in private made them feel committed. Furthermore, Nic noticed that it seemed to be Jules's lifelong regret that they had not had a, so-called, wedding.

<sup>2</sup> 2010 was the 99th year since Taiwan was established. The number '9' in Mandarin is a homophone of the word '久 (jiu, long duration of time)'. So they picked those nine-related numbers in time and date (9 pm, 9/9/99) to symbolise a 'long-lasting relationship'.

That's true. I knew she really desired to have one. That was the thing I couldn't afford to give to her. Seriously do something to declare my love to her. I wasn't pursuing her before we got together. [...] She complained that she deserved better from me since she didn't enjoy any of my romantic courtship. Have we mentioned this before? It's a bit of 'a male/female thing', I reckon. (Nic)

This future ceremony, involving both Nic's proposal and a wedding party, would be a demonstration of Nic's commitment and also make public their committed relationship. Although Nic seemed to be self-critical of 'a male/female thing', their (future) commitment ceremony did not indicate commitment in the way that a marriage did. The act/event was seen (among the community) as a public statement through which their commitment could be recognised by their friends. The moment at which commitment can be said to have started was more significant than the celebration event/act of the commitment since neither partner had gained anything in the sense of legal rights; nor would their future commitment ceremony (whether in the form of a wedding or not) carry any cultural meanings associated with a (heterosexual) wedding. In other words, this (future) wedding was more like a party, by which Nic intended to please her partner, rather than a ceremony through which they made a commitment.

### *Public Ceremony*

Since their relationship had broken down and they had become partners again, and Kitty had failed in her marriage, Kitty and Nan did not see the significance of commitment. They even ridiculed commitment itself because they had failed in their commitment to their own relationship and later in Kitty's marriage,<sup>3</sup> which was considered to be serious and conventional. Now they had started their relationship all over again they were wary of empty commitments. They said they had been keen to commit to each other the first time they were together; so they exchanged rings. But their failure reminded them not to place too much weight on a

<sup>3</sup> The sequence of their relationship was: their first period of being together lasted two years; then they separated for a year; during the year of separation, Kitty got married and divorced; they had then been together again for four months before the interview.

commitment or a commitment ceremony as this would not necessarily lead to a committed relationship.

- Nan: In the end, the commitment or things signifying commitment are merely lip service, if I may say so.
- Kitty: In fact, overemphasised commitment comes from uncertainty and insecurity in the relationship.

However, Nan still wished to have an event to mark an achievement in their relationship. Instead of giving a ring, taking bridal photographs with Kitty some day in the future was her wish as this would disclose their relationship to the public and would require a healthy relationship. 'If partners can get through all the annoying process [when taking studio photographs] and can discuss all the details peacefully, this relationship will definitely survive because they have good communication skills' (Nan).

Although giving/receiving rings has been commercialised to symbolise a committed relationship, in making heterosexual commitments in particular, a ring had a meaning that was applied differently by each lesbian couple. Giving rings to a partner or exchanging rings can be a very private ritual between two people, as with many of the couples that I interviewed. Unlike those participants who gave their partners rings privately, Luce and Rachel invited a friend to witness the ritual, which simply involved wine and two rings. Giving rings and wearing them on their ring fingers represented their commitment to each other and the private ceremony of exchanging them was symbolic of a promise for the future.

Yes. We recognised the rings in terms of their meaning; and we intended to put them on our ring fingers.... Our main purpose...um...we wanted this little ceremony and we were sure...we were willing to...Er, how shall I put this? We expect our relationship to last forever. We wish to share everything in our future for better or for worse. So we wanted to celebrate our decision in a relatively formal way. (Luce)

Interestingly, Luce and Rachel did not see their tenth anniversary party, which most of their friends had attended, regardless of their sexuality, as a ceremony with the symbolic value of commitment. They noticed that some people who came to the party thought it was more like a wedding festivity than simply a party to celebrate and gave them a 'red envelope' (紅包, cash wrapped up in red paper,

to symbolise good luck in the marriage), a monetary gift that people usually give to (heterosexual) newlyweds.

Jessica and Helen were another couple who expected longevity in their relationship from a very early stage. They said they had never thought of separation once they got together. However, Helen did not think they would take their commitment (only between them when being interviewed) further unless Jessica was open about their lesbian relationship to her family of origin. To Helen, disclosure to their families of origin would not reinforce the fact that they were committed if they wanted to keep their commitment in private; but Helen claimed that if Jessica suggested having a ceremony she would have to come out to her family. 'We would not get a dowry from both families of origin if we didn't tell them,' Helen joked in the couple interview. In their story, Helen had contextualised commitment on a different level of understanding in which external/institutional support was influential in the material world.

### *Institutionalised Commitment*

It was interesting that these lesbians did not associate public commitment ceremonies with making a commitment; neither did they see a public ceremony as the ultimate act of commitment. Most of them saw such a ceremony as an instrumental event. Researching the empirical significance of civil partnership, Shipman and Smart (2007) found that when same-sex couples decided to have their relationship publicly recognised, everyday reasons, for example love, acknowledging mutual responsibility and the importance of family recognition, were as important as equality and legal rights. This study pointed out the importance of civil partnership for personal relationships within families; that is to say, it was a way for families of origin to accept and take seriously their loving relationship and commitment, by means of a tangible sign.

By contrast, the fact that any form of legal recognition meant a public statement was the main reason why most of my interviewees avoided it. They were expecting the introduction of civil partnerships or same-sex marriage for equality in the future, but few of them would really have one because it was challenging to get a family acknowledgement. It might complicate family relationships by making their lesbianism public. Theresa illustrated the dilemma between a public statement and remaining in the closet with their families of origin. A wedding-like ceremony thus had a meaning for securing their relationship.

I can't remember the exact moment...it was...I did suggest [same-sex marriage] to you [i.e. Jess]. I wanted to publicise our relationship at the time. That was a long time ago. I felt like doing it because the relationship seemed to be protected by making it public. I mean doing it in a [conventional] form of ceremony. (Theresa, couple interview)

By publicising their relationship, they mean to their community, rather than their family. A similar idea could be seen in Angie's account:

- Angie: If civil partnership in Taiwan can be expected in the future, we would consider registering our relationship. This is solely for pragmatic reasons. But we would probably not tell people that we were going to do it. No need to publicise it.
- Iris: Do you mean that the registration of partnership has nothing to do with commitment or a declaration of commitment?
- Angie: No, it's just for the legal side obviously. We have been together so long. I think we are on the same page in terms of the registration. Partnership is a means of protecting each other's legal rights, more than a signifier of our commitment.

Whether lesbians embodied their commitment in romantic love or public recognition or not, pragmatic issues like financial interests or inheritance rights, which were all missing, had made them seek self-help plans. Planning for their old age was the most frequently mentioned factor that was intertwined with and inseparable from the concept of committing. Having a retirement plan together meant that their relationship was based on a long-term consensus that they would be able to plan ahead. External reinforcements might not make them feel committed, only in very rare cases did it do so; but they might feel more connected and assured that their commitments were protected by so doing.

## CONCLUSION

Given that lesbian commitment in places where partnership rights are unavailable does not develop on the basis of legal recognition, a committed relationship between lesbian couples does not need external reinforcement and the concept of commitment can be separated from societal practices. This finding also resonates with Carter's (2012: 150) conclusion that marriage is not the only good relationship format for commitment, while 'other relationship forms, such as cohabitation or living apart

together, can involve equal if not more commitment'. While Carter's participants had options, however, the women in my study did not. The absence of legal partnership rights distinguishes lesbian commitment from that of heterosexuals. Same-sex relationships may be legally recognised in Taiwan in the near future. It is worth mentioning, however, that my participants only considered legal recognition for practical purposes, for example, to gain legal support for each other; rather than seeing same-sex marriage as the ultimate form of commitment. My data has presented the varying strategies through which they developed their very own notions of commitment.

Having been in their relationships for a long time (on average seven years, varying from six months to 16 years), most couples left their parents' homes and moved in together at different stages of their relationship. Given the fact that many of them did not disclose their lesbian relationship before moving out, their approaches to making it possible showed their negotiation with their families of origin. In the next chapter I discuss whether, how and when they decided to move in together and the ways in which they managed their households.

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## Egalitarian Lesbian Relationships?

There is an emerging consensus in studies of same-sex relationships that egalitarianism is both valued in principle and achieved in practice. Most Western research illustrates the significance of egalitarian relationships in lesbianism (cf., Weston 1997; Dunne 1997; Weeks et al. 2001); except for Gabb's (2004) critique, their findings suggest that the lack of taken-for-granted guidelines from 'gender scripts' makes lesbian women feel relatively free from traditional expectations and responsibilities in terms of the gendered division of domestic labour. Most work done in Asia also emphasises egalitarian relationships; for example, Hong Kong lesbian families (Wong 2012) and Japanese lesbian couples (Kamano and Khor 2008; Kamano 2009). In response to existing studies, this chapter examines egalitarianism among Taiwanese lesbian couples in two separate areas, financial arrangements and the division of household labour. My findings on egalitarian lesbian relationships differ from most of the relevant research and suggest that the T/Po pattern does not necessarily lead to an imbalance in household arrangements.

### LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

A decision to move in together brings with it many practical issues for lesbian couples. As Kamano and Khor (2008) argued, in addition to difficulties in finding a place to live and the high cost of living in Japan, lesbians have to find justifications when they move out of their parent's

home and settle down with their female partners. In addition, ‘moving out and living together could also make the (lesbian) relationship more “visible” and provoke various reactions from their parents and other people’ (Kamano and Khor 2008: 171). In Chapter 5 I discussed how lesbian daughters struggled, as individuals, when moving away from their families. The following section looks at how lesbian couples make the decision to move in together, or in some cases not to, and how they arrange their lives/spaces in given situations.

Life changes when one girl meets another girl. In the interviews, lesbians tell stories of how they re/arrange their lives when they start their relationships. Table 7.1 presents my interviewees’ current living arrangements. Among those who are cohabiting, the majority of couples stayed over and then gradually moved into their partner’s place at the beginning of their relationship. Moving in together to a new place later often happens when needs have emerged. The extremely high cost of housing and tight budgets are also factors that can lead to cohabitation.

At first, Ninny and Evelyn had their own separate addresses, although Ninny frequently stayed over at Evelyn’s place. Six months later, they realised that it would save them money (on rent and travel) and trouble if they lived together. Evelyn seemed to be more aware of money when she explained why they decided to live together; in fact, it was Ninny moving into Evelyn’s place. However, she was hesitant about maintaining their privacy at the time.

Most of the time we live in one place and pay double rent for her place as well. This means we can go back to our own places sometimes when you are not in a good mood having her around. [Ninny: Um.] We considered it a benefit at the time. But, you know, this may not happen as often as before. The spare flat turns out to be a backup in case of a quarrel every three hundred years. I do think about the necessity of maintaining two households, yet it’s a total loss if we don’t have a quarrel afterwards. It’s not worth it if that’s the only reason we rent an extra place. She lives with me and pays rent for the empty room. Each month you have to remind yourself of the rent and, moreover, we have to take care of the house regularly. It’s no more than a storeroom. (Evelyn, couple interview)

For Ninny, living together is a natural course, ‘I’m supposed to be around; and I dislike talking on the phone’ (Ninny, couple interview). Financial considerations seem to be their greatest concern, rather than private space

Table 7.1 Cohabitation

	<i>Assumed name (Age)</i>	<i>Cohabiting</i>	<i>Current residence</i>	<i>Property status</i>
01	Clarissa (36) Sally (36)	Yes	Shared house (with another lesbian couple)	Rent
02	Jessica (35)	Yes	Shared house at weekends (with Jessica's sister and one flatmate)	Grandmother-owned
03	Helen (34) Evelyn (30) Ninny (30)	Yes	2-bedroom flat (weekdays) Shared house (with Evelyn's mother and one flatmate)	Mother-owned (no rent) Rent
04	Wilhelmina (32)	Yes	2-bedroom flat	Rent
05	Vivian (35) Camille (31) Petra (32)	Yes	Studio	Rent
06	Maggie (32) Angel (30)	No	Parents' home/the USA 2-bedroom flat	Parents-owned/rent Relative-owned (no rent)
07	Angie (37) Clara (37)	Yes	2-bedroom flat (Angie owned)	Self-owned Self-owned/letting
08	Edith (32) Abby (32)	Yes (weekend)	Parents' home (weekdays), flat (weekend) Accommodation and parents' home (weekdays)/ Edith's flat (weekends)	Parents-owned/self-owned Company property, parents-owned/ Edith-owned
09	Lisbeth (35) Mimmi (40)	Yes	Lisbeth's parents' home and working studio (Lis owned)	Parents-owned, self-owned No property
10	Rachel (32)	Yes	Studio	Rent

(continued)

**Table 7.1** (continued)

	<i>Assumed name (Age)</i>	<i>Cohabiting</i>	<i>Current residence</i>	<i>Property status</i>
11	Luce (32) Nic (29)	Yes	1-bedroom flat	Rent
12	Jules (34) Crocodile (35) Zoe (29)	Yes	Shared house (with one flatmate)	Rent
13	Tina (32) Bette (34)	Yes	2-bedroom flat (Bette owned)	No property Self-owned
14	Theresa (31) Jess (32)	Yes	2-bedroom flat (Theresa owned)	Self-owned Self-owned /Letting
15	Kitty (31) Nan (28)	No	Studio Flat (with brother's girlfriend)	Rent Parents-owned

or freedom, as they currently live with one flatmate and Evelyn's mother. However, living with families of origin or friends is still a choice to save money on rent.

This is not the case for Clarissa and Sally; Sally lived in her parents' big house alone for a year while her family were away in different countries most of the time. Clarissa lived with her parents and started moving her clothes to Sally's place when they began their relationship. 'And then more and more, I brought more and more clothes to her place. The books, I have too many books; most of them are at my parents' house' (Clarissa, couple interview). To accommodate her cohabiting with Clarissa, Sally managed to rearrange the house and made Clarissa a study to store her books. Purchasing a new desk for Clarissa symbolised their cohabitation. However, a year before the interviews Sally's parents and sister came back and used the house temporarily, which triggered their realisation that living under the family's roof was not a permanent plan for them. A house of their own became necessary if they wished to keep some privacy. They rented a shared house with another lesbian couple for one year as a stop-gap while preparing to buy an ideal house of their own.

So we rent a room. Previously my younger sister gave birth and my parents came back to Taiwan for a while. Living in the house wasn't as comfortable as before. Furthermore I don't really want . . . My parents live abroad now, but they will come back to Taiwan one day in the future. I don't really want to share the same roof with them. It's better to keep some distance from them. After all they haven't planned it yet, but I know the day will come. I'd better buy a house of my own. We started viewing properties last year. The interest rate fell last year, so we thought it might be the best timing for us to buy a house. (Sally, couple interview)

Symbolic items, such as new furniture or personal belongings, are often mentioned when interviewees recall the stories of moving into their partner's place. Clarissa's desk in the study is one of the examples. Similarly, at the beginning of Lisbeth and Mimmi's relationship, Lisbeth could not bear the idea that Mimmi brought her laptop with her when staying over. Lisbeth resisted the idea that Mimmi was going to move into her house.

She works with her laptop; I felt uneasy if she brought it to my home. 'Are you going to live with me from now on?' At the beginning she wouldn't. But I couldn't stop nagging her 'why haven't you been writing recently?' or

'you need to work harder' because she wasn't working at all. Then I realised that I'd have to buy her a desk, just a small, very small one. That desk is a symbol of my approval. I gave it to her. Then she is able to bring her laptop to my place. She can't initiate it. Her clothes came next. At first she didn't have clean clothes here. But she'll need to change into clean ones after taking a shower anyway. I got some old loose clothes and she could wear them for now. And then I said to her 'all right, you can bring some of your own.' . . . When she put a suit of her clothes and then another suit into my closet, I realised that it symbolised our cohabitation, not anything else. (Lisbeth, couple interview)

Lisbeth seemed to be more dominant in their cohabiting relationship, while Mimmi passively let her decide. Both in the individual and couple interviews Mimmi was fine giving her own opinions and Lisbeth did not obviously dominate the conversations. However, in cohabiting, sharing space with her partner, Lisbeth appeared to be very sensitive and led almost all their discussions. In the similar situation of moving into a partner's place, Crocodile and Zoe were relatively more relaxed, accommodating themselves to the changed situation.

Crocodile: I remember that she demanded of me the first or second time when she stayed over at my place. She said . . . At the time I had just moved into the flat and started my career. My bedroom was big enough for a double bed but a single bed was good for me. My friends mocked me with 'what are you going to do if you have girlfriends?' I didn't see that as a problem at all; I wanted her to share a single bed with me. A loving couple can fit in a single bed nicely. (Laughter) She had stayed over just once or twice! I didn't expect she would say that the single bed was too small for two of us and she wanted a double bed. Isn't it a bold request? (Laughter) I was thinking that of course I'll buy a new double bed. I'd rather you sleep in the new bed with me once I buy it for you. In the end we bought a double bed and also a dressing table. By then she was quite sure that she was fine staying over at my place. So she wanted to have a dressing table in our room. I'm OK with it. Our room had little furniture; simply a closet and a single bed. So that single bed ended up . . .

Zoe: Being given away.

Some aspirations cannot be fulfilled until the couple find a new place. Jules and Nic had moved house five times within five and half years since they began their relationship. Nic moved into Jules' place at the beginning and realised that a simple en-suite room was not enough for them. Their decision to move showed what they wanted in an ideal home under given conditions.

Jules: We tended to find a bigger house when we moved into the second one.

Nic: That's true. We were looking for a bigger place because we wanted a kitchen. I don't really like eating out every day. She can cook; that's how her mother educated her at home. So, I'm very keen to have her food when I get back home. That's why we need a house with a kitchen.

However, a house with a kitchen and Jules' cooking for her did not make Nic feel like it was 'her place'.

Jules: For quite a while you called that place 'your home'. I mean when we lived in the first flat.

Nic: That was her place for sure. I didn't have any belongings there.

Jules: Of course you did. Come on. You just didn't have space to store them. She lived there for two years and put everything on the floor. She thought there was no space for her. That house wasn't big and spacious. She complained a lot that she had no space to put her belongings. Whenever she did, I tried to squeeze some space for her. But she didn't like the idea. I knew she wanted things of her own. For example, the closet, she wants a closet of her own. But we couldn't do anything about it. She always called that house 'your home'. [...] She doesn't count the second, third and fourth. She didn't even live in the second one at all.

Iris: Didn't she [Nic] live in the second one? So, that was Jules' place?

Nic: Yes, that was also her place.

Iris: And?

Jules: The third one is my ex's property. Until we moved to the fourth house, we called that 'our home'. By then she finally had her own closet and desk. She complained about it for ages. She wanted her own desk.

Nic: I was doing a degree. It was horrible if I didn't even have a desk. I used the bed instead. Well, it doesn't matter now. It's over.

As shown in Table 7.1, some of those cohabiting couples had more than one residence/property. For example: Angie and Clara each owned a property; Theresa and Jess lived in one and let the other out; Edith and Abby lived together during the weekends; Jessica and Helen ran two households, one for weekdays and one for weekends.

### *Running Two Households*

Jessica and Helen were living in Helen's flat (closer to the city centre) during weekdays and spent their weekends at Jessica's house with her sister and one flatmate, who was a close friend of theirs. The two flats were both family-owned and did not cost them rent. If they managed to live in one and rent the other out, they (or the family) would have benefitted from the extra income. Indeed, they had considered it over the years. However, taking care of their three cats was the major reason that Jessica and Helen decided to run two households; the old one was in Jessica's flat and the two younger ones were in Helen's flat. According to them, it was not a good idea to move the old one because it was too old to adapt to a new environment or to live with newcomers. In the end, they managed to spend more time at Helen's flat when they had to work and took care of the old cat; Jessica's flat became a weekend/holiday flat when they were off work and wanted some leisure time. However, the old cat was alone at Helen's place during the weekends, which worried them quite a lot.

In that case, I feel like we're leaving an old grandpa alone by himself at home. It's only a cat, but I feel a bit guilty. We've got a flatmate and my younger sister there [at Jessica's place] and we're happy eating together, chatting and watching TV with them. And we have our privacy here [at Helen's place]. It's more like going on a holiday when we live in that house. It's good that everyone's having a great time there. But in my mind I feel terrible and always think of my lonely old cat. I murmur to myself all the time when we are there 'Is it all right? Should we go back and take a look at it?' If we come back we will stay overnight. But during the weekends we want to take a break from working mode and have some relaxing time there! We want to spend our holidays in that house. I know I'm contradicting myself. (Jessica, couple interview)

It took a while for them to figure out a better arrangement for living once they had prioritised their pets' well-being. Although the flatmate and



Jessica's sister helped to take care of the cats during weekdays, they sometimes went back to Jessica's place an extra time during weekdays, mostly on Wednesdays. I noticed that both Jessica and Helen were caring and thoughtful. They were not only concerned about their cats, but also about the other residents in Jessica's house:

- Jessica: Occasionally...um...sometimes we would come back [to Jessica's place during weekdays] when she [their flatmate] was alone. She seems to be quite lonely. Sometimes, rarely...in fact, we are familiar with her story, she has no boyfriend and just a few friends in Taipei; besides going to the office she didn't hang out with friends a lot. We know that she really wants to chat with us and have our company sometimes. When she was alone in that house, for example, before my younger sister moved in or when she went travelling for more than ten days, we would go back more often in case she got bored alone in the empty house.
- Helen: Besides, her [Jessica's] house is on the second floor without full iron fences on the windows. It is possible to be broken into from the balcony. Her flatmate would be in danger if she forgot to lock the door.
- Jessica: Um. Things like that. We will come back even more often if they're away. Clean the cat-litter tray, feed the cats and so on. About every two days.

However, it is never an easy task to manage two households. It was not only Jessica who had such concerns, Helen pointed out the inconvenience when they started running two households:

- Helen: Over the past two and half years we were thinking about the possibility of staying in one place. [Jessica: Um, that's true.] Sometimes I stayed at her place and noticed that I didn't have suitable outfits for certain formal occasions at work the next day. I only had casual ones at her place. That was a disaster. And I didn't have any cosmetics. I didn't have an eyebrow pencil when I needed it to draw on my eyebrows. [Jessica: Yes.] It's really annoying if we need one thing immediately and it's not there. Besides, we need to tidy two houses. We clean up here at her place and clean up there when we go back.
- Jessica: And do the laundry. Cleaning and washing...and emptying the cat-litter tray. There are things we must take care of.
- Iris: And do it twice.

- Helen: I remember that you [Iris] were surprised that we lived in two places. In fact, we don't define our home by the houses; instead we prefer to call it home wherever she is.
- Jessica: Yes, we're more like that. I don't know how you feel about it. But we're getting used to this kind of living arrangement. I'm familiar with both houses and I feel at home in both houses. These two houses are our homes! Like my parents, they lived in the house in Yong-He most of the time and bought one in Chung-Li. They keep it and occasionally go and take care of it.

For Jessica and Helen, the notion of home did not seem to be built on a permanent residence of their own; instead they jointly accommodated their cohabiting arrangements to their current situation. As they said in the interview, they do imagine having one ideal home, but it does not seem likely to happen in the near future. For the moment, Jessica agreed with Helen's earlier comment on their current living arrangements. 'Like she said, wherever we are there is our home; in this case, these two places are both our home' (Jessica, couple interview). Although they had made an agreement to run two households, at first they found it difficult to accommodate these two places of their own together.

- Jessica: You remind me of one thing. In fact, there was a process of change. At first we might feel like we were visiting your place or my place; gradually we found it weird if we named them yours and mine. [Helen: Because these two in fact are not our property.] No, that's not what I mean. We didn't want to differentiate things like that, yours and mine. Once we considered naming the two houses instead of 'your home' and 'my home'. I forget if it was you or I suggested it. Was that you?
- Helen: It was my idea!
- Jessica: Yes, yes.
- Helen: We both live apart from parents and relatives. If we lived with parents, for example my mom lives in this house, there's no doubt that we would say things like 'today we'll stay at your home' or 'come to my home'.
- Jessica: It is quite interesting. These two properties both belong to our elders. I don't pay rent and of course I never feel like I rent the house. I call this house my grandmother's property and that is her mother's property for sure. These two houses are not like rental houses; we take these houses seriously. We take very good care of the houses because they are our elders' properties. Both of us

agree about this. These two houses are similar to us; we didn't buy them, they are our elders' properties and we have a responsibility to take care of them, both of us for both of them.

In the end, they referred to these two places by their addresses or nicknames instead of 'your home' and 'my home'. Jessica admitted that she would feel better if they used nicknames for the two houses due to their increasing awareness of 'being together', while Helen felt there was little difference. Jessica noticed the contradiction between what they wanted to do and what they did; they were aware of their joint responsibility for both households, but the language they used did not seem to follow.

Perhaps deep in our minds, we thought... Um, for example, she helped me watering the flowers there and I said 'thank you'. She said 'why do you say thank you?' Another example, she would say 'thank you' to me if I cleaned the cat-litter tray here and I would say 'why do you say thank you to me?' This is a bit ironic I know. She will say thank you if I do housework at the flat in [road name]. It's weird to say thank you to me. Isn't it the house we're living in together? However, I will say the same thing to her when she does housework in the house in [City]. And she of course will correct me afterwards. I know it but I can't help saying thank you! Perhaps deep down in our minds we know the properties belong to our elders. Or we simply want to show our appreciation because she did something. I really don't know. (Jessica, couple interview)

It was not a great distance between their two houses and the journey took no more than 30 minutes by car or motorcycle. With their insistence about taking care of others (cats, flatmate and Jessica's younger sister), they had to overcome the problems of constantly travelling between these two places. In addition, ownership of the properties burdened them with responsibilities and challenged the couple's sense of belonging to the place(s). They tried hard to ease the difference between 'your home' and 'my home' by changing the names they called them. From the accounts above, it can be seen that a great deal of effort had to be made to adapt their lives around two households.

### *Living Apart Together*

Cohabitation was desirable to most of the couples in my interviews; however, this may not be the case for those who are unwilling to give up their independence. Edith and Abby had realised the benefits of spending

a little time apart. This couple had been committed to their relationship for 16 years and had never lived at the same address. They stayed over at each other's places very often when they studied and worked in different cities. Since Edith had bought her own flat, they each lived with their parents during weekdays; in addition, Abby had been offered accommodation near her workplace; and they spent their weekends together at Edith's flat.

A few years ago, Edith bought the flat when she had a quarrel with her family of origin and wished to move out of her parents' house to keep a little distance from them. This was not a joint decision between the couple. Both of them had prioritised their careers and arranged to have quality dating time together when they were free from pressure at work. According to the couple, they did not consider living together in the near future. Edith explained the reason:

Both of us are working full time. No one would be happy doing household chores after work. I'm too knackered to think about doing the laundry or cooking dinner. It's a better idea if we see each other's faces only at the weekends. Then we may avoid some disagreements. She sometimes seems to be busier at work than I am. To me, I don't see myself talking too much after work, not even chatting. Sometimes I go home in a good mood, but it doesn't mean that I'm in a good mood to talk. In that case, I'm not angry with anything; I'm simply too tired to talk. That would be so annoying if I see her long face. She's the same. I'll be thinking 'Why do you give me that face? What do you want now?' And I'll get pissed off seeing her face like that. But the fact is we're simply too tired to talk or be nice to each other. (Edith, couple interview)

Edith lived with her family of origin and was taken care of by her mother during weekdays. She assumed that if she and Abby lived together they would have to deal with all the housework by themselves, which according to her account was the main cause of quarrels. She would consider living together and might like to share housework when they both had free time during the weekends or when they retire. Having quality time together is more important to them than spending every minute fighting.

I think I'm like that. I think I need some private space sometimes. I believe she needs to be alone by herself, too. We never talked about this. But I can tell from her actions. She sometimes can't be bothered talking to me or she has things to take care of. Um. She was like that when we were at school.

She . . . I might want to hang out with her or take her out, but she would say no, she'd got essays to do or she had to prepare for exams. She has her own things to do and doesn't want me being around to bother her. No, I didn't mean to say that. (Laughter) Is it a terrible thing to be in a relationship like us? (Abby)

We have our own privacy and this in fact helps to avoid conflict between us. This is simply my opinion. People say long distance is challenging. She may get someone else who is interested in her and our relationship may be challenged. I wouldn't know. I prefer go with the flow. I love this person very much, but I won't stop her from having a better future. It'd be a difficult decision though. (Abby)

Abby pointed out that extra effort would be needed to maintain intimacy at a distance. However, she also realised that keeping some privacy from each other enhances their relationship. This couple found advantages in living apart on weekdays and living together at the weekends.

Nonetheless, other couples had no choice but to live apart, such as Angie and Clara, who started their friendship as colleagues. Clara lived in office accommodation before she met Angie and travelled between her accommodation and Angie's place when they started seeing each other. At the time, Angie's ex troubled them quite often; thus, they kept Angie's residence a secret and were very careful about her safety. The couple did not move in together until Clara quit her job. In fact, most of the time Clara stayed over at Angie's place and left only a few personal things at her accommodation. She came back and stayed at her accommodation occasionally because she did not want people to know Angie's address and also could not be bothered to explain their relationship. She would have to change her residence address if she moved into Angie's house, according to her. 'At the time we were concerned about it . . . I could tell people where I lived without any hesitation because I lived in office accommodation. It was easier to explain' (Clara, couple interview). Thus, she kept the accommodation and an address that was OK to tell people about.

Another example were Angel and Maggie, who both wished to live together and were planning to settle down in the future; yet their situation left them with little choice. One of the obstacles was their families. Angel lived alone in Taipei away from her family; Maggie lived in Taipei's suburbs with her parents and had a part-time job in the city. Due to Maggie's studies and Angel's work, they were going to live separately in different countries over the following one or two years. They realised the

risk of living apart and had discussed how to deal with it. It did not seem that this separation would trouble them more than their current living arrangements.

During the year they had lived in Taipei, Maggie had stayed over at Angel's place on average twice per week and she regarded this as 'very frequent'. Maggie had come out to her parents before she started her relationship with Angel, but her parents did not support her lifestyle choice. Maggie said her mother was 'anxious, worried and angry' when she found out about Maggie's new relationship. Thus, staying over at Angel's place became an issue between her and her mother. Maggie's mother would not ask every time where Maggie was staying if she phoned her mother to say that she would not go home that night. However, whenever she did ask, a big fight on the phone would be triggered, which made Maggie feel stressed and tended to decrease the frequency of her staying over.

### *That Is the Place We Call 'home'*

Unlike most of the couples in my interviews who had bought their own properties or were keen to buy one together, Luce and Rachel saw little difference between buying a house and renting in the long term. They had rented houses and lived together since they started their relationship. Moreover, according to Luce, they had committed to each other at the beginning of their relationship and arranged their lives together on a long-term basis. They had purchased furniture for long-term use since they lived in a small studio for university students and still used it. This couple was very strong-minded on their idea of home:

Luce: You must know that most students used cheap drawer sets and temporary furniture. [Rachel: Um.] That was not our idea. We arranged our places with the idea of 'home' from day one. This included a cooking hob or a portable induction hob. There must be a cooking facility so that we can cook for ourselves. A kitchen was required when we started looking for a house. This kitchen can only fit one induction hob, but this is it.

Rachel: A simple hob is fine by us.

Luce: That's true. A simple space like that. We bought the induction hob when we lived in the previous house. There must be a space to cook, and a private bathroom. I can't stand a room in a shared house. And I must have a bookshelf and stereo set.

- Rachel: You can't call a room in a shared house a home, can you? This is how we perceived it.
- Luce: For an acceptable living environment where we two can settle ourselves. Besides, we never split the bills. We bought all the furniture together. This is how the relationship works, from day one we shared the money, until now.

Both Luce and Rachel preferred not to buy a house and made the agreement immediately. They said they had both learnt some experiences from their families of origin. Rachel's father did not buy a house and would not buy one during his entire life. The whole family lived in a rented house, which she described as a very nice one, and left Rachel with the idea that 'you don't need to buy a house to make a home' (Rachel, couple interview). On the contrary, Luce had experienced moving too many times due to her father's personnel transfers; her father bought a new house whenever the family moved to a new place. Her father's habit, according to her, did not cause financial difficulties for the family, but had made a bad impression on her.

However, they noticed that most of their friends started buying their own properties at a certain age; when preparing to get married or settle down, for example. The couple had then discussed in detail why they did not want to buy a house of their own. The main reason was not very surprising. They wished to live a simple/light life without the burden of a loan; 'I can't stand the thought that for 20 years I will have to keep myself working in order to pay the loan' (Rachel, couple interview). On the other hand, they did not see themselves getting into trouble like everybody did when buying a house. They preferred to rent a house and leave all the problems to their landlord. If they were not satisfied with the landlord, they could simply move and find another place.

- Luce: *We don't think having real estate is a necessary condition for having a home of our own.* Yes, that's it.
- Iris: Then what is a necessary condition to make a home?
- Rachel: Being together with her.
- Luce: Um.
- Iris: Sharing the same space?
- Rachel: Yes, in one space. I shall say . . . we two have an agreement that we are willing to share our lives and share our space together. For sharing lives I define it as we share our work, thoughts and any

possibilities in the future. We plan the future together and we're always thinking about our next step.

Luce: Um.

Rachel: Um. I think a space like this plus a person like her form a home. This is a home. (My emphasis)

What makes a home varies for different individuals in different contexts. As mentioned earlier, Clara and Angie were living in Angie's property, which was purchased a few years after they started their relationship; Clara owned a property in a different city before their relationship started and had never lived in that house. Before moving into their current residence, they had rented three places and were not very happy with those houses. In the end, Angie decided to buy a house of her own and she and Clara moved in together. They did not plan to buy the house together since Clara had one property already and could not afford another. Clara said she did not mind it at all when Angie made the decision on her own and registered the property under her own name alone. In fact, Clara did not offer many opinions on house decorations, 'I've experienced that before. That's enough for me (laughter)' (Clara, couple interview). She noticed that Angie was very excited about the new house and, thus, she was happy to see Angie being busy with things at the time. They explained to me carefully what their notions of home (s) were. They called the houses they rented before 'places they lived in'; they realised their instability and that they might move out at any time. For their current residence, which Angie bought, both Angie and Clara called it 'our home' or 'me and Clara's/Angie's home'. As Clara said, 'If you ask me where is our home? This is it. There is no doubt' (Clara, couple interview).

Obviously, ownership of the property had little influence on their notion of 'our home', but this was not the case for Clara's notion of 'her home'. Clara would refer to the house she had bought as 'wo-de-jia' (我的家, my [her] home), even though she had never lived in it, because 'this is what I really possess' (Clara, couple interview). She might have called her parents' house her home in the past because her parents lived there and they were quite close to each other. She would not call it her home anymore since her elder brother had inherited her father's house (where her mother was still living) after her father's death.

My parents' home is no longer my home. That's true! That is my brother's home already. I didn't know that until that day. All right, now I knew it. So now I separate these houses [under their owners' names]. I would say my



parents' home was my home before. But now I have learnt it, I wouldn't...  
(Clara, couple interview)

Both Angie's and Clara's parents lived in different cities and they had left their parents' homes quite a long time before to study and work. Parents' homes might be meaningful to them, but did not make them feel at home anymore. They had accommodated their lives as a couple in the house under Angie's name and Clara's property remained her own investment.

### FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS

Given the dominance of heterosexuality as the most visible model for coupling and parenting, Hong Kong lesbian couples may or may not adopt these familiar cultural narratives when constituting their intimate relationships. In Hong Kong society, feminism as a coherent ideology is uncommon; however, debates on gender equality have increased through popular narratives of 'chauvinist vs. unassertive males'. Thus, Wong (2012: 273) suggests that '[an] equal division of labour in lesbian households does not necessarily mean the elimination of gendered roles, but an opposition towards male chauvinism'. Similarly, Kamano's (2009: 139) study in Japan showed that 'the lack of feminist consciousness as a set of coherent ideas might have actually given more latitude to women in creating their own version of housewifery'. Japanese lesbian couples have redefined housework and housewifery as 'a positive expectation of adults and adult relationships'. They have adopted a flexible, negotiable approach to the domestic division of labour and the pooling of resources in a context of job instability, restricted opportunities and a high level of gender inequality. In their commitment to egalitarianism, joint survival (or mutual support) takes precedence over feminist ideology.

Economic imbalance and an unequal sharing of domestic labour within the home and workplace have been identified as major sources of inequality between men and women. Since lesbian couples do not experience gender differences, it is interesting to see how they deal with household issues and employment commitments and whether lesbian households can/should be conceptualised in terms of T/Po role-playing. My data reveal patterns in the division of labour in lesbian households and, at the same time, their financial arrangements, and these two intertwined factors are often discussed in the contexts of both Western and Asian culture.

**Table 7.2** Financial arrangements

	<i>Name (Age)</i>	<i>Income differential</i>	<i>Household bills<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Other expenses</i>
01	<b>Clarissa (36)</b> <b>Sally (36)</b>	No significant difference between salaries	Fairness	Aiming for fairness
02	<b>Jessica (35)</b> <b>Helen (34)</b>	Jessica is unemployed	Fairness (Helen lends money to Jessica while she is unemployed)	Fairness
03	<b>Evelyn (30)</b> <b>Ninny (30)</b>	Not sure	Fairness	Fairness
04	<b>Wilhelmina (32)</b> <b>Vivian (35)</b>	Wil earns slightly more than Vivian	Fairness	Vivian claims that Wil contributes more
05	<b>Camille (31)</b> <b>Petra (32)</b>	Petra had been unemployed previously/no significant difference between salaries now	Aiming for fairness; Camille paid all bills when Petra was unemployed and had run out of savings	Aiming for fairness
06	<b>Maggie (32)</b> <b>Angel (30)</b>	Angel earns much more than Maggie, who is a student and has a part-time job	N/A (not cohabiting)	Maggie pays a certain proportion and Angel pays the rest
07	<b>Angie (37)</b> <b>Clara (37)</b>	Clara resigned from her permanent full-time job and has a part-time job for preparing exams/Angie earns much more than Clara	Angie pays all bills	Clara pays other bills occasionally
08	<b>Edith (32)</b> <b>Abby (32)</b>	Edith earns slightly more than Abby	N/A (cohabiting only at weekends)	Fairness
09	<b>Lisbeth (35)</b> <b>Mimmi (40)</b>	Lis earns more than Mimmi with various sources of income/Mimmi works as a freelance writer	Lis pays all bills	Lis pays all bills
10	<b>Rachel (32)</b> <b>Luce (32)</b>	Rachel earns slightly more than Luce	Organise both salaries jointly	Organise both salaries jointly
11	<b>Nic (29)</b> <b>Jules (34)</b>	Nic earns much more than Jules, who was unemployed for a	Nic pays most of the bills	Jules pays partially when doing full-time jobs

**Table 7.2** (continued)

	<i>Name (Age)</i>	<i>Income differential</i>	<i>Household bills<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Other expenses</i>
		while and did freelance jobs		
12	<b>Crocodile (35)</b> <b>Zoe (29)</b>	Crocodile earns much more than Zoe and occasionally gives Zoe some money to save	Crocodile pays most of the bills	Zoe pays small bills
13	<b>Tina (32)</b> <b>Bette (34)</b>	Tina is unemployed	Bette pays all bills	Tina uses her own savings when needed
14	<b>Theresa (31)</b> <b>Jess (32)</b>	Theresa earns slightly more than Jess	Fairness	Fairness
15	<b>Kitty (31)</b> <b>Nan (28)</b>	Not sure	N/A (not cohabiting; previously, fairness when cohabiting)	Fairness

\* Household bills include utilities, living expenses, rent or mortgage and any other payments related to household management.

Many couples in my study had experienced income differentials and some were coping with a partner's unemployment. Income differentials between the partners were reported on the basis of their feelings, rather than the quantitative differentials of actual earnings. This was notably reflected in the way they split the bills; the higher-earning partner often took the larger (or the whole) share of big purchases, while the other often attempted to pay relatively affordable day-to-day expenses to neutralise the economic imbalance. In those cases of significant income differentials, I did not find obvious evidence of a power imbalance between the partners. The aspiration of equality (of the division of household chores and finances) was embraced but was of less concern than pursuing well-being or maximising happiness in their households, in which both partners contributed their strength of resources. In fact, many couples (whether or not there were income differentials) used their money jointly and accepted that this was for the good of their home. Table 7.2 gives a summary of the couples' financial arrangements.

However, ways of arranging household money might vary; to use money jointly did not necessarily mean having a joint bank account. Only one couple (Clarissa and Sally) had a joint account for a home

purchase in the future. Their joint account had not been introduced until they developed a preferred method of home spending and saving. They lived in Sally's parents' house by themselves before they moved into their current one. There was no monthly rent payment and Sally set up an automatic transfer from her bank account to pay utility bills. When Clarissa first moved in, she was enthusiastic about sharing Sally's load.

Clarissa: Yes, so I paid the monthly management fee.<sup>1</sup> And then, we seemed to be passionate about paying bills for each other. We would even be fighting over dinner bills. (Laughter) She would argue that I do too much grocery shopping for our home and she wants me to save some money. When we go out for dinner and I'm about to pay, she'll stop me and say 'no, let me, it's my turn'.

Sally: Well... It wasn't our original deal. We settled to share all bills, but she always pays for grocery shopping because she cooks. So, if you pay for the groceries, let me pay the dinner bills. Things should be like this

Thus, they started with a wallet to which each of them contributed a certain amount of money and, due to their plan to buy a house together, they opened a joint bank account. This was only one of the strategies that lesbian couples adopted towards egalitarianism, although this approach might not be explicitly illustrated in solid agreements between partners.

### *Home Finances*

As Pahl (1989) argues, money can be seen as a tracer for each aspect of a couple's lives together, especially the power relationship between them. In her pioneering study of money in married heterosexual households, she identified four systems of money management (1989: 67–77). In the *wife management system*, the wife is responsible for managing all the household finances and all expenditure, except for the

<sup>1</sup> Many apartments in Taiwan have facilitated management services in the building/block. There is a concierge stationed in an apartment house lobby, who screens visitors, accepts deliveries for the tenants, and is responsible for general building maintenance and repairs etc. This management service is similar to property factoring services in Scotland.

husband's personal spending money. In the wife management system, the husband usually hands all his wages to his wife, while in the *allowance system* the husband only gives his wife a set amount for household expenditure. The husband has access to the remainder, while the wife only has access to what is given to her. The *pooling system* seems to illustrate the ideology of equality in terms of a joint account, shared management and both having access. Each partner of the pooling couple pools a certain amount for collective expenditure and keeps the rest separate to spend as they choose. In the *independent management system*, both partners usually have an income and each has responsibility for paying for specific items. The couple have separate control over their incomes and separate responses to expenditure. Further studies (Vogler 1998, 2005) have also shown a clear link between the methods that couples use to organise money within households and power in the sense of control over decision-making.

The pooling system and independent management were represented as relatively equal and both partners could retain greater control over their own money while sharing equal responsibility for collective spending. The pooling system was favoured by many of the 13 cohabiting couples (including one living apart couple who had been cohabiting previously) in my study. Clarissa and Sally, for example, operated independent management at first and a partial pooling system afterwards; starting with a common wallet and then, for better management, they opened a joint bank account. Both remained fully in control of their own money and shared equal responsibility for common spending. Variations on the pooling system are possible; in Jess and Theresa's home they partially pooled money and relied on single management. Only one couple, however, operated the whole-wage system in a single-earning household; Bette handed over all her wages to Tina and received personal spending money back.

Cohabiting couples, like Clarissa and Sally, negotiated their ways of managing household finances, aiming towards and 'equality' that could be accepted by both partners. Most cohabiting couples arranged their household budget as a 'family'. Wilhelmina commented on her life with Vivian as a kind of 'married life' when they moved in together.

Wil: We, like anybody else, have to use a calculator, though we don't really use it (laughter). Our household budget is reviewed every

month to see how much we've spent this month and to arrange money for bigger purchases. We do it together.

Iris: You mean you arrange your life as a unit.

Wil: Yes. We do need to arrange our life [not only living expenses]. We have to arrange time to visit both families of origin, to see parents. Other families might have kids and need more time to deal with it. Well. We don't have kids, but we have a cat. [They see the cat rather like a child.]

A loving relationship may be romantic, but as far as running a household is concerned, it has to be pragmatic. In the dual-earner households, each partner in the relationship believed that they should contribute an equal share to the household finances. Large expenses and household bills were mostly split down the middle (which it is relatively easy to do), but interviewees dealt with small expenses differently. For Vivian and Wilhelmina, rent and utility bills were easy to split because the bills came in periodically.

Vivian: Spending? Sometimes we split it down the middle.

Wil: We would negotiate household expenses in advance. I pay a certain amount of rent and you pay water and electric bills, so you pay a smaller share of the rent. Like that. But we don't really care about day-to-day things. If we do split it, we split roughly.

Vivian: Yes. It's sometimes like this: she paid for lunch and I would pay for dinner.

Wil: It depends. Sometimes the person who has the most money in her wallet will pay. 'Please pay this I don't have enough money now.'

Vivian: I thought she might pay more.

Wil: Well . . . We wouldn't calculate every penny particularly. If there's a solid bill that we both see, we'll split it. Or things like . . . um . . . f or example, we'll talk about it in advance 'you pay this and I pay that'. But we wouldn't split every penny on day-to-day expenses.

Among those couples with roughly equivalent earnings, neither partner was expected to pay more. I noticed a kind of altruism in the relationships where many of my interviewees, whether or not she was a higher earner, would intentionally pay more on day-to-day expenses where the bills were easier to ignore and appeared to be very sensitive to the situation when her partner paid more than her. In the couple interview with Vivian and Wilhelmina, Vivian's claim was an example of this kind. They started

with similar salaries when they were both in the early stages of their careers, but Wilhelmina's salary had risen faster than Vivian's over the years. In fact it had not made a lot of difference, but Wilhelmina would pay more because she wanted to take care of her partner and their home. On the other hand, Vivian did not think the higher earner should make more of the household contributions. Her notion of fairness could also be seen in their plan to buy a house. Having been renting a house for a few years, Wilhelmina introduced the idea that she should buy a house and both of them move in. Vivian did not see herself buying property in the near future, but she would not feel uncomfortable with the situation. The only thing she insisted on was the house ownership.

Vivian: She's mentioned it before. She said if she's going to buy a house, she wanted to put my name on the title deeds. Immediately I said no to the suggestion. If it's your money then it's your house, not mine. Don't put my name on the title deeds. I'm not entitled to it.

Wil: I thought it's for her future security.

Vivian: But I don't like the idea.

The fact was that both of them were working as professionals and, luckily, it was possible to afford a house on each of their earnings. Wilhelmina explained why she wanted to put Vivian's name on the title deeds.

Telly taught me wrong! (Laughter) It's just the bad influence of TV [ . . . ] The thing is that ordinary parents would feel settled if their daughter's entitled to a property bought by their son-in-law. And their daughter's future is secured. So I hope [I can do the same thing]. (Wilhelmina, couple interview)

Vivian, however, did not think her partner should financially secure her future. Her appreciation of Wilhelmina's sweet act and, at the same time, insistence on her independence could be seen in another dialogue:

Vivian (in the couple interview): No, I don't want to. It's not the case that I can't afford my accommodation. Whereas this is obviously your money, it belongs to you. It should be yours, not mine.

Iris: Say, think of it as a gift?

Vivian:

Then it's a too big gift. [Iris: Too big?] If it is a kind of gift, I'm living in it. That makes more sense to me. I can't take it if [the house] itself is a gift.

Dunne's (1997: 197–200) respondents overwhelmingly reported being uncomfortable with unilateral house ownership, regardless of the fact that they may earn a similar income or have their own property. This usually conflicts with independence and a sense of belonging in the house, in particular, the power balance in the relationship. My study, however, suggests a different scenario. There were three couples in my study who lived in a house that was owned by one partner and, like Vivian, most couples did not favour co-ownership of a house if they could afford their own.

Edith saw buying her own flat as her achievement, rather than a home she had built up with Abby. They were not living together then (during weekdays) but might have one together in the future, which was still under discussion, but they both recognised that this flat was Edith's own and they could spend time in it during their free time. They split the bills when they went out for meals and any other leisure spending. However, Edith did not want Abby to pay anything for the house.

Edith (in the couple interview):

Fridge, for example, if I paid half of the money, could I take the freezer part or the fridge part when we separated? Things like that. In my opinion, it's unnecessary to get money involved in the relationship. Imagine your ex complaining to you: 'I was so nice to you when we were together and I bought you this and that.' It's totally wrong. In my case, I wanted to buy a house, it was my idea and this is something I want to do. There's no point asking her to pay anything. I only suggest that she comes over when she has free time. It's not our house. It's my house and I want her to come over sometimes.

Iris:

So, you paid all the money by yourself?

Edith:

Yes.



- Iris: And you didn't want her to share with you?
- Edith: No, not really. It's really hard to say. I mean it's difficult to define sharing. You think sharing is all about money. But actually she shares many things with me that I don't want to do. If you are talking about a good bargain or worth the money, it wasn't really bothering me. It was my idea to buy the thing in the first place. So I wasn't expecting anything from her.

Thus, Edith viewed the properties, made up her mind, and got the flat furnished and decorated all by herself. Abby went to see it with Edith just before she signed the documents and was happy with Edith's decision. Abby did not show obvious discomfort or feelings of dependency on her partner, in either the couple or individual interviews, and was devoted to sharing household labour with Edith. Neither did their division of housework appear to be unbalanced.

On the other hand, Clara, who owned a separate property from her partner Angie and lived in Angie's house, showed a different attitude towards house decoration. Clara had shown her sense of belonging to the home they lived in; however, she did not think she was in a position to make any comments on the house.

- Angie: I came up with most stuff.
- Clara: She did it all, not me.
- Angie: Yup, I did it all, I didn't discuss it with her.
- Clara: It's all her. I didn't have any opinion.
- Angie: She was like, yeah, right.
- Clara: I didn't have opinions towards this. Because I felt, yeah, it's okay. I didn't think she . . . that I need to give any words. I think the only time I gave out opinions; it was . . . hmm . . . what did I offer?

As mentioned in the previous section, Theresa and Jess decided to buy two separate houses at the same time because of their families of origin. Theresa's house was bigger and better suited to them and their dog. They talked about furniture and decoration together; also they paid the house bills equally. The bigger house, although it was under Theresa's

name, was their home where they wished to make a life. On the other hand, Jess's house was a one-bedroom and carried a smaller mortgage. Jess did not want Theresa to pay more, so she paid a monthly rent to help with Theresa's mortgage. This was their approach to an equal sharing of household economics, as well as their arrangement of daily expenses.

Each of us contributes two thousand dollars per month and we use the money to pay household and other bills, or dinner bills. We almost always eat at home. If we go out for dinner, we will use the money to pay the bill. If the money runs out early, say in the middle of the month, each of us will contribute more. I will complain to her if the money is running out and she doesn't notice, and doesn't inform me in time to put more in. She is in charge of managing the money. I would nag her that 'you don't take care of the money and you didn't let me know there's no money' like that. (Jess, couple interview)

The same strategy applied to their travel budget. Furthermore, this conversation illustrates their preferred presentation as a couple in public domains.

- Theresa: When we go travelling . . . We don't split the money right at the moment when we pay it. Each of us will take out a certain amount of money before heading off . . .
- Jess: Say two thousand dollars. And we pay bills by using the joint budget throughout our journey.
- Theresa: So we don't have to split the bills when we are still at the table or right away after we finish the meal.
- Jess: That's awkward. (Laughter)

Like Wilhelmina and Vivian, Theresa and Jess did not split every penny when it came to 'small spending'. Egalitarianism like 'cut it in half' did not seem to be natural to these lesbian couples. However, this did not stop them from applying strategies to approach equality between partners.

### *Income Differentials*

Maggie and Angel were not cohabiting when I interviewed them. Maggie was doing her PhD, while her partner Angel had just begun her early academic career. They had had no problem with Maggie's financial dependence previously when they were both living in the USA. When they came

back to Taiwan, Angel was working full time and Maggie was working part time. Angel showed caution when paying bills for their dating expenses in order to avoid her mother's inspection. She suggested that Maggie contributed a bit to their spending together, which was a small amount of money that made her feel much more comfortable and balanced.

I just came back to Taiwan and, according to my previous experiences, my mom would nag me for wasting money, I thought she would. Well, I don't feel it now, but I did in the beginning. She would notice if I spent a lot of money in a short period of time. I mean my daily expenses. She knows my salary in detail and she is monitoring my finances. She will keep nagging me [if she finds something unusual]. From my point of view, I wouldn't have spent so much money if I were alone or single. But now the fact is that I spend double what I did. My mom will definitely... I'm afraid that she would try to invade my private life and I really don't want her to. So I tell Maggie to contribute three thousand dollars every month, like that. (Angel, couple interview)

Angel was careful about her mother's opinion, as it was sometimes a source of conflict in their relationship.

Iris: So do you really care when you come back to Taiwan? Do you really think your mother is monitoring you?

Angel: Well, yes. I think my family is very close to me and I can imagine their voices around me. They might ask me about my salary. They did. They did ask me about it when I came back [to the south] for lunar New Year. She [Angel's mother] asked me my monthly spending, well, only roughly.

Iris: But in fact you live on your own. So your finances...

Maggie: The reason she gave me at that time was... I didn't take her as... because... In fact I think her behavioural pattern is so straightforward. Like I remembered back then, I felt okay if we went Dutch when eating out or suchlike. But since this pattern has been set up, she became the one who paid the bill first. Maybe she felt that she was supposed to do it. But I didn't think the same way. Every time when she thinks she should do such things, then she worries about her mother. That's the thing she mentioned before. So the self-struggling and conflict occurred. That was the time I felt very strange, I couldn't imagine a 30-year-old, who had studied abroad for seven or eight years already, living in Taipei, not Kaohsiung, far from

home. How on earth did her mother get a chance to check her bank statements? Then her mom would count how much she spent per month. I thought this is too crazy. But since she thought so, I can also . . .

In addition, Maggie noticed that Angel had been cautious not only about her mother's opinion, but also those of other lesbians in the community. Angel would not pay when their lesbian friends were present. This was, according to Maggie's understanding, to avoid T/Po stereotyping, in which T is the provider and Po is the receiver in terms of money. Angel hated to seem as though her financial support was the only reason for Maggie staying in their relationship.

She pays more and she constantly shows that she has no problem with it, maybe more than happy to. But she is very careful when people mention it. She does care. She hates hearing people say, if someone ever did say, that I stay in the relationship because she will pay bills for me. (Maggie)

Stereotyped T/Po role-playing was not welcome in Maggie and Angel's relationship. Angel was very aware of not falling into the stereotype.

Maggie: Why isn't it good? Let me think, maybe because it falls into the so-called T/Po stereotype. Like most people would think T should be the provider and Po should be the receiver and Po is usually taken as the one having the tragic story. Like in the end, you know, people would ask 'why isn't a nice girl like you with guys? You're such a good girl, why do you have to be with her? There must be some particular reasons.' [Angel] didn't want people to have this idea that she influenced me with money so that I wanted to be with her. No, it wasn't like that, not even close to what's been said. But still, we somehow limited ourselves when we went out . . .

Iris: When there are others present?

Maggie: Yes, when there are others present, maybe it should be me to pay or . . . She doesn't want others to feel . . . This is quite interesting. She doesn't want other people to think she's the one who pays.

Iris: So you are the one who pays the bill?

Maggie: Hmm, but that was my money as well. And yup, we eh . . . We have to have our own . . . I mean, I'm not that broke and things are not like every penny is coming out of her purse. This thought came to me; she's trying to avoid the image. I think the problem

becomes that we need to purposely avoid the stereotype of same-sex or lesbian couples. And the stereotype is somewhat negative.

Maggie and Angel's awkward situation was partially because of their current earning asymmetry; at the same time, this reveals the issue of stigmatised T/Po relationships. However, the T/Po pattern does not necessarily have an influence on financial arrangements when partners earn differently. Jules's partner Nic identified herself as T and in their home Nic paid for most of the spending. Compared with Nic's stable occupation, Jules sometimes did freelancing or was unemployed between full-time jobs. No one constantly paid more for their household although they did not intend to split the bills. Jules was the one who contributed more money to the relationship; later, Nic paid more when Jules had more burdens from her monthly contribution to her family of origin. Nic and Jules might reveal T/Po patterns in their relationship; nevertheless, these patterns did not overwhelmingly determine their home financial arrangements.

Not really, I think it depends. It's because she makes more money. (Laughter) Because when we first got together, I was an editor at that time. I made more money as well. I took half of my salary home [to her parents] every month, and then I used the rest for the rent, utilities and living expenses. So I didn't really have any savings along the way. But when we got together, I stopped taking money home, all of a sudden, I felt I was rich. I spent more money after that, if she wanted to do something or eat something, I'd buy it for her. However, as time went by, I felt I couldn't be like this anymore, because my mom would count how long I didn't take money home. I started to feel I was in debt. Later on, she thought she could make more contribution in terms of money. (Jules)

Jules did not remain unemployed for long; they were not in any financial difficulty during their single-income phase. However, it might appear different when a household relied on one partner's earnings.

### *Unemployed Partners*

Tina and Bette were taking care of a baby girl in their household, which brought big financial changes and budgeting challenges. While other cohabiting couples thought about saving money for travelling abroad,

they sought strategies for saving money on childcare, food, baby gear, taxes and monthly bills, child education and more. Tina worried most about education money for their child and did not think Bette's earnings alone could afford it, although Bette disagreed with her. They had different ideas about budgeting and financial management. This was not a problem when Tina was working full time, but she had become aware of Bette's spontaneity with money. Bette then delegated the household financial management to Tina and relied on her to take care of the whole family. Their home finances were a mixture of the wife management system and the allowance system (Pahl 1989). Bette handed all her earnings to Tina and received an allowance periodically, while Tina took charge of all household expenditure.

Iris: Do you think you manage the household bills jointly or do you split the bills?

Bette: I've never thought about this question. (Laughter)

Tina: Neither have I.

Bette: In fact, well, our case is that we use our money together. We don't split bills like other people do, you pay water and gas and I pay the rest. I think people manage their own money. But this is not our case. We . . . I give her all my salary every month, all of it. Then I'll leave the home finances to her total management. I only care about my monthly allowance or weekly sometimes. (Laughter) [Tina: Yes, you do care.] I'm entitled to have pocket money!

Tina: She would count it and would nag me if she didn't have money in her hand. She would remind me 'it's time to give me some money!' (Laughter) Then I would have to give it to her, of course. She can lose her temper if she has no money. She was like that before. She was so impatient and completely out of control when it comes to money. So I said 'I will manage the household money.' (Laughter)

Tina was doing a full-time job at the beginning of their relationship and had some savings. She was very careful about home finances, while her partner might not be the same. This conversation also shows their different ideas of living on single earnings.

Iris: So even if she doesn't have a job and you as well, then how is the household financial status . . . ?

Tina: *Very tight.*

Bette: *Only a bit tighter.*

- Tina: We can't afford any accidents.
- Bette: But I, I think, I'm okay with going tighter. I simply want her to be happy, she doesn't need to wear herself out, because I feel that once she felt tired, got emotional, or felt sick, then these might affect our life. So I'd rather that . . .
- Tina: Feeling weak was true.
- Bette: Yes, I'd rather she lives a comfy life. Then I can go tighter in our financial status. Yes, at least she feels comfortable now. It'll be okay if she just takes good care of us. Right? (My emphasis)

Tina's story was unique in my data; her resignation from her job was intended to promote household well-being. The other participants, however, expected better jobs when leaving their previous ones. Along the lines of joint household finances, the lesbians in my study appeared to be responsible for supporting their unemployed partners. Four couples, including Tina and Bette, had been in a single-earning situation. When I conducted the interviews, Jessica was about to start a new job after six months unemployment; Petra and Jules had been unemployed previously and had returned to full-time jobs. None of them were fired unexpectedly; however, their unemployment had brought family economic uncertainty.

Jessica and Helen took equal shares of household expenses when they both had full-time jobs. Jessica was unhappy in her previous job and prepared for a period of job-hunting with savings. They discussed Jessica's resignation carefully and both thought they would be able to deal with a single-earning household. Helen did not see Jessica's unemployment as an obstacle although Jessica did not have many savings. On the contrary, she was quite positive about the situation. She found it a good opportunity for both of them to learn budget control and was willing to change their financial lifestyle:

In that case, we will have to spend money only on necessities; cutting spending and saving levels or things like that. I'm all right with it. In some sense we are learning budget control. It's something we have to learn after all. For example, I would tell her to have only meals, not snacks. No more snacks or sweets! [Iris: That must be a pain.] Yeah. (Laughter) But, that's her lesson to learn how to have control! (Helen)

Thus, when she resigned from her previous job, Jessica stopped giving an allowance to her family of origin<sup>2</sup> and depended on Helen's income for day-to-day spending. Her family of origin did not really support Jessica's unemployment; instead, her closet lesbian partner took the major part in supporting her financially.

She said she's going to lend me the money. Maybe it's because she saw me being really unhappy every day in that job. Then, she would tell me, 'Just quit the job! You complain about it after work every day. It's very unhealthy.' Because we chatted on MSN during work and I would tell her how pissed off I was all the time. The complaints would still go on even when I got home, because I really felt it was problematic in the workplace. She also thought that if I continued the job, there would be a few possible crises waiting ahead. So it might be better if I just quit. She thought I could always find another job. I told her then the following problem was that it takes time to find a new job and I didn't have much savings back at that time. She answered me right away, 'There's no problem. I can lend you some.' (Jessica)

Similarly, Petra and Camille negotiated their financial arrangements when Petra decided to quit her job. They shared all their bills equally when they had a dual income and planned to buy a house together. When Petra became unemployed, she had already prepared some savings for the following few months; besides, their joint savings (for buying a house) were instantly accessible. However, things were not going as smoothly as she had planned. Job searching lasted longer than expected and her individual savings were not enough. They lived solely on Camille's income afterwards, but Petra was uncomfortable about using Camille's money, in particular when they went to their families of origin for the Lunar New Year and Petra did not have enough money in her pocket.

Petra: She wasn't available then, timewise. So I thought 'never mind' and I borrowed some from my sister. After that, because of the thing [a significant conflict they had] the unpleasantness piled up

<sup>2</sup> Jessica and Helen were running two households; one owned by Jessica's grandmother and the other by Helen's mother. Jessica gave some money to her family of origin as monthly rent and this was also her giving back to her family of origin, which is conventionally seen as the adult children's responsibility to their elderly parents in Chinese families. (See Jackson et al. 2013 for more on adult children's monthly contributions.)



when we came back from New Year holidays. Those things are still there. Negative emotions pile up and things get worse when it comes to money. I'd run out of savings then. I didn't have money in my pocket. It became a pressure on me. I hated to remind her to give me some money every week. And then one day we had a talk. I didn't realise that I would be so anxious and financially insecure in awkward money situations. I told her how I felt about this. She, then, asked me how to eliminate the anxiety. And I said 'just give me your debit card'. So after that . . . (laughter)

Iris: Is that real?

Camille: Yes. That card really sets her mind at rest. It was such a big relief to her.

Camille had been supportive and arranged finances and lived around it. She also found unexpected joy during Petra's job seeking; Petra would make a lunch-box every day, she would bring it to Camille's office and they ate it together. Camille was not anxious about Petra's unemployment on the basis of mutual support.

But later on, because we had this happen to us, which made her feel I didn't protect her like she expected. Plus, she was under this financial pressure. In the meantime, she was supposed to have some rest, but she couldn't manage to get it at all. Instead, she was very anxious. She told me about the situation and then I said, 'OK, there's no need to worry. If you can't have the rest you need, we can just postpone the date.' It was fine with me. After she started looking for a new job in May, then there were some situations popped up one by one. It was like the whole thing didn't seem to be as successful as we thought it would be. So I felt she was under big enough pressure already. All I could do was to take care of her in our daily life. Because I happened to get a part-time job last November, so we didn't really have to worry too much about the expenses. We were doing all right back then, so things could stay the same for the moment. Mainly it was because I wanted her to find a job she really likes and is also promising. I didn't want her to take a job if she wasn't even into it. (Camille, couple interview)

Lesbian couples might have been believed to fall into a more traditional approach when they were in a butch/femme relationship. This inequality in the division of labour, as Dunne argued (1997: 213–215), was related to unemployment or long-term illness, and when their relationship attempted to mirror a heterosexual one. However, supporting an unemployed partner had made many relationships better and stronger.

Throughout my data, there is no explicit illustration or obvious evidence that can tell how much influence from feminist thought lesbians applied in their relationships. Finding a financial balance in the relationship seems to be more important than self-consciously practising egalitarianism.

### DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOUR

Many researchers have found that same-sex couples value equality in their relationships regarding the use of gendered roles and the division of labour (e.g. Weston 1997; Dunne 1997; Weeks et al. 2001). Most lesbians are said to be against any revival of butch/femme roles because they believe that contrasting roles recreate the inequality of conventional heterosexual relationships. As Dunne (1997: 215) argues, 'women who choose to share their lives with other women have no desire to subject themselves to the kind of power dynamic that they perceived [*sic*] as underpinning relationships with men'. However, a commitment to equality does not prevent some lesbians from using gender categories. The lack of taken-for-granted guidelines for conducting lesbian relationships, for the obvious reason that both partners are the same gender, does not mean that same-sex couples cannot use gender to assign roles in their relationships, because 'femininities and masculinities can be constructed without regard to the biological sex of the physical body' (Jamieson 1998: 153).

Asymmetrical sharing of household labour in lesbian relationships is always undesirable; and this is what people believe a T/Po couple would look like. In some Taiwanese lesbian communities, T are typically portrayed as unlikely to share household labour. It is common that lesbians see T/Po households as having the potential to be as unequal as conventional heterosexual families. Tsai (2006: 32) noted that her participants usually had such stereotypes and would avoid a relationship with a T who did not do housework. Tsai's participants felt uncomfortable if they found their relationships were mimicking unequal heterosexual relationships, and in extreme cases this could lead to the end of a relationship. However, in Wong's (2012) study on Hong Kong lesbian couples, an equal division of household labour was found to be possible in a TB/TBG (Tomboy/Tomboy's Girl) relationship. Gender performance of being TB/TBG or T/Po might have some impact on creating egalitarian relationships, but equal sharing of domestic work (as an ideal of mutual care) is pretty much welcomed by lesbians in Hong Kong as in Taiwan.

My findings suggest that gender role-playing in lesbian households is unlikely to determine the division of labour. Consider, first, the effect of the gendered division of labour on boys and girls when learning domestic work. The making of a Taiwanese daughter often involves learning domestic work at home. Lesbians are often engaged in household chores from an early age, whether they are T or Po. Second, the content of household labour varies in different cultures; in Taiwanese families, traditionally masculine chores—for example, home repairs, gardening and woodwork—are not usually done within households. Third, given the financial vulnerability of women in Taiwanese society, dual-income households are more common than the conventional main-earner/main-houseworker pattern in Taiwanese lesbian households. Finally, there is often a considerable difference between ‘taken-for-granted’ and voluntary tasks; rather than expectations of a Po role, lesbians who do housework more regularly cannot be unthinkingly paralleled to the wife’s role in a conventional heterosexual relationship. Thus, it is worth looking at lesbians’ views concerning what constitutes equality at home, rather than treating a T/Po household as a mirror or a transformation of heterosexuality.

### *T/Po Roles in Lesbian Households*

I would like to start this argument with a unique case. Ninny’s experience in a T community gives us some ideas of living as a communal T group. When she was in her twenties, Ninny was taught a clear division of household labour along the lines of T/Po roles. The way of affirming a T’s masculinity was to refuse to do any domestic tasks; ‘girls’<sup>3</sup> did all the chores and ‘guys’ did not. In her account, she clearly described how restricted the gendered rules were in their T/Po household.

Um . . . I’ll take my friend as an example; I am the third in our brotherhood community. She is the fourth one. She was, like, she wouldn’t touch the chores at all. So she’d educate her girlfriend beforehand, she would say it out loud, like the requirements to be her girlfriend. Because she’s good-looking, well, she’s all right. (Laughter) So she’s got it, she threw out the

<sup>3</sup> I adopt Ninny’s way of naming feminine women ‘girls’. Although T did not identify themselves as men, they would not name themselves ‘girls’ or women, those were for T’s erotic targets.

requirements. [...] She said, 'Girls can do whatever they feel like to be my girlfriend. But my girlfriend has to do laundry for me, and do the chores as well.' She'd tell them beforehand. We were all living together back then; she even taught my girlfriend this. Like I said, I didn't know how to wash my clothes back then. Her girlfriend even helped with my laundry. My first girlfriend, the one who's older than me, no matter how drunk she was, she'd wash all the clothes before going to sleep. She was my first girlfriend; she did everything for me perfectly. She wouldn't use a washing machine, even though we did have one in our place. It was like my girlfriend was not home one time, and her girlfriend helped to do my laundry. [Iris: She did it?] Yes, that was what happened. So I didn't wash my own clothes until I was 23 years old, when I moved back home. Yup, I started it, coz we got a washing machine at home. (Ninny)

In their T/Po household, doing chores was the girl's responsibility and T would not share or 'help out'. At the beginning of our conversation on this topic, Ninny accounted for her not sharing chores by saying that she was not good at it. However, lying behind her statements 'We [T] don't hand-wash clothes' and 'We [T] didn't do any of these chores', was the community norm that all members followed, including T and their 'girls'. Ninny did not specify what she would want her girlfriend to be like, as their fourth 'brother' did, but the girl she was dating at the time seemed to follow the gendered norm. In this T/Po community, 'girls' were responsible for all the routine household tasks and would not expect any help from their T. Domestic chores were female jobs; there was no way T would do womanish things. T in this community were earners and providers.

This norm might only be used as a guide, however, and was not definitive. Ninny did not continue with the T/Po approach when she left the community and instead started learning how to take care of herself. Doing household chores became a matter of independence and of the daily demands of housework.

I felt like an idiot who had no idea how to take care of myself after breaking up with her [Ninny's previous relationship]. You felt like you knew nothing; you've relied on her too much. She took care of everything I needed, including my finances. I got into debt around that time [after they split up]. (Ninny)

Furthermore, this gendered norm did not follow Ninny into her next relationship. Ninny and her partner Evelyn's household had no obvious gender-role expectations in terms of financial management or domestic chores. They were living with Evelyn's mother and one flatmate in a three-bedroom flat. Apart from their flatmate, who did her own chores, their household chores were shared between the couple, although Evelyn's mother sometimes got involved. Because of their belief in filial piety and reciprocity, they seldom left chores to Evelyn's mother, only if she wanted them to. For example, Ninny cooked for them as much as she could and would do the laundry before Evelyn's mother noticed there was a full load. There was no obvious evidence of the T/Po community norm of task allocation in Ninny and Evelyn's household.

Camille provided another T/Po story in her lesbian community. She and her partner Petra had a Po friend when they were at university. Camille's comment on their Po friend, who strikingly did all the chores, revealed a conventional view of T/Po gendered roles in lesbian communities. The T/Po couple in this story had been living together and then their relationship became a long-distance one; the Po travelled back and forth constantly in order to do the housework for her T.

The Po even went to her T's university, picked up her laundry and took it back to her university and washed it for the T. She would take back the clean clothes to the T after she washed them. They were in different universities and cities! We were wondering, aren't you doing too much? [ . . . ] Yes, I was wondering why you had to do this every time . . . One time we saw her carrying a huge black bin bag at the train station. We were like, 'What's going on right now? Are you going to wander around carrying a huge bin bag?' But she really did. (Camille)

The inequalities were obviously quantitative when Po did most of the chores. Nonetheless, the Po friend was not an exception in their university lesbian group. Camille and her lesbian friends were given suggestions on how to act and react in a T/Po relationship, although, unlike in Ninny's brotherhood group, gender role-playing was not so restricted within their group.

You should do certain things because you are P,<sup>4</sup> for example, you have to take good care of your T. However, other things you should leave to

<sup>4</sup> P, the initial of Po, is as commonly used as Po among Taiwanese lesbians.

your T; for example, carrying heavy stuff and things like that. But I was not like that before, I graduated from a girls' school and we did things on our own. I don't like it because lying behind it is an assumption that they think you're weak, so you should not do things. I'm kind of sick of it. (Camille)

It seemed that T/Po gender expectations in their lesbian group did not affect Camille too much. She was very careful not to fall into the inferior category, so she did not enjoy it when she was recognised as Po. This attitude applied to her relationships, too. Intending not to follow a T/Po division of household labour, Camille and Petra claimed that they shared the chores according to their preferences.

Camille: Whoever wanted to do it, and then the person would do it.

Petra: Usually we tend to pick different chores.

Thus, Petra would cook and do laundry while Camille did all the cleaning. However, when they went on to explain why they divided the chores, terms such as Camille's use of 'my kitchen' drew my attention. Their division of household labour appeared to be 'whoever did *not* want to do it, and then the other person would do it', rather than chores being done on the basis of positive preference.

Camille: Coz I've been the one who takes care of the kitchen. [ . . . ] No, I don't [cook]. I just simply manage the space.

Petra: Manage. Yup, like the fridge.

Camille: Right, for example, how to put stuff, such as my kitchenware, or what to recycle, where to put them. I decide all of that, and she doesn't care. [ . . . ] Yes, she cooks and finishes it happily, and then she'd leave. My role is to come in to prepare and clean up the mess afterwards. [ . . . ] They are not the fun part. But I have to say that I really don't know much about cooking. For my appetite, I'd rather have her cook.

Petra: I have no idea what goes where in the fridge, so I ask her directly for what I need.

Their interaction seemed hierarchical in the kitchen; one party mastered the cooking and the other party managed preparation and cleaning. Camille agreed that what she had shared was 'not the fun part' of the

household chores. However, she did not see unequal or T/Po patterns in their household arrangements. In her individual interview she gave a clear explanation that the meaning of egalitarian depended on what constituted their ideal of equality.

As long as we feel like it's fair when it comes to the division of household chores, actually. Maybe in other people's eyes it seems not so fair in certain senses. If you see it from who does more chores and who does less, then yup, maybe I'm the one who does more. But I do feel like it's quite fair to me. Because she does those chores that I don't like. I think this is common. I think it's something that should be done, those ordinary things. (Camille)

Whether they were in a T/Po relationship or not, most of my interviewees reported that they had achieved an egalitarian and satisfactory division of household work. In the stereotypical T/Po household, T's ignorance of chores was commonly blamed. None of my data supported the idea that T did not share household chores in their current relationships, although the couple might show different degrees of domestic commitment.

It was also very rare to see a dominant role among these couples, even in a T/Po pattern of sharing tasks. In the majority of cases, it was not obvious who was taking charge; the exception was in Rachel and Luce's home. Their household had a cleaning list indicating how often and when each task should be done, which was very uncommon in my data. Luce seemed to have the lowest dirt threshold levels and it was her idea to set up the list. She then managed their household cleaning. This cleaning list was not a rota; the ideal of cleaning was that whoever was available would do it. Yet, Rachel seemed to have different ideas about what should be listed on it.

Rachel: Because, those were my bookshelves, my stuff, coz it was my notion of my home and my own clothing, so it was my responsibility. This was how she defined it.

Luce: Because I felt this was very personal. So I should've had her handle it.

Rachel: Yes, so did you notice the premise? Why didn't I have the right to not deal with my very own things? She just couldn't take it.

Luce: Because . . . it's overflowed around the house.

Rachel: No, it did not. Actually I didn't let it.

Luce: All right.

Rachel: You kept feeling it overflowed, but it didn't. Those books could be thrown away, could be returned to a friend. These were not our books, however, I just borrowed them. I could take them to the office so you wouldn't see them. If this was the thing you wanted. See? That's the point!

Luce was not only dominant in scheduling the chores, but also in doing them. She carried on the cleaning by schedule and wanted Rachel to share it, although she claimed that she did not care who did it. There was little negotiation in doing housework and these chores could not be left undone. Rachel understood Luce's insistence on managing a tidy home, but from time to time she complained about it.

Rachel: She just couldn't accept the idea that every day I want to have my own two hours free from schedules. Why? Because she wouldn't see any change after two hours. She couldn't understand the reason why I could take my time cooking, making a lunch-box and the chores. I used to be too busy to do the chores. Then she started demanding, she would nag, 'do you do household chores every day?' And she would count your time, like how many hours you have, what things you're going to do, and how much time you need. Then she would say to me, 'you can choose not to hang out with friends and stay at home to handle such things'. Yes, you have to follow her.

Luce: Don't exaggerate. You can discuss it with me. We can move things scheduled for Wednesday to Thursday, and then you have Wednesday free to do whatever you want.

Rachel: Yup, we're pretty much like this now.

Luce: But you have to make sure things get done on Thursday.

Rachel: Yes, like the things we're discussing right now...

Luce: Where will the things supposed to be done on Thursday go? Nowhere... They won't disappear.

I noticed that they were really doing their housework by schedule because they had rearranged their Wednesday chores to Thursday for my interview. Since they did not allocate each of the various tasks to one partner, like most people did, there was no obvious gender division of household chores. For example, neither of them was responsible for cooking or



cleaning, tasks that often fell to Po roles in T/Po patterns or masculine/feminine task allocation.<sup>5</sup>

Notably, T/Po patterns of sharing household chores did not necessarily lead to an unequal relationship, but surely a gendered one. Jules, with her T partner Nic (self-identified as T), reported that in their household T/Po role-playing defined most of their task allocation.

Iris: So do you think you treat each other in T–Po roles?

Jules: I'd say so. [Iris: How so?] For example, I clean up the house; I cook for her, take care of her. But actually I'm not good at taking care of others. I just tried to do everything in terms of taking care of her. She takes care of me in the health part. Coz she always thinks my health has not been good, so she took me to the traditional Chinese medical doctors and had me eat supplements. But she was okay in other parts.

Jules pointed out that cooking, cleaning and taking care of Nic were her part of the household chores; and these chores were done for her T partner. Yet, Nic shared some of the chores and would even do more when Jules was unable to. On the other hand, Jules would feel guilty if she could not take on these chores when her job required more commitments. 'I feel like I owe her. But this is a positive thing. She has grown up now and knows her responsibility' (Jules, couple interview). Elsewhere in their couple interview, Nic mentioned that she did the laundry most of the time; 'I put dirty clothes into the washing machine', and expected Jules to help with drying them. However, 'When she [Jules] doesn't feel good, I will be good and dry them myself. Or when she cooks a wonderful meal for me, I will do the laundry and then dry them myself. Do more of the household chores' (Nic, couple interview).

Interestingly, their narratives revealed more than T/Po patterns and brought a different element of relational dynamics into focus. They were not always like a T–Po couple when they used language like 'I will be good' and 'She has grown up now'. Jules, in her individual interview, explained whether or not she saw them as a T–Po couple:

<sup>5</sup> I did not find my interviewees speaking of gendered male/female tasks in the division of domestic maintenance. This might be because in Taiwan most people hire professionals to take care of home repairs that require physical strength and practical skills.

It was okay, coz most of the time it was ‘mammy and baby’.<sup>6</sup> In fact it’s more like in a reverse way, I’m the one who takes charge and then she follows. I give orders, and then she does them. Speaking of the T-Po pattern, then maybe it fits our financial part and division of chores. But not the other parts, I think in many ways, it’s the other way round. (Jules)

A mammy–baby pattern in decision-making and other parts of Jules and Nic’s relationship seemed to balance their uneven sharing of housework, and then it might make equality possible. Jules was wary of their T/Po patterns in the division of household chores, but the stigmatised T/Po role-playing did not bother her too much, as her account shows. T/Po patterns did not determine how this couple constituted their notion of equality. Accordingly I would suggest that T/Po relationships might not stand in opposition to egalitarianism.

In her study of lesbians’ attitudes towards housework and gender roles, Kamano (2009: 135) pointed out one extreme case; this participant identified herself in a conventional Japanese ‘male’ role and accordingly refused to share any household work. Regardless of her partner’s attempts to neutralise their uneven contribution, the gendered division of household labour retained its influence in this lesbian family. However, in the rest of Kamano’s cases, lesbian women might have rejected housewifery in the heterosexual context but redefined its ‘content’ to make it a positive expectation of adults and adult relationships, which could be seen as a more flexible approach to household labour. This is a result of Japanese lesbians’ survival strategies in relation to socio-economic gender inequality.

Tina’s story provides a reflection on lesbian housewifery. Having been in the relationship with Bette for two years, Tina had recently quit her full-time job to take care of their five-year-old child and manage their household. Their home finances relied mainly on Bette’s earnings. Unlike other co-parenting lesbian couples in Dunne’s (1997) and Oerton’s (1998) studies, who take more creative and balanced household/work strategies and with the partners both lowering their commitment to their careers,

<sup>6</sup> Her original words were ‘mi-mi and bo-bo’. ‘Bo-bo’ (寶寶) in Mandarin Chinese means kids, but ‘mi-mi’ may refer to either ‘mao-mi’ (貓咪, kitten) or ‘ma-mi’ (媽咪, mammy). She explained to me later that ‘mi-mi’ in their use was mammy. Accordingly, I used mammy instead of ‘mi-mi’ in translation to avoid confusion.

Bette committed more to her career and thus made herself the earner in the family. She then fully relied on Tina to take care of their household. Although Tina had left her job because of a health condition, she did not think her unemployment was a permanent situation and wished to return to work when the child went to primary school.

This family benefitted from Tina's full-time housekeeping more than they expected. In the following interchange, Bette indicates that she enjoyed having a home-cooked meal every day when she came home from work. However, Tina's account did not harmonise with Bette's view. She gestured that her situation was comparatively poor. Cooking for the family and taking care of their child made Tina feel like she was a housewife, and this was not something she wanted to speak up about in front of her partner.

- Bette: Well... the point is... My happiness is that I am welcomed by a big meal when I get home from work. I'm very happy. I want no more. I feel satisfied with a meal when I get back. What? What is she [Tina] trying to say?
- Tina: (Murmuring to Iris) (Laughter)
- Iris: Do you want to speak up? (Laughter)
- Tina: No. (Laughter)
- Iris: All right. So, your daily life now is focusing on... taking care of the child?
- Tina: I'm living my life as a housewife.

Bette did not think so. Tina had been having health problems for a while, thus Bette encouraged her to quit her job and committed herself to supporting the family alone. It was difficult to afford a family with a young child on a single income. But Bette seemed to be happy to be the only earner in the family.

You can't really get everything you want in your life. It's like you dream of having fortune and leisure at the same time, don't you? So I've minimised my desire and made things simpler. I only wish her happiness and health. That's all I want. (Bette, couple interview)

It is hard to say whether Tina's decision to be unemployed was a win-win situation for the family and her health. Her unemployment in fact solved a lot of difficulties in their family and both of them realised that they were dependent on the other in certain ways. Remarkably, their household

arrangements did not make Tina take on the role of 'housewife', although she joked about it being the case. Their family reached a balance because both of them made an important contribution. Leaving her paid job for the family caused Tina to struggle at first. She did not find domestic work any easier than her paid job; neither did she see being a 'housewife' as unimportant or insignificant. She had transformed her prior ideas about being a housewife and found satisfaction in being supportive to her family. Her account showed her struggles and reflections on being seen as a housewife.

Hmm... I tried to find reasons to let myself accept it. [...] I might have been stuck on finding a way to allow myself to take it. At first, I denied everything. I couldn't find anything to approve of. Then I started thinking about why I was denying it. I didn't know I was denying myself; I was annoyed, feeling no sense of security because I lacked my own income. What should I do? I knew our financial situation well. What can I do? You can't go to her; you can't go to her and count money in front of her. So I had to step back and calm myself down. She felt I wasn't doing okay, and I felt the same. It affected things too much, so I tried to move forward a bit. Why would I have these reactions? I gradually realised I couldn't make myself proud. Then I tried to decide what I needed at that time. Do I want some rest or do I need to be a career woman? I am a very competitive person. So all during my career, I might not have been the top one but at least I had something to be proud of. I had some kind of achievement at some level in my career. So for me, I deny myself easily because I can't find achievements in my life. I'm trying to understand what I really want now and I learnt I could enjoy family life a bit from time to time. I felt real happiness from it. But I don't want it to be the main focus of my life. I felt like I still need to find another focus other than just cleaning the house every day. Cleaning doesn't bring me the sense of achievement. But I like cooking dinner for them, waiting for them to come home. Yes, I do like making the house tidy for them and knowing they feel happy. *Meanwhile I know one thing for sure, it couldn't be my only focus in life.* (Tina, my emphasis)

In this long account, it is clear that Tina refused to be tagged as a housewife and would not take on housekeeping permanently. She then concluded with a reflection and situated her current condition as a compromise. Being a housewife might put a woman at a disadvantage; her lesbianism would put her in a worse situation. Being a lesbian housewife was disfavoured due to the fear of being stigmatised twice.

Tina was married before her lesbian relationships, and in the marriage she was told to be a good wife, a mother and a daughter-in-law. Her fear of being seen in a gendered relationship (again) represented a community expectation of what an egalitarian lesbian relationship should look like. By overlooking the diversity of lesbian families, the community narrative of progressive egalitarian lesbian families consolidates an ideal form of practising families. Therefore, lesbians who do not conform to the community norm tend to shy away from advocating rights and isolate themselves from 'the community'. Although different group norms can emerge in each type of community, 'other' lesbian relationships outside the mainstream ideal might be absent from academic accounts of lesbian families. Similar findings can be seen in Western studies; VanEvery (1995) argues that the alternative and/or feminist strategies of heterosexual wives are concealed; so too are the 'traditional' forms of lesbian-parented families (Gabb 2004).

The patriarchal structure is widely believed to be embedded in the practice of coupling masculine T and feminine Po, both in Western research and my data. Egalitarianism has become overwhelmingly popular in most Taiwanese lesbian groups because of their fear of mirroring the inequality/gendered relationships that are usually found in heterosexuality. Camille and Tina's narratives of their household management revealed this fear. However, in most of the households, whether they were single or dual earning, chores were shared in different ways. There might be different degrees of equality, different ways of achieving it and various ways of perceiving egalitarianism; my findings suggest that lesbian couples negotiated the sharing of housework in a way that was acceptable to them, while holding an egalitarian notion in mind. In other words, whether their task allocation appeared to be equal or not, this did not affect their ideal of egalitarianism.

### *Different Strategies to Achieve Egalitarianism*

The majority of my participants claimed that they had achieved egalitarianism in domestic labour allocation; nevertheless, there was sometimes a gap between ideals and practice. Regardless of the degree of financial contribution to their households, most couples in my study aimed to achieve egalitarianism in sharing housework by applying different strategies based on time availability, preference-based planning or speciality. These strategies sometimes overlapped in each household.

Dunne (1997: 195) found that inequality of income might affect housework contributions. In these cases, contributions were agreed according to the capability and commitment of the respective partners, and this was perceived as the fair way of doing it. My findings, however, suggest that economic inequality did not determine household task allocation; instead, many participants reported that either time availability or preferences ruled their division of household chores. This is sometimes true in the case of asymmetric-wage couples. The higher-earning partner, although often having less time at home, managed to share responsibility for household labour. On the other hand, couples with roughly equivalent earnings might not appear to be sharing domestic tasks equally for various reasons.

The following two accounts (Angie and Clara; Zoe and Crocodile) are both from households with asymmetric earnings; their sharing of household labour is based on time availability and greater flexibility at work because lower wages do not necessarily mean more free time at home. Angie and Clara had a clear idea about sharing household responsibility; they both wanted to do more housework when they were available.

Clara: I do more [housework], because I don't have a job right now, yup, but...

Angie: This year, her situation is more like this. Because she decided to do so, she turned down a job offer, a more stable one, compared to her last job in the past few years. She turned down that offer. But in the past two years when she had a regular job I think she covered more household chores actually. My job required longer working time.

Clara: Because her working time was longer and hmm... I wouldn't say I like doing the chores more. Maybe I should put it this way, I felt like doing the chores wouldn't make me feel 'not okay'. Yup, coz I felt quite happy when I tidied up the house and so on.

Angie: I do the chores sometimes as well.

Clara: Yes, she just did a bit less... because her workload was too much. Doesn't mean mine was not brain-consuming. But just by comparing the two, she is more...

Angie: Busy.

Clara's account indicated that she was aware that her current situation might bring more expectations of doing household chores, but she did not see herself taking more domestic responsibility when she left her previous

full-time job. Instead, she claimed that she liked a clean, tidy house and was willing to make it happen when she had more free time than Angie. She emphasised that her current part-time job was not easier, at the same time she was preparing for an important exam (this was also her motivation for quitting her job), and the only reason she seemed to do more household works was her time availability. Furthermore, she reminded us (both me and Angie) that Angie also took responsibility for the equal sharing of chores by adding: 'she just did a bit less' after Angie said she sometimes did chores. They did not specialise in terms of likes or dislikes and only in rare cases would they do housework together. The rule was always that the person who was available would do domestic tasks.

Couples who chose to share housework based on time availability were usually more flexible about doing tasks. There was no rota drawn up to ensure an equal share; tasks were done when they needed to be done, and whoever was available did them. Neither partner held primary responsibility for the overall running of the household. The idea of an equal, or similar, contribution to the household was clearly present in Clara's narrative; doing more tasks did not mean carrying more responsibility or expectation.

Interestingly, this approach does not often involve negotiations between partners; individuals were happy to do more than their partners whenever they were needed. Crocodile and Zoe serve as an example:

- Crocodile: Her leave time is not so fixed. Sometimes when it comes to traditional celebrations, then it can be really awkward. Not like having holidays on every Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday and Friday. She still has to work on the weekends. Anyway, I think it's okay when we deal with the household chores. When she gets less time at home, I do more. When she's not too busy, she does more. Basically it's like this.
- Iris: You two don't divide household labour specifically, right?
- Zoe: No.
- Crocodile: No. It's more like, sometimes she looks more tired, for example after we go out for something fun and then we come back home for dinner. If she's more tired, I'll do the dishes. Sometimes I may be the one who's more tired, and then she'll take care of the dishes. We're usually like one's in better condition, the other's not. So the one who's in better condition would stand up and say, 'Okay, I'll take this'. We're usually like this.

Zoe did most of the household tasks while she was previously unemployed, but she was not overburdened by responsibility and expectancy now. Their flexibility in task allocation allowed them to avoid problems when they rearranged their life around Zoe's new job. Both when she was employed and when she was not, Zoe was free from expectations regarding responsibility for household chores.

On the other hand, Jessica and Helen<sup>7</sup> presented a different type of 'time availability' approach. Similar to Zoe and Crocodile's flexibility, Jessica and Helen had no problem with temporary inequality in sharing household chores. Jessica was unemployed when they were interviewed and she showed great initiative in carrying out more tasks. Previously, Helen had done more when Jessica was very busy at work. They did household chores in both homes and did not divide tasks. When I asked them about their sharing strategies, they praised each other's greater contribution.

Helen: She did more!

Iris: In both places?

Jessica: In fact my unemployment was quite long, yup, at least this year. I was busier when I worked at a PR company last year. Then Helen might have done more chores, because I had to work overtime, even on the weekends, and usually came home late. So you [Helen] did more back then.

Helen: Really?

Jessica: Yes, but I'm more relaxed now, so I do most chores.

Iris: What about cooking? I know you two cook at home quite often, right? [Jessica: Hmm . . . ] Who usually does the cooking?

Jessica: If we both had jobs, then both of us would cook. Yup, but now I don't have a job. I enjoy cooking, so I started cooking at an earlier hour, and then it would be like what you saw today, when she came home, dinner would be ready. Then after dinner, she'd say she's going to wash the dishes; I might go and do some other stuff, too.

Helen and Jessica serve as a unique case among my data; they rushed to do household chores before their partner, whether one partner was

<sup>7</sup>Jessica and Helen ran two households; they usually lived in one during the weekdays and the other at weekends.



unemployed or not. They seemed to have a similar dirt threshold and tended not to leave chores undone and thus avoided the conflicts that such behaviour often caused between couples. In their narratives, it was uncommon for them to share chores. Without difficult conversations, it seems to be a natural thing to them that when one is doing one task, the other one will go and do other things to get everything done and have the rest of the evening free. They would not bother to divide each task. Helen pointed out the 'secret' of their harmonious task allocation:

We're very lucky because we both see fairness as a very important thing in the relationship. It's natural not to take advantage of the other party if you embrace fairness; the same for her. Doing laundry, for example, if one dried it, no doubt the other one would collect and fold it. We seem to co-operate pretty well in sharing household chores. Like cooking, one cooks and the other one will clean up. It's a sure thing. (Helen, couple interview)

Helen and Jessica believed in egalitarianism and they seemed to achieve it; although their task allocation did not appear to be equal when one partner was unemployed and spent more time at home. Sharing more chores when their partner was busy at work did not cause an issue of inequality. There is no separate responsibility about who does what. They would get chores done whenever they were free to do so. Certain chores, for example cooking, were even seen as leisure rather than a chore.

Seriously speaking, cooking doesn't count as a chore for her [Jessica] actually. She likes cooking. She would say, 'please, please let me cook', especially when she's busy. By doing it, she can...[Jessica: Release the pressure.] It's a process, her process of transition. (Helen, couple interview)

Different task allocation strategies sometimes overlapped in Helen's and Jessica's accounts; they do have elements of preference based on planning and speciality. Dividing up tasks according to particular likes or dislikes was also a favoured approach taken by lesbian couples. Unlike task allocation according to time availability, preference-based planning involved a greater degree of specialisation and separate responsibilities in the relationship, and might result in more negotiations between partners if both parties disliked the same task.

- Clarissa: Basically it was more like one was able to do something and did it. I mean, we didn't assign each other who should do such chores. It was like what I said, for example, *if I come home earlier, I'll cook*. And, *she doesn't like washing up, so I wash up*. Maybe take another one as an example; she likes the floor to be really clean, so she wipes the floor. Yes, I can't do like kneeling down on the floor and mopping it, so she mops the floor. But *she's not as good as me when it comes to sweeping the floor, so I sweep the floor*. [Sally: Yes.] We work by functions.
- Iris: So it depends on who's good at it . . .
- Clarissa: Yes, functional household chore division.
- Sally: Yes yes yes.
- Clarissa: Yes, I think it's more like this way. But I think I kind of felt it eventually became I did more of these chores. And she deals with other stuff like picking up the phone . . . (My emphasis)

In fact, Clarissa and Sally did not discuss dividing the household chores when they moved in together. Over the years they had developed their patterns of sharing tasks according to each partner's likes/dislikes and strengths. Although picking up the phone does not seem to be a heavy load of housework, as Clarissa pointed out, their division of household chores was functional and acceptable between them. Sally and Clarissa's narratives provide a clear example of using multiple strategies. For example, 'if I come home earlier, I'll cook' implies time availability, 'she doesn't like washing up, so I wash up' indicates preference-based planning and 'she's not as good as me when it comes to sweeping the floor' clearly points to a speciality or strength approach.

In addition, task allocation might change over time. Job change is often the main reason for couples to reorganise their sharing. However, by saying reorganise I do not mean it always involves overt negotiation or discussion. Sometimes dividing chores between couples is not necessary. Most couples in my study did not divide chores strictly, although they did use different strategies to get things done efficiently. As Edith and Abby said, they had never thought about dividing chores; flatmates divide household chores, couples do not, according to them. I did not find conflicts between partners who used these various strategies. They might appear to have different degrees of equality, but it is more important to look into their different ways of achieving it and different ways of how they perceived it. It is also worth mentioning that, in the majority of asymmetrically sharing households, the one who did more of the chores did not

therefore take prime responsibility. They might do more than their partner, but both of them understood that no one should be solely responsible for their household chores. My data also did not support the T/Po pattern as the main contribution to an imbalanced division of domestic labour; although, in unique cases, T/Po couples might have more experience of polarised heterosexual domestic arrangements.

## CONCLUSION

U-Haul syndrome is a stereotype of lesbian relationships in North America, referring to the joke that lesbians tend to move in together on the second date. It suggests an extreme inclination towards monogamy or committed relationships among lesbian couples. I learnt this joke while I was writing this chapter. My study did not aim to examine this joke. Nonetheless, it illustrates the fact that a committed lesbian relationship often involves moving in together at the beginning of the relationship. The majority of cohabiting couples in my study reported that they began by staying over at their partner's place and gradually moved in together. The U-Haul joke seems to be somewhat exaggerated. However, living in the same household was not the only way to practise cohabiting. For example, Jessica and Helen decided to retain two households and travelled back and forth between them. Another couple (Edith and Abby) were cohabiting during the weekends and spent their weekdays at their parents' houses.

Household chores were generated as soon as the couple moved in together. Home finances would have to be worked out between the couple, too. In addition to day-to-day expenditure, some of them looked for a 'bigger' dream and paid a monthly mortgage for their homes. Most of my participants worked full time, while some did part-time jobs or freelancing and might have experienced unemployment by choice for shorter or longer periods of time. Participants appeared to be highly supportive when their partners decided to take a career break. Couples who had no significant difference between salaries tended to split bills fairly; among those with asymmetrical incomes, the higher earner would contribute far more than their partner. Whether they ran a dual-income household or not, the pooling system and independent management were the two favoured ways of managing household money.

Compared with the financial contributions to their households, lesbians tended to be more relaxed about sharing household chores equally.

Asymmetrical income, in particular in single-earning couples, might affect chore contribution in terms of time availability. However, higher earners were not free from housework responsibilities because of their greater financial contribution to the household. Lesbian and gay couples in both Western and Asian studies often stressed the notion of the egalitarian household; the presence of the community ‘myth’ (Gabb 2004), in which same-sex couples are expected to be equal, also strengthens the ideal of egalitarian lesbian relationships. Butch/femme or T/Po relationships are constantly argued to lead to more polarised, heterosexual domestic arrangements. My findings suggest that the T/Po pattern does not have a crucial influence on imbalanced sharing arrangements, while other factors might be more significant.

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## Conclusion

Lesbians in Taiwan, as long as they are single, easily blend in among single women (also in Japan, cf. Kamano and Khor 2008). This first drew my attention when I started thinking about this research. The social changes in contemporary Taiwan have actually made it possible for lesbians, like other single women, to make their lives outside patriarchal families. However, to my disappointment, single women's greater sexual autonomy and freer lifestyle choices in Taiwan over the decades have not brought much joy to lesbians who wish to form relationships. The picture that emerged from my participants' stories presented varying negotiations within the local context. Situating participants within this specified cultural and social context, Taiwanese lesbians faced difficulties in identifying as lesbian from adolescence to adulthood (see Chapter 4), integrating their partners into their families of origin (see Chapter 5) and making commitments without legal recognition (see Chapter 6).

By reviewing the literature on social change in Taiwan and women's stories in my family, my self-disclosure enabled me to position myself in my research (see Chapter 1). The insider status of researchers in the field of same-sex intimacy is very rare in Asian academic work. My hesitation disappeared when I put looked into Western work. I could not hide my envy when I read Gabb (2004), who writes 'I have yet to read any work on lesbian parent families where the researcher's lesbian status is not highlighted at the outset and situated as crucial to the research process'. I am not suggesting that my lesbian status is unique or more important than

that of any others in this field. On the contrary, I hope my self-disclosure will encourage others' future work, as those admirable pioneers did for me. My self-disclosure not only motivated my initial curiosity, but my desire to approach the research. Later, when I conducted my interviews, as a researcher I benefitted from my insider knowledge and found that it was 'crucial to the research process' (see [Chapter 3](#)). Another obstacle occurred when I tried to collect work on Taiwanese lesbian families. There was not much academic research on Taiwanese lesbians, although non-academic writings provided significant and valuable accounts. Antonia Chao was probably the first and only researcher in this field (alongside a few MA dissertations); however, her work was focused on an older generation of working-class lesbians. The lack of Asian literature brought my research into an open field and became one of my advantages. More publications in other Asian countries appeared while I was doing my research (cf. Kong [2012](#); Tang ([2011](#)); Yau (ed.) [2010](#)).

Conducting interviews with lesbian couples both together and separately was an advantage and distinguishes this research from other relevant work in Asia. This approach enabled me to explore the flow of relational power between the couples and to make connections between the stories couples tell and the relational selves revealed in each individual interview. This method was inspired by Heaphy and Einarsdottir ([2013](#)), and particularly suited my research on lesbian families, which I came to with the aim of contextualising Taiwanese lesbians' notions of family. With the help of this method, my participants have very successfully facilitated this aim (see [Chapter 3](#)).

Although identifying as non-heterosexual can occur at any stage of the lifespan, my data confirmed that there was often a gap in time between recognising same-sex attraction and identifying as lesbian. Varying lesbian identity processes and patterns occur over the life course in different situational contexts and these factors vary from one country to another. During their schooldays, the women that I talked to did not have access to LGBT information in the formal curriculum and had thus developed their lesbian identity in different social settings. The lack of positive support motivated them to establish lesbian peer groups at school, at university and on the Internet. Each way of building a community created different subcultures and group norms. For example, groups headed by 'da-ge' often appear hierarchical and members developed their notion of T roles by observing the big brothers' masculinity, leadership and interactions with feminine girlfriends. In other peer groups, however, a clear division

of sexual roles and collective lesbian identification may not be appreciated, and stereotypical T and Po lesbian figures are abandoned. Remarkably, in both cases, collective identification is adaptable and may throw up contradictions in the wider community and later relationships (see [Chapter 4](#)).

Individual sexual stories differed depending on whether participants had had previous heterosexual experiences or not. For those who had, the realisation of same-sex attraction often meant that they had to cope with their discontinuous pasts and to embrace gender fluidity in a positive way. The strategies that they developed were: making a particular woman an exception, rather than generalising same-sex attraction, often involving an initial denial of lesbianism; claiming that they had chosen an unconventional lifestyle when entering their first same-sex relationship to ease the gap between their lesbianism and the heteronormative expectations that they might have adopted before; looking for self-justifications following a period of emotional conflict and self-questioning (see [Chapter 4](#)).

Coming out creates another issue for lesbians. Disclosure to a peer group might have been easier, although there were exceptions. Lesbian daughters often chose not to come out to their families of origin immediately after their realisation; instead, they considered whether, when and how to disclose lesbian sexuality to parents under the pressure of filial piety. Successful coming out mostly occurred in lesbians' adulthood when parental power had lessened; however, lesbians did not give up their family ties if their parents did not accept their unconventional lifestyle choices. A daughter's responsibility remained a main concern for adult lesbians. Taking care of each other's elderly parents was included in a lesbian couple's future plans. Many of my participants did not consider coming out to their families of origin until after they had started a relationship. Daughters would make an effort to have their female partners known and accepted by their families, whether or not their relationships had yet been disclosed (see [Chapter 5](#)).

Contemporary lesbians are likely to live their lives outside patriarchal families; however, it is still difficult to integrate partners into their families of origin. Once their parents acknowledged their relationships, both lesbian daughters and their parents faced difficulties with kinship terminology. This is an issue specific to Taiwan. Each family member has a corresponding position/title based on their generation, lineage, relative age and gender. But there is no concept of relationship titles through lesbian relationships in the Chinese kinship system. Couples who had a close relationship with their families of origin reported that mothers in particular often saw their partners as



‘another daughter’ or their daughter’s ‘good friend’, rather than their daughter’s intimate partner. The way in which parents name their daughter’s lesbian partner often demonstrates their ignorance of lesbian sexuality. A lack of kinship naming, however, did not seem to prevent other parents from establishing a close relationship with their daughter’s partner. Parents in these cases often saw their daughter’s female partner as a son-in-law or daughter-in-law, whether the couple agreed with this notion or not, thus locating lesbian partners within heterosexual affinal relations. Despite these difficulties, lesbian couples today have great autonomy to form their own families outside the patriarchy in a way that was unthinkable only a few decades ago. Participants’ accounts of their parents reflected a shift in attitudes to daughters’ lesbian relationships. It is possible that the Chinese kinship system will develop corresponding titles for same-sex relationships (see [Chapter 5](#)).

In many Western societies same-sex marriage now exists, whereas this is not the case in Taiwan. Compared with lesbians in countries where a legal institution is available, my participants have a different view of commitment and ways to commit to each other. Their commitments were mostly very private and did not involve a public ceremony. Only a few couples made a public announcement among friends; even so, a romantic wedding-like ceremony did not seem to be as popular as in Western societies. None of them established their relationships or commitments on the basis of family acknowledgement, acceptance or support, while it was customary for their heterosexual counterparts to gain family acceptance before getting married. A public ceremony was not their ultimate goal in their relationship commitment, and external reinforcement did not form their notion of commitment or make it solid. The absence of any legitimising institution differentiated them from heterosexuals in terms of external support for a couple’s rights and welfare; this pragmatic concern was the only reason to consider institutionalising their commitment in the future. Legal recognition, thus, was not associated with their internal promise of a long-lasting relationship and, also, would not help family acknowledgement. Same-sex marriage may become possible in Asia in the future; however, I suggest that further research on same-sex commitment takes local context into account, situating lesbian and gay couples within their specific cultural and social context (see [Chapter 6](#)).

A significant difference between my own and Western studies on ‘families of choice’ was evident in the notion of family. None of my participants included anyone but their partner and their and their partner’s family of origin. There is no concept of friends as family in the culture.

Although most of my participants were living together, cohabiting was not the only way to practise relationships. In advocating an equal relationship, the pooling system (a joint account, shared management and both having access to money) was a favoured method of home financial management by most of the dual-income households. Methods of financial management changed in their relationships over time because of a partner's situation or house purchasing plans. Asymmetrical financial contributions often occurred in income-differentiated households and those with unemployed partners. However, lesbians tended to be very supportive when their partners were unemployed and did not problematise inequality in their relationship. Having a dual income was common in my data, while one exception planned around a single income and managed their household in a main-earner/main-houseworker pattern (see [Chapter 7](#)).

Compared with the equal sharing of financial contributions to their household, lesbians in my research tended to be more relaxed about the division of household chores. Much research on lesbian couples has indicated that unequal relationships result in polarised gender role-playing. To investigate this, I analysed the Taiwanese T/Po pattern in making a lesbian family and found little evidence of it. Given the fact that T/Po roles do exist in Taiwanese lesbian relationships, many participants had experienced the T/Po pattern in sharing household responsibility, either currently or previously. However, the T/Po pattern was not a crucial influence on imbalance in the sharing arrangements, while other elements might affect this more. It is noteworthy that the T/Po pattern may be changeable for individuals and during a relationship. The majority of my participants claimed that they had achieved egalitarianism in domestic labour allocation by applying different strategies in terms of typology (time availability, preference-based planning and speciality); nevertheless, there was sometimes a gap between ideal and practice, and different degrees of equality (see [Chapter 7](#)).

I initially did not intend to recruit middle-class women, but my sample came from similar social backgrounds, which reflects of my own social class. Although my sample was limited to middle-class lesbian couples, the data covered a field where there is little past research and therefore provides a new perspective. While Chao's (2001, 2002, 2005) pioneering studies concentrated on T-bar goers and working-class lesbian women of an earlier generation, this research explores a younger population with greater opportunity for living their life of choice. A middle-class background might make lesbians more privileged when making their own

families, however, this was not the only reason that made contemporary lesbian families possible. In addition to the social class difference between Chao's sample and mine, I should also point to social changes, the extension of compulsory education and the effort that women's and LGBT movements had made over the decades; altogether these have given contemporary lesbians more chances than our older counterparts.

Lesbian women, who are often seen as single women, are challenged to purchase properties without external support. Rising house prices in major Asian cities and gender inequality in incomes are only two of the obstacles that lesbian women have to overcome in buying homes. Hardly any Taiwanese parents would financially support a daughter in moving away from home and her 'unconventional' lifestyle choices, but many would help a son to make his own household, in particular when this is formed by marriage. It is evident that those of my participants who own houses or were planning to buy one in the near future did not rely on their parents' financial help, although there was one exception.

While, in reality, purchasing a home together is not the ultimate goal for every lesbian couple, it is still a common decision for couples seeking a stable relationship. Purchasing a house can be seen as an investment in their future. By which I do not mean economic conditions determine the way in which people make families. This decision, however, requires an individual financial commitment and is less likely to happen where women lack financial independence; unlike women in Chao's sample, my sample were privileged enough to make this kind of commitment. This might explain why my research topic had drawn their attention and why they participated.

My recruiting of the couple with one child is another example illustrating the specificity of Taiwan where lesbians are socially marginalised by a lack of reproductive rights. I was very surprised to find this couple because it is so unusual to come across lesbian couples with children in Taiwan. Without reproductive and adoption rights for same-sex parents, children with lesbian parents mostly come from previous heterosexual relationships or through self-help plans.

Whether they had children or not, however, Taiwanese lesbian couples built their family on the basis of erotic relationships, while some included their pets and showed no intention of having children. To claim that they were a family was saying something more significant than just being in a relationship. In order to present the significance of their notion of family, I used the term family/families to illustrate Taiwanese lesbian's relational and couple stories instead of other terms that were more commonly

chosen in this research area. This choice of terminology served to highlight the fact that Taiwanese lesbians have a stronger family tie and the influence of Confucian family traditions. Notably, their notion of family distinguished them from same-sex couples in other countries.

My participants, firstly, defined family members through erotic relationships and extended this to their families of origin and that of their partners. They might include pets in their family and would maintain varying degrees of intimacy with their families of origin. Most of them were closely involved in lesbian communities and groups, but would not see friends as family. 'Families we choose' was not a characteristic of Taiwanese lesbian families. Secondly, strong family ties connected lesbians to the wider family system. Lesbian daughters, whether they came out to the family or not, felt responsible to their elderly parents because of the ideals of filial piety and the obligations of being good daughters. Taking care of each other's elder parents, which might include a monthly contribution (making a regular payment to their parents) in some cases, would be seriously considered in the couple's future plans. Participants did not exclude their partners from caring for older generations even when their relationships had not yet been acknowledged. However, taking care of their parents did not mean that they had no boundary between the new family and their family of origin. Most of the couples expected to set up their own households once they were committed and would protect their privacy to the maximum, while they sought varying ways to have their partners accepted by their family of origin.

Parents, on the other hand, often adopted a stance of silent knowing towards their daughters' sexuality and lifelong relationships with females. Those parents who were informed of their daughters' lesbianism or had had some suspicions, chose not to go further and ask anything about sex or sexuality. They might fail to acknowledge their daughters' unconventional lifestyle choices or lack an understanding of lesbian sexuality; nonetheless they would not often raise objections since they had lessened their parental surveillance over their adult children. Another purpose of silent knowing was to maintain good relationships with their adult daughters. Many participants reported that they brought their female partners to their parents' house and would arrange family gatherings in order to have their partners more involved in their family of origin. Having meals together, constant visits and helping out with family matters were some of the strategies lesbians would use to introduce partners to families of origin. Remarkably, most couples did not intend to disclose their erotic

relationships to their parents in order to avoid conflict, since lesbianism did not meet their parents' expectations, but they wished their families of origin could at least appreciate the fact that they were 'together'. Other couples were more ambitious; they wanted their families of origin to acknowledge their relationships and treat their partners accordingly.

Once their parents have accepted their relationship, naming and positioning female partners of the daughters in the kinship or generational hierarchy brought up another issue. Given the critical importance of kinship in Chinese society, each family member must have a corresponding position and title based on his or her generation, lineage, relative age and gender. Unlike kinship terminology in English, maternal and paternal lineages are distinguished in the Chinese family system, as are the relative ages of siblings. Some of these terms have no equivalent in foreign languages, for example, younger brother's wife, elder brother's wife and husband's sister are titled 'sister-in-law' in English, but all are distinguished in Chinese kinship terminology. To put female partners of female family members into Chinese kinship (daughter-in-law for parents and sister-in-law for siblings) has challenged every definition in this system. While 'partner', which is considered gender irrelevant, has become a preferable term in referring to a person's significant other elsewhere, it is not yet commonly used among Taiwanese parents. Indeed the literal translation exists but it is not used by anybody in Taiwan.

Therefore, a lack of kinship naming for lesbian relationships accentuated the difficulties of integrating a daughter's female partner into the heterosexual affinal system in Taiwan. However, this was not only an issue for parents, but might also become a problem between the couple. Participants were not all happy to be a daughter-in-law in each other's families of origin because this kinship term connotes subordination. In addition, masculine appearances and T identity were often associated with sons-in-law, coupled with feminine daughters-in-law. Heterosexual affinity had led to a stressing of gender role-playing between lesbian couples. They had to seek a better way of introducing their partner. 'Another daughter' was often used in these cases, in particular when it came to mother-daughter relationships. Although being titled and treated as 'another daughter' erased the erotic nature of their relationship, most lesbian daughters felt this made them more intimate with and more accepted by their family of origin. On the other hand, the fact that they would have someone with whom to plan their old age satisfied parental expectations. This seemed to be the most important element in heterosexual marriage that parents expected today.

My participants' notions of commitment and their distinctive ways of making those commitments have also differentiated this research from Western studies (e.g. Weeks et al. 2001). I identified three forms of commitment in participants' accounts, where each experience could merge or overlap with another. First there were the privately committed. In some cases, private commitment was followed by the second step when they were ready to bring their relationship into the public domain. This involved disclosure to third parties, for example, friends or their families of origin. The third form of commitment, institutionalised commitment, was related to external reinforcements of the mutual bond in the relationship, for example shared financial investment or insurance benefits. Forms of institutionalised commitment did not involve legal recognition due to the lack of same-sex marriage/partnership legislation in Taiwan. Those who had thought of or actually engaged in external reinforcements did not aim to keep the relationship strong and together by so doing; instead, they sought alternative ways to parallel what heterosexuals gain from the law.

However, participants were only interested in legal recognition for the sake of equality and legal rights. The fact that any form of legal recognition meant a public statement was the main reason why most of my interviewees avoided it. They were expecting the introduction of civil partnerships or same-sex marriage for equality in the future, but few of them would go for one because it was challenging to get family acknowledgement. It might complicate family relationships by making their lesbianism public. Neither did they connect public recognition to romantic love or acknowledging mutual responsibility, where their commitments did not necessarily build on external reinforcement or recognition. This might explain why the same-sex wedding industry in Taiwanese gay and lesbian community has not been as popular as in Western societies, with or without a legal basis. Instead of having public commitment ceremonies or seeing same-sex marriage as the ultimate form of commitment, pragmatic issues like financial interests or inheritance rights, which were all lacking, concerned them more. My data has presented the varying strategies through which they developed their very own notions of commitment.

Planning for their old age was the most frequently mentioned factor that was intertwined with and inseparable from the concept of committing. Having a retirement plan together, for example, meant that their relationship was long-term and based on a consensus that they would be able to plan ahead. One of the significances of lesbian commitment in my study was the declaration of longevity of the relationship; doing substantial things

together, for example, making plans for their old age and buying a house, were the most frequently mentioned signifiers of commitment. The accounts that referred to these sorts of decision often emphasised that they depended on prioritising commitments. Another significance of Taiwanese lesbian commitments was the irrelevance of family acknowledgement and support. Unlike most heterosexual couples in Taiwan, who wished to gain family acceptance before getting married, lesbians in my study did not establish their relationships or commitments on the basis of family acknowledgement, acceptance or support. This attitude showed in their making a commitment to each other without any family involvement.

The ambivalence of keeping working relationships with their families of origin and wanting to keep their commitment private illustrates how lesbians negotiate relationships within the constraints of social structure. There are contradictions between family ties, filial piety and lesbianism. Whether or not their relationships were disclosed, lesbian families really do not fit the Confucian ideals of family. This book presents the difficulties that Taiwanese lesbians confront and the efforts they have been making. Their efforts and my experience of writing them had me believing that it is still possible to make lesbian families in Taiwan and this is happening now.

I appreciate that theories and prior studies from Western society, where same-sex couples enjoy more freedom in creating their families, have provided me with a research framework and comparative knowledge. During my analysis, however, I have realised how important the local context is when researching same-sex relationships. Specific issues in Taiwan that were raised in my research challenge the taken-for-granted understandings of same-sex intimacy. The local context is extremely important in this research area if we seek to appreciate lesbians' everyday understandings of their experience in all its variety and to develop situated knowledge on the basis of multiple standpoints. Lesbian relationship practices are understandable only if we recognise their situational contexts.

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## APPENDIX COMPARISON IN EDUCATION BETWEEN INTERVIEWEES AND PARENTS

<i>Surname</i>	Interviewees		Parents	
	<i>Age</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Education</i>
Clarissa	36	MA	60ish	BA
Sally	36	MA	60ish	Junior college
			60ish	BA
			60ish	BA
Jessica	35	MA	66	BA
Helen	34	MA	65	Junior college
			Divorced	(incomplete)
			64	N/A
				Junior college
				(2-year)
Evelyn	30	Vocational high	70ish	High school
Ninny	30	school	60ish	Junior high school
		Junior college	50ish	BA
			50ish	Junior college
Wilhelmina	32	BA	80	Elementary school
Vivian	35	BA	64	Elementary school
			64	Vocational high school
			Deceased	Elementary school
Camille	31	MA	61	College
Petra	32	MA	55	College
			71	High school
			67	Junior high school

*(continued)*

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Maggie	32	PhD-to-be	60	BA
Angel	30	PhD	59	BA
			61	BA
			61	College
Angie	37	BA	70	Junior college
Clara	37	BA	65	Junior college
			Deceased	Junior high school
			64	Junior high school
Edith	32	MA	64	BA
Abby	32	BA	61	High school
			61	BA
			63	Junior college
Lisbeth	35	BA	Deceased	Junior high school
Mimmi	40	High school	58	Elementary school
			63	High school
			61	High school
Rachel	32	MA	58	Junior college
Luce	32	BA	57	(5-year)
			61	Junior college
			58	(5-year)
				MA
				High school
Nic	29	MA	60ish	BA
Jules	34	Junior college	60ish	BA
			70ish	High school
			60ish	BA
Crocodile	35	BA	75	Junior high school
Zoe	29	Vocational high school	63	Elementary school
			N/A	Vocational high school
			56	Elementary school
Tina	32	BA	Deceased	High school
Bette	34	High school	56	High school
			N/A	Junior high school
			59	Junior high school
Theresa	31	BA	64	Vocational high school
Jess	32	BA	56	Vocational high school
			57	High school
			52	Junior high school
Kitty	31	BA	Divorced	College
Nan	28	BA	57	Junior college
			52	BA
			52	High school

## GLOSSARY

2000 Tong-zhi civil rights Citizens Movement— Taipei LGBT Fun Festival A-Ma	2000同志公民運動 —台北同玩節  阿嬤	the first LGBT movement to be sponsored by the Taipei City government grandmother in Taiwanese Minnanyu White Terror moving home-province people, Taiwanese people kids in between also known as Antonio Chao
bai se kong bu ban jia ben-sheng-ren	白色恐怖 搬家 本省人	
bo-bo bu-fen Chao Yen-Ning Chen Hsueh Cheng Mei-Li cheng zhi pan luan tiao li Chi Ta-Wei Chiu Miao-chin <i>Contestations over Female Sexuality: Dissenting Essays on 'The Gallant Women'</i> COSWAS	寶寶 不分 趙彥寧 陳雪 鄭美里 懲治叛亂條例 紀大偉 邱妙津 呼喚台灣新女性: 豪爽女人誰不爽?  日日春關懷互助協會	Betrayers Punishment Act
da-ge Dan-juan	大哥 蛋捲	Collective of Sex Workers and Supporters big brother egg rolls, a university-based BBS web space

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<i>Dao Yu Bian Yuan</i>	島嶼邊緣	The Isle Margin
Du Siou-Lan	杜修蘭	
<i>Eu Yu Shou Chi</i>	鱷魚手記	Notes of The Crocodile
gong-po	公婆	parents-in-law, literally meaning grandfather and grandmother
GSRAT	台灣性別人權協會	Gender/Sexuality Rights Association Taiwan
guai-tai	怪胎	freak
guo-yu	國語	the national language
han Po	悍婆	brave/tough Po
holding little hands	牽牽小手	
Huai-nu-cr	壞女兒	ex BBS
Hung Ling	洪凌	
jia	家	home/family/household
Jian Jia-Shin	簡家欣	
jiu	久	long duration of time
Josephine Ho	何春蕤	
ku-cr	酷兒	a phonetic transliteration of queer
la	拉	an abbreviation of la-zi
lao	老	old
Lai Zheng-Xhe	賴正哲	
lao-gong	老公	husband
lao-po	老婆	wife
lao-T	老T	old tomboys
late-ripened	晚熟	
la-zi	拉子	the most popular nickname of lesbians
Lee Yuan-Chen	李元貞	
lei-su-bien	蕾絲邊	literally meaning a fringe of lace
Lin Fang-Mei	林芳玫	
Lin Yi-Hua	林奕華	also known as Edward Lam
Lu Hsiu-Lien	呂秀蓮	also known as Annette Lu
ma-mi	媽咪	mammy
mao-mi	貓咪	kitten
mei-mei	妹妹	little girl
<i>Meng Ma Te Yi Shu</i>	蒙馬特遺書	Montmartre Testament
Minnanyu	閩南語	Min Nan/Hokkien, a Taiwanese dialect
Ni Jia-Zhen	倪家珍	
<i>Nieh Tse</i>	孽子	Crystal Boy
<i>Ni Nyu</i>	逆女	Rebel Daughter

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NTU female students club	台大女研社	
NTU lesbian <i>culture</i> studies club	台大女同性戀文化研究社	also known as Lambda
NTU gay <i>problem</i> studies club	台大男同性戀問題研究社	
NTU gay studies club	台大男同性戀研究社	
<i>Nu Er Quan</i>	女兒圈	The Circle of Daughters
nyu-tong-zhi	女同志	female tong-zhi
nyu-tong-xing-lian	女同性戀	lesbian
outsiders	外人	those outside of the family
Pai Hsien-Yung	白先勇	
partner	伴; 伴侶	
Penghu	澎湖	The Penghu Islands are an archipelago off the western coast of Taiwan in the Taiwan Strait.
Pioneer Publishing	拓荒者出版社	
Po-Po	婆婆	grandmother in Cantonese
qi-pao	旗袍	the cheongsam, traditional Chinese dress
red envelope	紅包	cash wrapped up in red paper, to symbolise good luck in the marriage
sim pua	媳婦仔	a daughter-in-law who is reared by her future mother-in-law
spouse	配偶	
State-regulated Sex Workers Self-help Group	公娼自救會	
tàn á mī	擔仔麵	in Minnanyu, the most common kind of noodle soup in Taiwan with thin slices of pork on top
the eldest brother is like a father to his siblings	長兄如父	
the eldest sister is like a mother	長姐如母	
<i>The Gallant Women: Feminism and Sex Emancipation</i>	豪爽女人: 女性主義與性解放	
The revolution has not yet succeeded; the comrades must keep on struggling	革命尚未成功, 同志仍須努力	
the other half	另一半	literally means such
tong-xing-lian	同性戀	literally meaning same-sex love/desire/attraction

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tong-zhi	同志	lesbian and gay
Tong zhi kong chian hsing	同志空間行動陣線	Tong-zhi Space Action Front
tong chan hsien		
you gai zhang di	有蓋章的	stamped
wai-sheng-ren	外省人	external-province people, Chinese immigrants around 1949
Way way de xiao wo	維維的小窩	Way-way's home
wo-de-jia	我的家	my home
Women's Awakening Magazine Publishing House	婦女新知出版社	
women jihj jian	我們之間	'Between Us'
xiao-di	小弟	younger brothers
xiao-si	小廝	archaic term for a young manservant
xi zhuang tou	西裝頭	short back and sides; literally meaning 'suit hairstyle' in Mandarin Chinese

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