

# COMING OUT AS EVERYDAY LIFE ACTIVISM: "DISPLAYING" GAY FATHER FAMILIES IN TAIWAN

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In 2019, Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage. LGBTQ+ reproductive rights are still, however, yet to come. The only feasible way for gay men to have biologically related children is to travel abroad for transnational third-party reproduction. Gay fathers have encountered multiple obstacles when embarking on the journey towards fatherhood, including unfriendly attitudes towards LGBTQ+ communities and misunderstandings concerning queer families. This chapter explores how gay fathers in Taiwan have navigated their coming-out strategies and made sense of their actions as "implicit activism." The data came from in-depth interviews with 53 gay fathers and fathers-to-be, and participant observation. This study has two contributions. Firstly, it elucidates why and how gay fathers have been more willing to reveal their queer identity to families, compared to gay men without children, and delineates their coming-out experiences and strategies. Secondly, this study argues that the practices of "displaying gay-father families" in everyday life can be understood as activism that facilitates the visibility of gay-father families. This chapter examines gay fathers' lived experiences from a non-Western perspective and re-conceptualizes the meaning of "coming out" in the Taiwan context through the approaches of "family display" and "everyday life activism."

**Keywords:** coming out, gay fathers, everyday life activism, displaying families, Taiwan

## 1. Introduction

While Taiwanese society has been celebrating the achievement of becoming the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, the reproductive rights

of LGBTQ+ people<sup>1</sup> are still on hold. Assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) and donor gametes, including sperm and eggs, are only accessible to medically infertile, married heterosexual couples. In 2017, a ruling by Judicial Yuan declared that the Civil Code, which excluded same-sex marriage, was unconstitutional. Judicial Yuan, therefore, required the Legislative Yuan to amend the law within two years. Sequentially, a national referendum on the public's opinions of the legal amendment for granting legal recognition to same-sex couple unions was conducted in 2018. Conservatives in Taiwan are still holding back on marriage equality for all, and the result showed that the mainstream hoped to establish new laws instead of amending the Civil Code. As a result, in 2019, the Act for Implementation of Judicial Yuan Interpretation No. 748 (748 Act) was enacted to legalize same-sex marriage. The decision to employ separate laws to grant marital rights to opposite-sex and same-sex marriage indicated the intense dynamics of the anti-LGBTQ+ conservatives and the LGBTQ+ movements. The 748 Act, unfortunately, cannot grant full rights to same-sex unions, such as reproductive rights. This legal transition indicated progressive democracy and blossoming LGBTQ+ rights in Taiwan, but also misunderstandings and discrimination against LGBTQ+, which caused significant uncertainty for the LGBTQ+ community when it comes to securing their full rights as a citizen in the country. The logistic of heteronormativity can also be identified in the legal regulations of reproduction and the social norms of family-making. The adoption law showed, for example, the ideology that the "ideal family" should consist of a father and a mother. Not until the amendment to Article 20, 748 Act on May 16, 2023, married same-sex couples cannot access joint adoption of non-biological related children (Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Terminologies: "Taiwan LGBT Family Right Advocacy" (TLFRA) addresses LGBTQ+ families as "tongzhi family" (同志家庭 *tongzhi jiating*). Tongzhi family initially referred to gay-father and lesbian-mother families. Tongzhi family also refers at present to families that consist of all LGBTQ+ individuals who have children. The English term "queer" was translated into *ku'er* (酷兒) and *tongzhi* (同志) in different historical contexts (Chi 2017). *Queer/ku'er* has been picked up by activists and applied as an umbrella term referring to all LGBTQ+ people and used interchangeably with the term *tongzhi*. I use *queer*, in both contexts of translating queer into *tongzhi* and *ku'er*, to refer to LGBTQ+ people as a collective term that contests heteronormativity. I therefore use *LGBTQ+ family* and *queer family* interchangeably in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Table 1 was also presented in a similar version in an article entitled "Queering Reproductive Justice: Framing Reproduction of Gay Men from a Transnational Perspective—Taiwan as a Case" (Chen 2023).

**Table 1: Reproductive rights according to 748 Act**

|                                       | Adoption           |                                                        |                              | ARTs                          |         | Surro-<br>gacy |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|----------------|
|                                       | Single<br>Adoption | Stepparent<br>Adoption                                 | Joint<br>Adoption            | Donated<br>Gametes            | IUI/IVF |                |
| Married Dif-<br>ferent-Sex<br>Couples | No                 | Yes                                                    | Yes                          | Only one<br>of the<br>parents | Yes     | No             |
| Married Same-<br>Sex Couples          | Yes                | Gestational/ge-<br>netically related<br>to the partner | No, until<br>May 16,<br>2023 | No                            | No      | No             |
| Single Indi-<br>viduals               | Yes                | N/A                                                    | N/A                          | No                            | No      | No             |

(Source: Act for Implementation of Judicial Yuan Interpretation No. 748, table by the author)

The unjust legal framework discouraged many prospective LGBTQ+ parents from envisioning a future with children. Before the legal change in 2023, if married same-sex couples considered adopting non-genetically related children, they had to “divorce” in order to access adoption as a single person. Even after the single-parent adoption was completed and the couple remarried, the other parent could not obtain the legal parental right to their children. Thus, the only option for LGBTQ+ couples to have children with legally secured parental rights was to seek third-party reproduction overseas. If the children are biologically related to one of the parents, the law allows the non-biological parent to “adopt” their partners’ biologically related children, which was termed “stepparent adoption” (繼親收養 *ji qin shou yang*).<sup>3</sup> For gay men with reproductive intentions, given that any form of surrogacy remains illegal in Taiwan,<sup>4</sup> the only accessible way for them to become parents to biogenetically related children is through transnational third-party reproduction, including ARTs, donor eggs, and surrogacy.

In everyday lives, gay fathers were often confronted with curiosity and sometimes misunderstanding from their extended families, neighbors, people at workplaces, and those working in governmental sectors. They encountered awkward moments of being questioned about their identities as gay fathers. They

<sup>3</sup> The term “stepparent adoption” (繼親收養 *ji qin shou yang*) was translated according to Sara Friedman and Chen Chao-ju’s (2023) work on the legal amendment of same-sex marriage in Taiwan.

<sup>4</sup> Either straight/traditional surrogacy, which means that the female who carries the baby is also the one who offers the ova, or gestational/host surrogacy, which means that there are two women involved in the reproductive process—one provides the ovum, and another carries the baby—is illegal in Taiwan. Commercial or altruistic surrogacy are illegal in Taiwan.

experienced situations where people would not "recognize them as a family" or as legitimate parents. Drawing on the concepts of "doing family" (Morgan 1996, 2011a, 2011b) and "displaying family" (Finch 2007), I depict gay fathers' strategic coming out and how they enacted "everyday life activism" (Fish, King, and Almack 2018) in order to envisage a friendly future. This chapter demonstrates how gay fathers in Taiwan employed their coming out strategies as a means to challenge heteronormativity and how they understood their fatherhood, dealt with the confrontations with their biological families, decided to come out, and "displayed" their families as everyday life activism.

## 2. Contextualizing gay fathers in Taiwan

### 2.1 The (in)visibility of LGBTQ+ parents

Despite their invisibility in public, queer people have been raising children in Taiwan for decades, far before the arrival of the blooming transnational reproductive travels. Huang Hui-Chen, a documentary director, documented her mother's life retrospectively in *Small Talk* (日常對話 *Richang duihua*). Huang's mother, who self-identified as "a woman who loved women," was married to a man and gave birth to Huang under social and familial pressure. Despite the fact that Huang's mother might not identify herself as "a lesbian mother," her figure as an "outcast" in heteronormative society indicated a lack of voices from queer people who were forced to enter into heterosexual marriage and become parents—with or without reproductive intentions.

In 2006, lesbians who had their children from previous heterosexual marriages established a private chat group, "Alliance of Lesbian Mothers" (女同志媽媽聯盟社群 *Nü tongzhi mama lianmeng shequn*) and issued an online publication *Lama News* (拉媽報 *La ma bao*). The online allies were the first community built by LGBTQ+ parents—at that time, there were only lesbian mothers. In 2007, the community reformed as "Taiwan LGBT Family Right Advocacy" (TLFRA) and expanded the service to all LGBTQ+ families nation-wide. It was officially registered as an NGO in 2011. Gay fathers were not to be seen at this time. The documentary *Small Talk* and the anecdote of the emerging lesbian mother alliance signify the difficulties non-heterosexual parents had coming out. It was the lesbian mothers—the pioneers—who came out collectively along with the development of the LGBTQ+ community. Gay men joined the queer parent club only later.

The first gay father who came out in public was Lance Chen-Hayes, who became a father with the help of his American husband's sister as their traditional surrogate. Lance and his husband wrote two autobiographies of their reproductive journeys and parenting experiences (Chen-Hayes and Chen-Hayes 2021;

Chen-Hayes 2019). Many gay fathers whom I interviewed mentioned Lance's family stories and viewed them as "pioneering gay dads" who came out in Taiwan. Despite the fact that Lance's story was an iconic figure, and many gay men hoped to pursue fatherhood, surrogacy was not accessible for most gay men due to the legal restrictions in Taiwan. Up until the early 2010s, the "first cohort" of gay fathers successfully brought their surrogacy-born children from the US and there has been a slightly increasing visibility of gay father families in Taiwan. The "first cohort" of gay fathers began to seek help from TLFRA and have participated in the LGBTQ+ family community ever since.

Despite the burgeoning visibility of LGBTQ+ parents in society, according to the latest national survey conducted by the Taiwan Equality Campaign,<sup>5</sup> there has been decreasing support for some LGBTQ+ rights policies, including accessibility to ARTs for gay fathers. In the report, they argued that this is due to the lack of visibility of LGBTQ+ families with children in everyday life. Firstly, LGBTQ+ families are still a minority in Taiwanese society, particularly gay father families compared to lesbian mother families. Until the year when this research was conducted in 2022, TLFRA estimated that there were about 500 queer families in Taiwan. Among these queer-parents-with-children families, approximately one-third were gay-dad families (n=170). Secondly, there is still significant social and familial pressure on many LGBTQ+ people. They find it difficult to come out and acknowledge their desire to become parents. It is now time for Taiwanese society to reject traditional heteronormative family ideology and embrace diverse queer family-making. To achieve this goal, the visibility of queer families plays a crucial role in activism. This chapter delves into gay fathers' family practices and coming out experiences and elucidates the implications of their everyday life activism in order to transform Taiwan into a more inclusive and friendly society.

## 2.2 Constraints of coming out within and beyond families-of-origin

Although Taiwan has been praised as the most LGBTQ+-friendly country in Asia and public attitudes towards non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming people have changed in the past two decades (Cheng, Wu, and Adamczyk 2016), LGBTQ+ people still encounter coming-out dilemmas, particularly within their families-of-origin. The everyday life of LGBTQ+ people is intertwined with their relationships with their biological families and other interpersonal interactions, such as in schools and workplaces, acquaintances, and even strangers met on the street. Among all social relations, relationships with families matter the most to the majority of LGBTQ+ people in Taiwan. LGBTQ+ people consider their relationships with families-of-origin as crucial as their sexual/gender identities and

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.civilmedia.tw/archives/118592>.

sometimes even conceal their queer identities in exchange for familial harmony (Brainer 2019). When it comes to "coming out" for LGBTQ+ people in Western countries, this might refer to a range of situations. In Taiwan, "Have you already come out?" often implies the occasion of revealing their sexuality to their families. For perspective gay fathers, they experience two coming-out scenarios. The first is to come out as gay, while the second is to come out as prospective gay fathers or gay fathers.

In Taiwan, familial relations have transformed with the changing socio-economic climates, which experienced the dramatic success of the "Taiwan Economic Miracle" from the 1950s to the 2000s. Under the impact of Westernization, modernization, and globalization since the late twentieth century, gender social movements and feminist activism have gained awareness in Taiwan, leading society towards individualism. Taiwanese society is influenced, however, by Confucian culture which emphasizes "filial piety" (孝 *xiao*) and an ideology that treasures family values among other forms of relatedness (Farrell and Yi 2019). LGBTQ+ people often face a dilemma between expressing their queer identities and maintaining harmony in the family. As a result, LGBTQ+ people have developed strategies of identity management in order to keep the balance between revealing their queer selves and maintaining familial relationships.

Scholars researching LGBTQ+ people in Taiwan have contended with the Western model of identity politics and coming-out discourse and called for a more contextualized understanding of the coming-out experience (Brainer 2019; Chao 2000; Hu 2017). The prevalent discourse of "either coming out or closeted dichotomy" (Sedgwick 1990) in Western culture has been introduced to non-Western countries and reconstructed in the local context. Hu Yu-ying (2017) argued against, for example, the static Western/non-Western dichotomy of coming out discourse and suggested that Taiwanese lesbians developed an "interactional" instead of a "confrontational" strategy to sustain a harmonious relationship with their families. Hu (2017) described LGBTQ+ people's "situational coming out strategies" in between coming out and closeted that create a flexible space for both parties.

Most gay fathers I interviewed,<sup>6</sup> however, considered coming out crucial for their journeys towards gay fatherhood. By coming out to their families, gay men not only embraced their new identity as gay fathers but also demonstrated a distinguished coming-out pattern in Taiwan, where many LGBTQ+ people and their families often chose the "don't ask, don't tell" strategy (Brainer 2019; Hu 2017). Gay fathers' lived experiences in this research indicated that coming out was applied to gain recognition and support for gay men to strengthen their motivations to become parents. Coming out also became a proactive gesture to "display" gay

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<sup>6</sup> Only 2 out of 53 held the opinion of not coming out.

father families to others, including their extended families and society. This study attempts to answer the question: How do Taiwanese gay fathers navigate their coming-out strategies and make sense of their actions as activism?

### 3. Framing gay fathers' family-making

#### 3.1 A lack of Taiwanese gay father studies

There is relatively little scholarly literature on LGBTQ+ family building in Taiwan. Research on reproduction is mainly focused on lesbians' reproduction (Ho 2014) and lesbian mothers' parenthood (Pan 2019; Tseng 2013). Due to the regulation excluding same-sex couples from joint adoption before 2023, some master's theses in the field of law discussed legal debates around adoption laws (Chang 2015; Chen 2017).

Despite the lack of scholarly literature on gay father families, there are two articles on LGBTQ+ parents' experiences when interacting with other people in educational institutions (Wang 2022; Wu 2021). Research on LGBTQ+ people's single-parent adoption of non-biologically related children also sheds light on the importance of granting full reproductive rights to LGBTQ+ people, as the authors pointed out that they could only recruit two parents due to the low success rates for single-person adoptions (Chen and Yu 2021). There is a lack of literature on the experiences of gay men who became fathers through transnational surrogacy, with a significant exception—a master's thesis in education and counselling. This study drew on interviews with five gay fathers who had experiences using surrogacy to have children and analysed their experiences of microaggressions and stigmas (Wu 2023). The author of this chapter also observed that the experiences of LGBTQ+ prospective parents in Taiwan have been neglected for a long period, and that it required legal and social transitions in order to achieve reproductive justice for all, including gay men with reproductive intentions (Chen 2023).

#### 3.2 Doing and "displaying" families

The definition of "family" in sociology has transitioned from static interpersonal relationships, that are based on biological kin ties as *de facto* "being family," to an emphasis on daily family practices and interactions as "doing families" (Morgan 1985, 1996, 2011a). Scholars have reconsidered and redefined what family means while entering the era of individualization in which relationships become more uncertain and fleeting (Bauman 2000, 2014; Giddens 1992; Stacey 1996). Along with the social changes, the definition of family has become flexible when it "appears as a context of fluid and changeable relationships, as well as a site of intimacy and emotional growth not only for children but also for the adults" (Silva and

Smart 1999, 6). Family life is, therefore, presented as a "home" to offer emotional support and as the reorganization of ways of living.

The re-conceptualization of the "family" also reflected diverse family formations and kinship-making. The increasing use of ARTs and the visibility of alternative ways of family making constantly redefine taken-for-granted kinship relations (Franklin 2001; Rapp and Ginsburg 2001; Strathern 1992, 2005). Studies also looked at the alternative family forms of non-heterosexual individuals that were not fitted into heteronormative patterns (Weeks 2007; Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 2001). Non-heterosexual individuals use the term "family" in their everyday life practices to demonstrate the subversive powers of challenging, changing, and transforming, making relatedness (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 2001). LGBTQ+ people had been "creating families" via "doing families" (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 2001) not only to build up a place of belongingness, but also to empower and gain social recognition through family and/or relational practices (Plummer 2003).

Building on the conceptualization of "doing families" (Morgan 1985, 1996, 2011a), Janet Finch (2007, 78) introduced the concept of "displaying families" as "an activity characteristic of contemporary families, and as an analytical concept" to understand family practices. This approach aims to complement what David H. G. Morgan (2011b) might have briefly mentioned, but not yet developed in-depth: the significance of the visibility of family-making in doing family. Finch proposed examining family practices not only within families but also in society. In other words, Finch argued that the focus on doing family inside families is far from enough. It is important to convey the message of doing family to those who are both inside and outside the family as a means to obtain recognition and secure the veracity of the family (Finch 2007). There are two crucial implications of applying "displaying families" to analyze LGBTQ+ families. Finch (2007) argued that the practice of "displaying" is a series of actions that have the audience watch, observe, and receive, which contains the function of conveying messages of "doing families" to society. In a study of lesbian-mother-families, Kathryn Almack (2008, 1184) applied Finch's notion of "displaying families" to analyze the coming out experiences of lesbian mothers by displaying "meanings of family and contributing to ways in which these meanings are conveyed, recognized, and understood as "family-like" relationships." Aaron Goodfellow's (2015, 30) ethnography on gay father families also asserted that gay fathers need to "negotiate an environment in which their relationships fall under constant suspicion" by showing their family interactions and activities to others.

In the case of as LGBTQ+ families, the displaying of families is a form of coming out. The practice of displaying LGBTQ+ families should be viewed as everyday life activism, because they convey the idea of embracing diverse family formations

to wider “audiences”—including their extended families and society. For non-heterosexual individuals, the creation of a family—either through cohabitation with a partner(s), chosen families with non-biologically related members, or family members with biological relations—is a powerful affirmation of a new sense of belonging and an essential part of asserting the validity of queer identities and ways of life (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 2001, 16). The implications of displaying LGBTQ+ families are also aligned with the empowerment of obtaining queer identities in the process of coming out. This consists of the power of being seen and recognized in society by claiming a queer identity for oneself and communicating the idea of “being queer” to others (Weston 1991). Susan Golombok (2020), who conducted research on LGBTQ+ families, coined the term “future families” to describe these “alternative” LGBTQ+ families and asserted that these LGBTQ+ families signified a potential and promising future in which all inventive and diverse family formations can be seen and recognized. Drawing on the theories of doing and displaying families, I scrutinized Taiwanese gay fathers’ family-making and displaying families to argue that their coming-out actions can be seen as implicit everyday life activism that destabilizes heteronormative human procreation and family formations in Taiwanese society.

### 3.3 Everyday life activism

The sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) has encouraged us to turn personal troubles into public issues, thus the personal is always political. Collective coming-out facilitated the development of LGBTQ+ movements. Coming out in public should not be, however, the only solution to motivating social change. To increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ families, for example, can begin with the coming out practices that happen in everyday life, which, as scholars have asserted, can “disrupt the binary dualism of making history and making a life” and thus carry out activism to influence others in their everyday life (Fish, King, and Almack 2018, 1194).

To examine the relationship between daily life and activism, Sarah Pink (2012) considered it essential to think of our day-to-day life as a critical site for generating activism for future change. Therefore, small-scale actions in everyday life can be seen as “implicit activism” that encourage individuals to make change from scratch and from something small yet significant (Horton and Kraftl 2009). The “implicit activism” approach can become a crucial conceptual and practical tool to reconsider what can be “counted as activism.” When we think about activism, we might imagine a group of people getting together to exchange ideas and take actions collectively. Activism can be found, however, not only in collective actions but also in interpersonal interactions in both public and private spheres as well as with both family members and strangers. One can therefore argue that activism is also relational. In our everyday lives, we encounter people with different levels of

intimacy and familiarity, and from here, we can also consider these interpersonal interactions as a site for starting our implicit activism.

Human beings live not in a social vacuum but in complicated and intricate relationships with others. I have observed that gay fathers are aware of their social lives and relations with their families, friends, and other people in society. The main reason is that interactions with other people can influence how gay fathers-to-be think about reproduction and family building and cause either positive or negative impacts on their (future) children. As a result, gay fathers and prospective fathers have endeavored to create a better environment for their children and themselves. This is the motivation which has driven gay fathers in Taiwan to embark on their everyday life activism. They come out in order to secure a better future for their families.

#### **4. Methods and data**

This chapter stemmed from a research project on Taiwanese gay men's experiences of accessing transnational third-party reproduction to have children. The methodological approach adopted for this study is qualitative sociological research with ethnographic elements through in-depth semi-structured interviews and both onsite and online participant observations. This research was approved by the Ethical Committee at the Department of Sociology, the University of Cambridge. All participants were provided with sufficient information about the study, and consent forms were signed before the interviews.

I conducted approximately 40 in-person and online participant observations with TLFRA, which offers support for LGBTQ+ families in Taiwan, including reproductive seminars (usually co-hosted with fertility clinics), parenting workshops, and support groups. Before entering the fieldwork, I revealed my identity as both a researcher and a volunteer to the gatekeeper, TLFRA. I recruited my participants through multiple methods, including posting recruitment information on two online forums and my social media, snowballing from my informants, and reaching out to potential participants during the fieldwork.

I conducted in-depth interviews with gay fathers (n=21) and fathers-to-be (n=32). The interviews were in Mandarin Chinese since that was their native language, except when three of them preferred being interviewed in English. I transcribed and translated the recorded interviews myself, following the verbatim method to capture the detailed narratives. The duration of the interviews ranged from 73 to 161 minutes (with an average of 91 minutes). By listening to the recordings repeatedly to become familiar with the materials (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007), I immersed myself in the conversations. Transcribing was also part of the analytic process (Elliott 2005), and coding is a dynamic and inventive process for

researchers to “think with pens” (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, 26). The strategies I applied are initial and focused coding, followed by thematic analysis. Themes relevant to “coming out” appeared in different phases of the interviews, including their realization of reproductive motivations, their ambiguous feelings—hesitations and excitements—to tell others about their future children, and their sequential strategies to reveal their gay-father family to others after their children were born.

## 5. Gay fathers’ coming-out stories

Gay fathers came out by displaying their queer families and explaining third-party reproduction to others. There were various ways of displaying families (Finch 2007), and gay fathers often came out by sharing their reproductive journey with others. The “stories of reproduction,” as Marcia Inhorn (2015) proposed, can facilitate researchers in exploring reproductive practices by interpreting how people “tell their repro-stories.” Storytelling can be compelling not only for the researchers to grasp nuanced understandings of their informants’ lived experiences but also for the informants to have their voices. Through telling others the “new stories of intimate citizenship” (Plummer 2003), queer families can bring insight into the coming-out narratives that contribute to the LGBTQ+ movements at an individual level. Queer families’ coming-out experiences can be considered the proactive gestures of contesting heteronormativity. The everyday life of LGBTQ+ people should be considered a form of “implicit activism” (Horton and Kraftl 2009). I build upon the scholarly literature on displaying families and everyday life activism in order to explore the strategies gay fathers employed to tell their coming-out stories, seek recognition, and achieve activism (Figure 1).

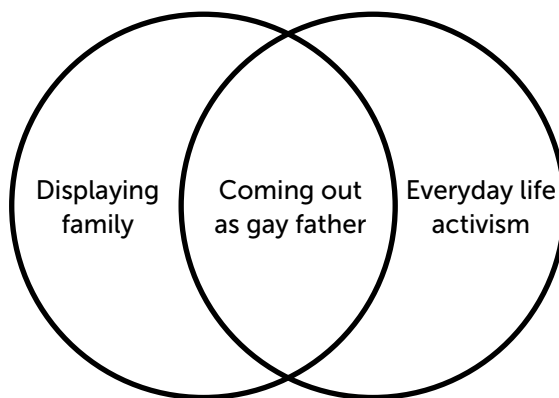


Figure 1: Displaying gay father families as everyday life activism

Some of my interlocutors' coming-out experiences followed a chronological trajectory—coming out in their young adulthood, then coming out when considering having children, and re-coming out as gay fathers after their children were born. Coming out was not necessarily, however, a chronological process or a necessary process for LGBTQ+ people. Hu Yu-Ying (2017) argues that Taiwanese LGBTQ+ people, compared to those in the Western contexts, prefer to stay "in-between coming out and closeted" and adopt an ambiguous strategy to maintain their familial relationships with others. This strategy did not amount to conforming to heteronormativity but in finding the possibilities of coming out in the future by sustaining harmony for now. A number of gay men I interviewed did not come out to their parents at their young adult age for the sake of a harmonious relationship, but might choose to come out by the time they are about to have children. Some only came out to their parents until their children were born. By illustrating gay fathers' coming-out stories, I discuss a variety of coming-out strategies employed by gay fathers to achieve everyday life activism.

### **5.1 Coming out with a grand gesture: "A newborn is a blessing for all"**

Gay fathers sometimes planned a "special event" to come out, such as a grand ceremony, in order to signify how much prudence they had for the moment. This act differed from the "don't ask; don't tell" pattern that was often found in the LGBTQ+ people's experiences in Taiwan (Brainer 2019; Hu 2017).

We held a huge party—more than 100 people, my family and family friends—to celebrate our son's "full month party" (滿月酒 *manyue jiu*). My father and I arranged it together. I gave a long speech. I still recall the moment. I was so afraid that some of the relatives might get agitated when I came out. But it turned out to be a success. Everyone came forward and hugged me. I also posted the whole speech on my Facebook; I came out completely, even to those who were not at the party. (Ted, late 40s, married, father to a son)

At the party, Ted came out to the entire extended family and formally introduced his husband to all the family members who still recognized him as "a very close friend" at that time. He also talked about the journey of surrogacy and their baby's birth story. The queer family-making narrative Ted gave to his family was a way of displaying his gay-father identity and his gay-father family to others—which consisted of the details of how a gay couple became fathers through the medical procedure of third-party reproduction and their journey to the US.

Similarly, Tsou-Tsou came out to his family by bringing his husband to a family dinner and announcing that they were going to have a child:

We have stepped over that coming out thing. Now, we can live as who we really are in both of our families. My mom said she will take care of the baby for us. I think *we are just like normal families*. It has nothing to do with our sexuality. Take my siblings as an example. What they [my parents] are eager to do for my siblings, like childcare, they will very much want to do for us as well—all the same. (Tsou-Tsou, late 30s, married, father-to-be)

After coming out to Tsou-Tsou and his husband's families, they visited each other's families-of-origin and felt treated just like other siblings in the family. For prospective gay fathers like Tsou-Tsou, coming out to families also indicated the "normalization" strategies they employed to "fit into" society, as Tsou-Tsou addressed his family as "normal" (Srnietana 2016).

In the theory of displaying families, Finch (2007) observed that family members displayed family by carrying out mundane daily tasks and housework as well as through family activities and interactions on special occasions, such as birthday celebrations and family trips. In the case of gay men, they came out on these special occasions in order to claim the veracity of their gay fatherhood. Some arranged family trips to the US to pick up their newborn babies together.

When we traveled to the US, my elder and younger sisters came together to help us take care of the child. It was a family trip for us. Because my partner could only be there for four days—he could not take too many days off from work. We [my sisters and I] spent four weeks there. Normally it takes around four weeks if you are not in a rush. Plus, we thought we could also have a nice vacation there. (Bruce, early 50s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

Bruce's elder sister was an experienced child caretaker, and she traveled with Bruce to take care of his newborn baby. Bruce planned this journey as a family trip and hoped to create the memory of welcoming the baby as well as strengthen the family ties between Bruce and his family-of-origin. This family trip was a special event—a "display work" that Bruce employed to maintain the relationships with his family and create a "new kinship" via the practices of transnational reproduction. Bruce and his families were also able to later recount the trip in order to strengthen their bonds through the shared memory of this trip. The repetition of the family trip also became the display of the family to others, which showed gay men's alternative way of family making and how they sought familial support and recognition.

Similarly, some gay fathers came out to their families on a specific day, for example, their baby's one-month celebration—to gain familial recognition. They applied the "direct coming out strategy" to reveal their gay-father families. The gesture contained elements that could be traced back to the heteronormative way

of announcing a new family member in a gay version—they came out as a couple and shared their transnational reproductive journey of conceiving their children.

## **5.2 Coming out with reproductive aspirations: "I am gay, and I want to be a father"**

Gay men gradually developed their aspirations of reproduction, which often took years as the information was difficult to access. As a result, many gay men lacked the "thinkability" of becoming parents (Smietana 2019, 2021).

When I found out I was gay, I was sad because I might not be able to have a child. After I saw other stories from the news coverage, I was so touched that I could have a child. I felt like this was something possible for a gay man. (Cohan, late 40s, married, father to two sons)

Cohan expressed his distress at imagining he could not have children when realizing his sexual identity. After years, Cohan, like many gay men I interviewed, acknowledged that there were possibilities to become fathers and gradually developed their "procreative consciousness" to envisage a future with children (Berkowitz, 2007: 185; Berkowitz and Marsiglio, 2007). Gay men still found, however, their sexuality contradicted by social reproductive expectations. In a study on UK non-heterosexual people's perception of reproduction, Pralat (2021) argued that non-heterosexual people required the coming out process to articulate their reproductive orientations when they encountered ambiguous procreative expectations from society and their families. Consequently, some gay men applied the strategy of "coming out with procreative aspirations":

When I was 30 years old—I was so afraid—I said to my father that perhaps I would adopt a child in the future. Then my father told me we had the financial resources and asked if I wanted to have a child that shared our family's blood ties. I did not dare to think about it until my father said so. It is not my money. (Justin, late 30s, in a stable relationship, father-to-be)

After Justin told his father that he wanted to have a child, his father suggested he consider surrogacy. Justin eventually told his father that he was gay. Justin's father hoped for a grandson to carry on their family line. For some gay men, like Justin, revealing their reproductive motivations before coming out as gay was a relatively tolerable way for their parents to accept their sexuality.

Derek did not reveal his sexual identity too enthusiastically either. Instead, he shared his reproductive plan with his parents first:

I did not say it out loud, but I sort of mentioned it several times. Like "dad, these dates with women are not going to work out. I am thinking about, maybe, giving birth to a child via a test-tube baby. Could I try to be together with a man?" (Derek, late 40s, single, father-to-be)

Derek did not come out to his father for years and attended obediently every “blind date” his father arranged for him. He said it was a conciliatory gesture to not “break his father’s heart.” When Derek started to think about having children, he realized that he had to come out to his father because “a fake story of a single heterosexual dad” just did not make any sense:

Is it even possible for a heterosexual single man who was so desperate to spend six million New Taiwan Dollars to have a surrogacy-born baby just because he could not find a woman to marry? (Derek, late 40s, single, father-to-be)

Interestingly, gay men’s reproductive intentionality oriented them towards the direction of coming out, which had not been considered a route to take for years or even decades. The hope of an upcoming grandchild becomes a potential way to connect gay men and their parents. Since some of the parents hoped for their sons to give birth to an heir to carry on their family name and were so desperate to be “upgraded as grandparents,” prospective gay fathers found it was easier to come out to their parents by implying the possibility of having children to soften their reactions toward their sexual identity.

Even for those who had already come out to their parents in their youth or before their self-realization of the desire for fatherhood, some of their parents still longed to become grandparents:

I came out when I was 35. They took it rather well, but they felt slightly sad that this thing—me being gay—would eventually lead to the end that they could not have grandchildren. I ultimately realized that my parents did not care so much about whether I would get married [to a woman] or not. The thing that bothers them the most is the assumption that if I am not going to marry someone, then I will never be able to have a child. Now I skipped the “marriage stage” and jumped right into the “childrearing stage,” I think this is a significant and vital decision for both me and my parents. (Luke, early 40s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

For Luke’s parents, the acceptance of having a gay son meant they had to accept their fate of not becoming grandparents in the future. Luke revealed his reproductive aspiration to his parents years later, however, and the future grandchild became a great joy and surprise for the exciting grandparents-to-be.

Howard also felt the same way that the coming of his son brought himself and his mother even closer than before:

I later realized that with two children joining our family, the relationship between my family and me improved. I eventually realized what it means when people say “the happiness of having grandchildren around.” This

is a great joy for my parents. (Howard, late 40s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

Luke and Howard both came out somewhat chronologically—first, they came out as gay men and later, they came out with the reproductive aspiration. It still took time for them to realize that gay fatherhood is thinkable and feasible, and it also took some effort for them to come out once again to others with the new identity as gay fathers. With their families' support, these gay fathers shared the joys of becoming fathers, and their parents shared the joys of becoming grandparents. The displaying of gay father families, in these cases, has involved cooperation between the gay fathers and their families-of-origin.

### **5.3 Reasons to come out: "It is in the best interest of our children"**

The main reason to come out as gay father was for the children's best interests. They believed that coming out to their families and the public was necessary since the familial and social recognition of their queer family was crucial to their children's wellbeing.

We cannot lie to others. This is for our children. We are coming out for our children. We cannot let our children feel like being in a queer family is a shame or a mistake. If we cannot be completely honest about our identity, then how can we teach our children in the future? We must be their model, their pioneer, to come out proudly. (Martin, late 40s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

The parents should come out for their children first. They should be the safeguard. (Richard, early 40s, married, father to two sons)

Most of my interlocutors shared similar viewpoints with Martin and Richard that coming out was necessary not for themselves but for their children. As queer parents, they were supposed to come out to others before their children were asked about their families. To come out and display their family proudly to others is a gesture to demonstrate the identity of queer families to their children.

The transition of the queer family—from a single (gay man) household or a co-habited (married) gay couple to gay dad(s) with child(ren) implied that it had become difficult for them to pass as "single-by-choice" or as "brothers/roommates" in heterosexual society.

Compared to heterosexuals, queer people encounter more significant social pressure; you have to face societal pressures and questions. Two of us can "hide in society," and we do not need to come out. Other people might ask, are you brothers or what? But we do not need to answer. But everything would be completely different if you had a child. Unless you instead hide everything all the time. But it is impossible. People would

say, why are you two men carrying a child? That sort of thing comes with more pressure. I heard from other queer parents; they consider this to be a re-coming-out. Although you have come out to most people around you, now you have to come out to the whole world. (Tsou-Tsou, late 30s, married, father-to-be)

Tsou-Tsou, a gay father-to-be, who was waiting for the surrogate candidates at the time of the interview, explained why gay men needed to come out if they considered having children. The dominant heteronormativity compelled many gay couples to face misrecognition of their relationship, like Tsou-Tsou—a scenario when others mistook him and his husband as brothers. He pointed out that this kind of misunderstanding was only acceptable if they did not have children.

Joe had similar feelings that he did not find it necessary to come out before he developed the reproductive aspiration:

Although I knew I was gay in college, I did not come out to others. Even now, I do not come out to others except those who are also queer. Not until recent years, when I thought about having a baby, did I consider coming out. I did not tell my parents directly, like, hey, I am gay, and I never took a boyfriend home. I never did that. I am not pushing them into accepting me as a gay son. They could tell others that I am single and unmarried. I am fine with this. Now the thing is, I am the one who tells them, I am going to find a surrogate and have a baby. (Joe, late 30s, single, father-to-be)

Once the gay couple have a child, they cannot hide from others. It was often termed “re-coming-out” to describe situations of gay men who were about to become fathers. It denotes how gay fathers came out for the second, third time, and more times. They felt like they had to come out “to the whole world” for their children.

After re-coming out to their families, gay fathers continued to encounter situations requiring them to come out repeatedly. Another milestone of coming out was when their child was about to enter the institutional education system:

Some gay fathers whose children are a bit older now—are about to enter elementary school. They are surveying schools and trying to understand the current situation. Many people joke that we need to compete to be elected as president of the Parent Association and become the one that has the power to influence others to protect our child. (Howard, late 40s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

Howard joked about his conversation with other gay fathers on winning the presidential seat as means to protect their children from discrimination. Many gay fathers experienced anxiety when selecting a school for their children, for it would

be the first time that the children needed to interact with others without the presence of their parents. Most of the gay fathers, again, emphasized the importance of coming out openly as a strategy to avoid potential discrimination.

We went to the school for a visit before we made the decision. The teacher said something that impressed me. I asked the teacher, "We are a queer family, and we want to let our kids join this school. Is the school well prepared and ready for this?" Then the teacher said, "Oh, of course, you are like any other family." They were very welcoming. (Ben, late 30s, married, father to two daughters and a son)

My son is going to kindergarten now. I interviewed the principal of that kindergarten. I even tested them with a situation like, what if a kid asks my child, "Why don't you have a mother? Then, as the head of this kindergarten, what will you do?" Or ask them about gender education and all that. Like, "What will you do when celebrating Mother's Day?" (Luke, early 40s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

Ben and Luke shared their strategies of "interviewing" the kindergarten by coming out to the school directly on the opening day to test their attitudes towards queer families. Gay fathers often related that they were responsible for coming out for their children. The open display of gay father families in public is not only regarded as individuals' coming-out actions, but also as the representation of an emerging alternative family form in educational institutions and in wider Taiwanese society.

#### **5.4 Relational coming-out: "It's for our children and our families-of-origin"**

Some gay men did not come out to their families-of-origin until they gradually developed the concept of having children. Mike, who felt that he should come out before embarking on his reproductive journey, serves as an example:

My parents did not know [that I am gay]. They carry more pressure on their shoulders because they are in the traditional value system. My father is very traditional. That is the reason I have not come out to them. But now I am thinking about having a baby, and when I attended the event, they discussed what you should do after your child's birth. It is impossible to disguise. For example, when you and your partner bring your baby with you on the street, and then if someone comes up and asks about your baby, you cannot just lie. It is not good for your baby if you are not fully prepared to come out to others and explain your child's birth to others. There might be negative impacts on the child. Like, why are we cowering? Therefore, we should tell our families-of-origin the truth. (Mike, early 40s, in a stable relationship, father-to-be)

Mike was not alone in the difficult situation of staying in the closet. Many gay men chose not to talk about it with their families-of-origin, particularly their parents, who had grown up in a relatively conservative era. Mike realized, however, that “staying in the closet” would no longer be possible once he decided to have children. The initial reason he used to hide his sexuality from his parents was out of love, because he assumed his parents would be very distressed about his sexuality.

It was love for his future child that urged Mike to come out to his parents because he realized that it would be the best thing to do for his future children. The decision-making of coming out in the Taiwan context has been identified as “relational” and embedded within the complexity of family relationships (Hu 2017). Mike changed his mind from hiding to coming out when he transitioned from being a gay man to the role of becoming a gay father:

I have started to plan for coming out to my parents. I will tell them my plan to have a child. I am still planning how and when to come out. I am gradually giving them some information about my life. For example, they think that I am living by myself. But in fact, I am living with my partner. So, I told them that my partner was my “roommate.” From there, I want them to know that I have someone by my side, and then in the future, I can tell them what kind of relationship exists between my partner and me. (Mike, early 40s, in a stable relationship, father-to-be)

Mike planned to come out to his parents “step-by-step”—first coming out as a couple and then revealing his intention of becoming a father. Some parents of queer people did not necessarily hold hostile attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people, but did not understand all that well what it was supposed to mean, and they manifested anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes out of misunderstandings and worries that their sons would be “abnormal.” To come out by saying, “I live with my roommate happily, and we can look after each other,” Mike reassured his parents that he was doing well with a loving partner. The message also implied that this couple was fully capable of taking care of themselves as well as their future children.

Gay men regarded coming out as a means of displaying a new family form—gay dad(s) with children—to their parents to reassure them that their “alternative ways of life” were content and fulfilled. Their coming-out-as-intended-gay-dad experiences also signified the repairing and sustaining relations with their parents that were once distanced because of their unspoken sexuality, yet now reconnected because of the upcoming children. Coming out to families-of-origin also intensified gay men’s aspirations to become parents:

I came out to my parents. This is a very important move. As I came out to my parents, the thought of having children became possible and thinkable. This made me start to plan to have children. I know it might

not apply to everyone, but coming out to my family of origin is crucial.  
(Oliver, late 30s, married, father-to-be)

Olive came out to his parents before started his reproductive journey. He felt like he might need support from his family while he was on the way toward parenthood. Families offered support to intended gay fathers emotionally, practically and financially.

We have spent a lot of money. I have already discussed this with my Mom, and we both agree that we will bring her with us to the US to pick up our baby in order to save money on hiring a nanny to go with us. Although now she is still running her business, she may retire in the coming years and be able to babysit my child. (Tsou-Tsou, late 30s, married, father-to-be)

Tsou-Tsou talked to his mother about childcare in the future, and his mother was willing to help. Tsou-Tsou and his husband, who had already spent a great deal of money on the ARTs and surrogacy, were grateful for what Tsou-Tsou's mother offered. For Tsou-Tsou's mother, it was also a blessing. She was happy to become a grandmother who could care for her grandchild. The coming-out practice in Tsou-Tsou's family united his families-of-origin with his new queer family.

The displaying of Tsou-Tsou and his husband's intimate relationship, as the coming out practices to their families-of-origin, also built up solidarity between their families-of-origin and their new-formed gay father family. This seeking of recognition could also be found in everyday life interactions with other family members:

Now I visit my younger sister, and she says, "Could you hold my baby for me for a while? My arms are sore." Although it is not helping all that much, I am willing to share some burden with her, even though it is just a tiny thing. I am sure my sister will do so once I have my child. Everyone can have a support system. (Tsou-Tsou, late 30s, married, father-to-be)

Tsou-Tsou felt that he was like his heterosexual siblings, who could receive help and support from this family unit. Finch (2007) has defined that the displaying of families can be found in trivial moments in everyday life to showcase the existence of a family. After coming out to their families, prospective gay fathers not only shared the intimate moments with their families, but also shared the expectations and joys of the upcoming children, which also signified the re-connection between gay fathers and their families-of-origin.

## 5.5 The empowerment of coming out: “We want the world to see our family”

In a heteronormative society, gay fathers always had to come out to display their queer families to others. By doing so, they not only protested for their rights and provided their children with an LGBTQ+-friendly environment to live in, but also empowered themselves, others, such as their families and educational institution staff, and their children.

We read them picture books about two dads when they were 4 or 5. One of their friends from the kindergarten asked my daughter—a little boy asked her, like, a hundred times, “Don’t you have a mother?!” Then my daughter answered, “I do not have a mom.” But the boy kept asking. My daughter came home and told me about this. She said to that boy, “I do not have a mother, and that is that.” My daughter is quite okay with this. They knew two healthy aunts [the surrogates] gave birth to them. They also tell others in the same way. (Ben, late 30s, married, father to two daughters and a son)

Ben’s daughter grew up immersed in the LGBTQ+ views provided by her two dads and found no difficulty coming out as a kid from a queer family. She naturally embodied the displaying of queer families by articulating her family formation to others who had doubts about it.

Our son started learning piano last year, and the teacher sometimes said, “You can go home and practice with your mom and dad.” And he said, “I don’t have a mother.” (Cohan, late 40s, married, father to two sons)

Cohan and Richard were quite relaxed when recounting the incident that their child’s piano teacher sometimes “forgot” they were a gay-father family. Their son’s reaction did not feel awkward, and he did not try to hide anything. From what his daddy and papa had taught him, it was natural to “come out” and tell others that “I do not have a mother” without having negative feelings. Most gay fathers developed their educational strategies of “giving them the tools” to deal with coming out rather than over-protecting them. Similarly, Bibby shared his viewpoint:

We cannot take care of everything for our children. As parents, we can teach them the courage to encounter difficulties and be there for them whenever they need us. It is my parenting strategy. I will build up their courage and let go of them to explore. But if they do need help, we will be there and support them. (Bibby, early 30s, married, father to two sons)

The gay fathers I interviewed shared similar ways of parenting. They came up with steps to fight against the heteronormative assumptive scripts of what a family

should look like. By doing so, they displayed their queer family in society with the hope of increasing the visibility of the diversity of family forms.

### **5.6 Diversities among gay father families: "Should I come out now if I am single?"**

Among 53 interviewees, 10 of them were single. Others were either in a marriage or in a stable relationship, and were committed to child-raising. The two-dads-families tended to consider it necessary to come out. As for the single dads, most of them shared similar thoughts about coming out. A few of them were reluctant, however, to come out:

I do not think coming out to the family is necessary, even if I want to have a child, right? You can be single and have a child as a single parent. My parents are eighty-something, and I reckon this should not be all that hard for them to accept. I am single but want a child. That is that. I will tell them about surrogacy, but that is all they need to know. (Jim, early 40s, single, father-to-be)

Jim, a single father-to-be, felt that he did not need to come out to his parents since the family formation of a single dad and a child did not straightforwardly imply his sexual identity as gay. Jim applied the "semi-coming-out" strategy, meaning he only came out when necessary. Jim came out to the fertility clinics, for example, and the gay father community. Still, he did not feel comfortable coming out to his family at this point: "Perhaps it will change in the future because now I know people always say it is better for the child." The narrative from Jim demonstrated a different way of considering coming out as a gay father.

From Jim's story, however, it is apparent that coming out has become the mainstream pathway for Taiwanese gay fathers to follow. Consequently, Jim accepted the possibility of coming out in the future. He admitted that he was not in a hurry to come out for now, but he was still aware of the majority's viewpoint about coming out among the gay father community: it will be better for your child. The mainstream coming-out discourse showed that gay men considered it their responsibility to come out for themselves, their children, and the future generations of gay fathers-would-be.

Having said that, the stories of gay fathers presented in this study cannot represent all gay-father families and their coming-out experiences. This chapter, instead, provided a contextualized understanding of gay men's lived experiences of how they perceived their reproductive aspirations and transformed them into empowering coming-out strategies to gain recognition from their families and society. By doing so, gay fathers enacted everyday life activism by displaying their diverse queer families.

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter explored the coming-out experiences of Taiwanese gay men who decided to conceive their biologically related children with the help of third-party reproduction and build up queer families that were very different from the heterosexual majority in society. Some gay men came out to their parents at a relatively young age yet had difficulties coming out for the second time with their reproductive aspirations. Most of them found support from their families-of-origin after coming out with their procreative intentionality, and by doing so, reconfirmed their reproductive plans.

Gay fathers and fathers-would-be were determined to come out, which was a decision that was not often reached before they gradually developed their reproductive consciousness. They came out by presenting their multiple identities: gay men, gay men with procreative intentions, and gay fathers(-to-be). Gay fathers endeavored to create a transparent environment for their children to grow and to rebuild the connections with their families-of-origin to welcome their new family member together—their future children. Undergoing coming-out and displaying their queer families, gay fathers not only conducted everyday life activism, that changed other people's perspectives towards queer families, but also found a way to embrace their new identities as gay fathers.

For gay fathers, coming out is a form of displaying family to those who might have doubts or misunderstandings about LGBTQ+ families. "Displaying families" (Finch 2007) is the theoretical tool that I employed to analyze gay men's coming out strategies and the reasons behind their proactive decisions. Building on the rich empirical data and the theoretical framing of "doing and displaying families," I propose a new version of the concept: "displaying queer families." The idea of displaying families is aimed at presenting family practices, which are based on the concept of "doing families" (Morgan 2011b) to justify their familial relations and to be recognized by the others' witnesses. I, therefore, developed "displaying queer families" to demonstrate that Taiwanese gay fathers employed coming out strategies to carry out everyday life activism because they did not only come out to present their gay father families for themselves, but also for other people within and outside their queer families, including their children, their biological families, and future LGBTQ+ families. Despite the fact that gay fathers only joined the LGBTQ+ family community in the past two decades, they followed the pioneering lesbian mothers' activist spirits and developed it further by constantly voicing their gay father identities. Gay men's determination to envision and forge a better future, as well as their embodied actions of coming out to increase the visibility of their non-heterosexual family formations, denote the emerging "displaying queer families" as a pathway towards everyday activism among the gay father community.

Taiwanese gay fathers embraced their multiple identities—as gay men, as gay men with reproductive intentions, and as gay fathers—to construct diverse strategies of coming out—including “direct-coming-out,” “step-by-step-coming-out,” “semi-coming-out,” and constant “re-coming-out.” Gay fathers developed the discourse of coming out for the sake of their children and advocated for LGBTQ+ family’s rights. These gay fathers’ coming out actions echoed the blossoming LGBTQ+ rights movements in Taiwan, which made a huge achievement in 2019 to become the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage. Along with the transitioning social atmosphere, gay fathers made it possible to come out more proactively in their personal lives. These gay fathers created queer families by having children and continued carrying out everyday life activism by displaying their queer families to wider society. The everyday life activism of “displaying gay father families” is gradually deconstructing the dominant heteronormative ideal family formations and embracing a promising, diverse, and inclusive future for all forms of family-making.

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