

RAINBOW CONNECTIONS

Paul J. Farrelly

ON 20 MAY 2017, a group of parents went to the People's Park 人民广场, Shanghai's 'dating park', to advertise their single sons and daughters to the parents of prospective partners. Unlike most other parents there, however, their children identified as LGBTQI. Their presence upset some other parents, and police ultimately ordered them to leave the park on the grounds that, in distributing printed material with commercial logos, they had not registered properly.

In 1997, homosexuality, which had been illegal since 1979 as a form of 'hooliganism', was made legal in mainland China and in 2001 it was removed from the Chinese Classification of Medical Disorders 3rd Edition. Yet the position of LGBTQI citizens remains fraught, with prejudice common both

in society and workplaces, and same-sex marriage impossible. To avoid social and familial pressure, some gay men enter into sham 'going-through-the-motion' marriages with willing female partners 形式婚姻. If a gay man's wife is unaware of his sexual orientation, she may be known as a *tongqi* 同妻, or 'comrade's wife'. The word from communist discourse for 'comrade', *tongzhi* 同志 ('same will') shares its first character *tong* with the word for homosexuality 同性恋 ('same-sex love') and for some time now has been used as slang to refer to members of the LGBTQI community.

Less than a week after the Shanghai dating park incident, on 24 May, the Constitutional Court of Taiwan ruled that laws limiting marriage to heterosexual couples were invalid in



Taiwan Pride 2017
Photo: Puritcat, Flickr

Taiwan. The Taiwan parliament now has two years to rewrite the marriage laws so as to include same-sex relationships. The ruling is the result of decades of social reform during which the gay rights movement gradually built up wide support and political influence.

The ruling prompted prominent mainland sexologist Li Yinhe 李银河 to suggest that because Taiwan was ‘a society of Chinese people’, it could serve as a model for China. By speaking of Taiwan as best understood within the context of ‘Chineseness’, she undervalued both the island’s particular historical conditions and the democratic dynamic by which social change can influence policy development — very different from the way things work on the mainland.

Homosexuality has long been decriminalised in Hong Kong, and while same-sex marriage remains impossi-

ble, there have been recent evolutions in the interpretation of the law. In September, it was ruled that the same-sex partner of a British dependent could live there. Likewise, in November, the High Court ruled in favour of a Hong Kong civil servant, who married in New Zealand, to be allowed spousal medical benefits.

In late August, a claim to a ‘Chinese’ cultural perspective on same-sex marriage generated widespread attention in Australia. Shortly after the federal government announced a postal survey on same-sex marriage to inform parliament of public opinion on the matter, a campaign by the ‘Coalition for Marriage’ broadcast a television commercial featuring Dr Pansy Lai 赖潘西, a Hong Kong-born Sydney GP and co-founder of the Australian Chinese for Families Association 澳洲华人家庭守护联盟, which stands for ‘family values amongst the Australian

Chinese community in Australia'. The group claimed that a petition it started and was signed by 17,500 people had pressured the New South Wales government to drop the Safe Schools Program, designed to help students and teachers combat bullying of LGBTQI students. The group's anti-same-sex marriage ad misleadingly linked same-sex marriage with the Safe Schools Program, which it alleged (in line with other conservative voices in Australia) had been designed to confuse students about gender and sexuality. The ad attracted a huge amount of criticism, much of it focussed on Pansy Lai, with critics questioning her ability to treat LGBTQI patients with the non-judgemental compassion required of a GP.

That same month, Dr Lai wrote on her association's website (in Chinese) that school lessons on same-sex marriage and sexuality 'run counter to traditional culture'. While she did not specify exactly how this is the case, it could be argued that from a 'traditional' point of view, same-sex marriage could lead to imbalances between the

male *yang* 阳 and female *yin* 阴 energies, or result in people breaking the taboo of marrying those who share the same surname. Dr Lai's reading of 'traditional culture' also may draw on the Confucian notion of sons extending the family line and producing children who can later care for their elderly parents.

A supporter of same-sex marriage subsequently launched an online petition seeking to deregister Dr Lai for breaching the medical code of practice through her campaigning. After generating complaints, the petition was withdrawn.

Lai and her supporters, however, only represented one view on the matter. Benjamin Law 羅旭能, a gay Australian writer born to parents who emigrated from Hong Kong, wrote about the panicked conservative response to Safe Schools, and was a prominent supporter of the campaign to reform marriage laws. In late November, it was announced that sixty-two per cent of the population supported same-sex marriage, with federal parliament amending the legislation in December.

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