

**ROLE CONFLICT & ROLE ADJUSTMENT OF  
CHINESE GAY MEN IN THEIR FAMILIES  
IN KUALA LUMPUR & PENANG: A CASE STUDY**

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**by**

**CHUA HANG KUEN**

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This thesis is dedicated to all the *tongzhi*, who are on their way home ...

Yours truly,  
Hang Kuen  
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## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS & SEMINARS

- 1.1 Chua, Hang Kuen (2004). Role Conflict and Role Adjustment Among Chinese Gay Males in Their Families: Case Studies in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Paper presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Malaysian Studies Conference, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi.
- 1.2 Chua, Hang Kuen (2004). Coping with Role Conflict in The Chinese Families: Case Studies of Chinese Gay Men in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Paper presented at the International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi.

# KONFLIK PERANAN DAN PENYESUAIAN PERANAN BAGI LELAKI GAY CINA DI DALAM KELUARGA MEREKA DI KUALA LUMPUR DAN PULAU PINANG: SATU KAJIAN KES

## ABSTRAK

Masyarakat Malaysia kini sedang mengalami pelbagai perubahan sosial dan budaya yang mendadak. Perubahan-perubahan ini termasuk kemunculan budaya gay di mana individu-individu mengenali dan memaparkan diri mereka sebagai homoseksual serta mengamalkan cara hidup homoseksual. Perkembangan budaya gay dalam masyarakat Malaysia telah mengakibatkan pelbagai konflik kebudayaan dengan budaya mainstream. Bagi kebanyakan individu gay, konflik antara norma-norma mainstream dan norma-norma budaya gay berlaku terutamanya di dalam institusi kekeluargaan. Keadaan ini adalah relevan terutamanya dalam konteks lelaki gay Cina di Malaysia, di mana mereka diharapkan untuk memainkan peranan-peranan anak lelaki menurut ajaran Konfucius sementara mereka memeluk identiti dan cara hidup gay tersebut.

Sehubungan itu, tesis ini mengkaji *dugaan peranan* (role expectation) Konfucius tersebut terhadap lelaki gay Cina di Malaysia, konflik peranan (role conflict) serta penyesuaian peranan (role adjustment) yang berpunca dari dugaan tersebut. Satu kerangka teoritis dan model konseptual berpandukan Teori Peranan (Role Theory) telah dibentuk untuk menghubungkan konsep-konsep tersebut.

Penyelidikan kualitatif ini merupakan satu kajian kes yang melibatkan seramai 30 orang lelaki gay Cina yang bermastautin di Kuala Lumpur (15 orang responden) dan Pulau Pinang (15 orang responden) antara tahun 2003 dan 2004. Responden-responden kajian ini terdiri daripada lelaki gay Cina yang berasal dari pelbagai latarbelakang perseorangan, kekeluargaan, sosio-ekonomi dan penglibatan budaya gay.

Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa terdapat tujuh jenis dugaan peranan yang dialami oleh responden-responden dalam keluarga mereka, iaitu: peranan yang berkaitan dengan perkahwinan, menyambung zuriat, menghormati ibu bapa, sokongan ekonomi, kasih sayang dan sokongan emosi, duduk bersama ibu bapa dan hal ehwal yang berkaitan dengan peninggalan ibu bapa. Penyampaian dugaan-dugaan tersebut dipengaruhi oleh pelbagai factor perseorangan, kekeluargaan dan juga sosio-ekonomi. Antara dugaan-dugaan yang dialami oleh responden-responden, dugaan supaya mereka berkahwin dan menyambungkan zuriat merupakan dugaan yang bersangkutan dengan pengalaman konflik peranan responden-responden tersebut. Untuk menyesuaikan diri dalam keadaan-keadaan konflik peranan ini, para responden menggunakan pelbagai strategi penyesuaian untuk menyelesaikannya atau menyesuaikan diri dalam keadaan konflik tersebut; dalam pada yang sama, perbuatan ini akan mempengaruhi identity-identiti anak/gay mereka.

Adalah dicadangkan supaya penyelidikan lanjut akan mengambilkira dugaan peranan serta konflik peranan dan penyesuaian peranan yang berkaitan dalam institusi-institusi sosial yang lain seperti, sekolah, kerja dan agama, untuk memperolehi gambaran yang lebih menyeluruh tentang identity-identiti lelaki gay Cina dan juga lelaki berlainan bangsa di Malaysia.

# **ROLE CONFLICT & ROLE ADJUSTMENT OF CHINESE GAY MEN IN THEIR FAMILIES IN KUALA LUMPUR & PENANG: A CASE STUDY**

## **ABSTRACT**

Malaysian society is experiencing immense social and cultural changes. These changes include the emergence of gay culture in which people identify and present themselves as having a gay identity and lifestyle. However, the rapid diffusion of gay culture into Malaysian society poses various cultural conflicts with the mainstream culture. For many gay individuals, the conflict between mainstream culture norms and gay culture norms is often centred in the institution of the family. This is particularly relevant in the context of Chinese Malaysian gay men who are expected to perform the roles of a son as defined by the Confucian ethic of filial piety while maintaining their gay identities and lifestyles.

This thesis focuses on the filial role expectations of selected Chinese Malaysian gay men, their respective role conflict experiences and the adjustment strategies employed by them in resolving the role conflict situations in their families. A theoretical framework and a conceptual model adapted from Role Theory are developed to link the concepts of role expectation, role conflict and role adjustment in this study.

This qualitative research represents a case study of 30 Chinese gay men residing in Kuala Lumpur (15 respondents) and Penang Island (15 respondents) between the year 2003 and 2004. The respondents of this study comprise of Chinese Malaysian gay men from diverse family, educational, socio-economic background and gay culture involvement.

The findings of this study indicate that there are seven major types of filial role expectations that the respondents perceive in their position as the son in their families. They are: marriage, procreation, respect and obedient, economical support, care and emotional support, staying with parents, and parents' posthumous matters. The emission of these filial role expectations is related to various personal, familial and socio-economical factors. The role expectations related to marriage and procreation are the main expectations that are associated with the respondents' role conflict experiences. To overcome these role conflict situations, the respondents use various adjustment strategies in resolving or adjusting to the role conflict situations, which in turn has an effect on their son/gay identities.

It is recommended that further study be carried out to include other role expectations, the respective role conflicts and role adjustments in other social institutions such as, school, work and religion, in the mapping of the gay identities of Malaysian Chinese gay men and also gay men of other ethnicities in Malaysia.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Introduction

#### 1.0.1 The Emerging Gay Culture in Malaysia

Malaysian society has experienced immense social and cultural changes during the last few decades. Among these changes is the emergence of gay culture or *egalitarian homosexuality* (Sullivan, 2001), in which people increasingly identify themselves, as well as present themselves to others as having a consciousness and politics related to their homosexuality (Altman, 1995; cited by Sullivan, 2001) (See Appendix A for review of major perspectives on homosexuality). The prevalence of gay culture in Malaysia is evident from (1) the explicit local media coverage on gay related news and issues; (2) the expanding of exclusive gay social and virtual groups; and (3) the proliferation of gay “hangouts” in contemporary Malaysian society.

First, besides the news and articles on homosexuality featured in the newspapers (See Appendix M for examples of news headlines and features related to homosexuality in newspapers), TV and radio stations also broadcast interviews of gay individuals and features on gay issues during prime time. For example, the local TV station, NTV7 broadcasted an investigative report featuring anonymous interviews with a few self-affirmed gay men in its *Edisi Siasat Mandarin* (Mandarin Investigative Edition) (NTV7, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2003). The state-owned Radio 4 also broadcasted an interview with two lesbians and a gay man in conjunction with World AIDS Day (Radio 4, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2003). Recently the local paid satellite television, Astro featured an interview with a faced and onymous gay man in AEC, one of Astro’s sub channels (Astro, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2005). Similarly, the state-owned TV station, TV2 also featured local gay rights



issues on three consecutive evenings in its Mandarin News during Human Rights Day (TV2, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> December 2003).

Meanwhile, the Pink Triangle (Besides the Rainbow Flag, the inverted pink triangle is one of the emblems for Western LGBT liberation movement), now known as PT Foundation, a support group for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) formed by a group of concerned gays and lesbians in Kuala Lumpur in 1987 (Baba, 2001). Pink Triangle was first formed as an organization to address issues related to LGBT communities. Since HIV/AIDS has become a major concern for the nation, PT Foundation has taken up the task to educate the LGBT and general public on HIV/AIDS (ibid.). In addition to PT Foundation, many other gay culture groups have also flourished with the introduction of the Internet since the mid nineties. Currently, many Malaysia-based online virtual groups (Yahoo! Groups, 2005), Internet chat rooms and websites (See Appendix N for examples of virtual groups and websites and their Uniform Resource Locator – URL) have also been set up to provide unrestricted space for interaction, linkup and networking of gays sharing common interests.

Finally, in Malaysia, especially in urban areas, gay culture can also be observed through the establishment of commercial outlets such as pubs, discotheques, saunas, massage parlours and fitness centres, which cater mainly to gay clientele. These places function as meeting places and “cruising places” (Public places, for example: park, shopping mall, public area or restroom where gay men or men who have sex with men – MSM can find each other for social or sexual interaction) and they are easily found in major cities such as Kuala Lumpur, George Town, Johor Bahru (See Appendix O for examples of gay “hangouts” in Kuala Lumpur, George Town and Johor Bahru), Ipoh and other big towns such as Malacca, Kota Bahru, Alor Setar, Kuching, etc. (Baba, 2001; Utopia Asian Gay & Lesbian Resources, 2005). These meeting places

provide a venue for the meeting and interaction of gays who comprise the major ethnic groups in Malaysia including Malays, Chinese and Indians (cf. Baba, 2001).

With reference to Jackson (2001) and Sullivan (2001), the emergence and spread of gay culture in Malaysia as in most Asian countries is associated with the multiple influences and effects of globalisation, industrialization and urbanization, in which these developing countries in Asia are reshaping their lifestyle and economy in order to fit in with the Western capitalism (Altman, 1996; cited by Sullivan, 2001). In which the gay and lesbian cultures in Asia, with its emerging gay culture groups and sprawling gay commercial spaces, resemble their Western counterparts (Jackson, 2001). Hence Dennis Altman argues, there has been “an apparent globalisation of post-modern gay identities” (Altman, 1996; quoted by Sullivan, 2001: 255),

### ***The Conflict of Culture Norms: Gay Culture vs. Mainstream Culture***

However, the rapid diffusion of gay culture into the developing countries poses many political and cultural challenges to both the social institutions and the gay culture groups involved. As Thorsten Sellin (1993: 74) suggests, “conflicts of cultures are inevitable when the norms of one cultural or subcultural area ... come in contact with those of another.” In Malaysia, the apparent conflict of mainstream culture/norms and gay culture/norms manifests itself in legislation and public opinion.

The conduct norms of gay culture especially same-sex sexual behaviour, is regarded as a criminal act according to legal norms. According to Malaysian Penal Code, Chapter XVI, Article 377A (Penal Code, 1993):

*Any person who has sexual connection with another person by the introduction of the penis into the anus or mouth of the other person is said to commit carnal intercourse [Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section (Penal Code, 1993)] against the order of nature.*

and its punishment is spelled in Article 377B (ibid.):

*Whoever voluntarily commits carnal intercourse against the order of nature shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to twenty years, and shall also be liable to whipping.*

Although the same legislation is also applicable to heterosexual couple, it has always been associated to homosexuality in Malaysian social context. In 1998, the former Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Sri Anwar Ibrahim was sentenced for 9 year's imprisonment for committing carnal intercourse against the order of nature as in Article 377B (Liebhold, 2000), which shocked the whole nation. Furthermore, prevailing political and religious leaders also tend to view homosexuality as "immoral, despicable, eerie" [This is how the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir commented on homosexuality, with regard to Anwar's sodomy trial (Business Times: 26th September 1998)], "shameless and a crime worse than murder" [These words were expressed by the head of education and research at Malaysia's Islamic Affairs Department, Abdul Kadir Che Kob in an interview with TIME Asia (Ramakrishnan, 2000)]. For them, homosexuality is perceived as a social illness that threatens the existing social and moral order; therefore it must be controlled.

Under such a hostile environment, members of the gay culture group have evolved various adaptive strategies such as deception, information control, play acting or passing as heterosexual in order to protect themselves from experiencing these stigma and sanction (cf. Goffman, 1963; Davies, 1996b). These reactions inevitably have effect on their gay identities (David, 1996b) and roles in society.

For many gay individuals, the conflict between mainstream culture norms and gay culture norms is often centred in the institution of the family. This is particularly relevant in the context of Chinese gay men who are expected to perform the roles of a

son as defined by the Confucian ethic of filial piety while trying to maintain their gay identities and lifestyles.

### **1.0.2 Cultural Conflict Among Chinese Gay Men in Malaysia**

According to the 1991 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia (Department of Statistics, 1995), even though the majority of the Malaysian Chinese claim to be Buddhist (68.3%) rather than Confucian or Taoist (20.2%), these systems of belief/philosophy are inseparable and interlaced concepts for the majority of Chinese Malaysian (Lok, 2000). Despite their religion, the Chinese Malaysians “share a common cultural past in China and are united by a set of common Chinese traditions ... such as traditional Chinese values and philosophy” (Tan, 2000: 65). In this context, Confucianism is the major philosophy that continuously shapes the social system, values and conduct of Chinese Malaysian via socialization (Heng and Lee, 2000) and the Chinese education system (Yen, 2000). In fact Elwyn (1990: 194) even argues that:

*... in the Chinese Malaysian context, filiality with all its familial ramifications is an essential ingredient of ethnic Chinese cohesion. It provides a safeguard against the erosion of traditional Chinese customs and practices. Chinese filiality in Malaysia may be closer to the traditional Chinese interpretation than the current practices of many Chinese living in Hong Kong.*

This is evident through the practices of Confucian rites and rituals related to marriage, death and the worship of the ancestors among Chinese Malaysians (Lee, 1986; Hutton and Thompson, 1987). Although these practices may have the influences of Taoism and Buddhism, they are mainly the manifestations of Confucian ethic of 孝 (*xiao*) or filial piety (Lok, 2000), which has outlined the desirable behaviours and roles of the sons (and daughters) in the Chinese family (See Appendix B for more elaboration on Confucianism, filial piety and descent ideology).

### ***Filial Piety and The Roles of The Son in Chinese Family***

Confucianism has outlined three basic relationships in the family in its ethic of 五常 (*wu chang*) or the five cardinal relationships: between father and son (parent and child); between husband and wife; between brothers; the other two relationships outside the family are between ruler and subject; and between friends (Becker & Barnes, 1961; Lang 1968; Hsu, 1981). It is based on these familial-kinship relationships that the Chinese individual's conception of self or identity is formed (Elwyn, 1990; Chou, 2001); and the desirable behaviours and roles of an individual are drawn in accordance with filial piety (Chou, 2001).

Under the Confucian ethic of *xiao*, the son, apart from being expected to be obedient to his parents and elders, he is also expected to continue the family name and lineage through marriage and procreation, to take care and provide for his parents, and to eventually worship his parents together with their ancestors when they passed away (Lang, 1968; Hsu, 1971, 1981; Chang, 1990; Lok, 2000).

As the Confucian saying, 百行孝为先 (*bai xing xiao wei xian*), meaning “*xiao* must be prioritised among all acts”, therefore, it is almost unimaginable for one not to follow the practice of *xiao*, not to mention going against it. Among all the practices of *xiao*, having descendents, especially male descendents, is considered as the main responsibility of the son in the family. This is recited in the Confucian saying, 不孝有三, 无后为大 (*bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da*), which means, “there are three unfilial acts, the greatest is to be without posterity” (Lee, 1986; Chang, 1990). Thus, to get married and to have children are among the most important and obligatory roles for the son to fulfil in the traditional Chinese family system. Failure to fulfill these roles and obligations, a son is either no more to be regarded as a son, or he has to reclaim his status as the son by returning to the fold of tradition (Becker & Barnes, 1961).

In this construct, Chinese gay men who have adopted the gay identities and lifestyles may be subjected to conflict of culture/norms when they are expected to perform the roles of the son in their families, especially, with regard to the expectations of getting married and providing children. This conflict of culture/norms is evident in a case recorded in a case study of gay and lesbian couples in Malaysia by Ismail Baba (2001: 151):

*Lee is Chinese Malaysian and a graduate from a local university. He accepts himself as being gay but is somewhat troubled by the pressure from his parents and relatives to get married. According to Lee, at one stage, he avoided going home to his parents because they often hinted him that they would like to see him married ... Within the gay community, Lee is well adjusted but is unable to deal with his family about being gay. Lee is very close to his mum and dad but would never hurt them by informing them that he is gay ... Being the only son in a Chinese family, culturally, he would be expected to continue the family name. This has caused Lee a lot of stress.*

For Chinese gay men who are trying to cope or adjust themselves to these conflict situations in order to maintain their status as the son as well as harmonious relationship with their family members, they may have to develop various adjustment strategies to resolve these conflict situations and overcome their dilemma. The extent to which these adjustment strategies are successful in resolving the conflict situations in their families as well as in their psyche, bear great social and psychological consequences for them and their families.

## **1.1 Research Problem**

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that the emergence and diffusion of gay culture traits into Malaysian society have posed challenges for Malaysian society in general, and for the Chinese families and individual gay man in particular. The Chinese families will somehow have to acknowledge and cope with this relatively new culture

within the existing familial systems in order to maintain its function and harmony. As for the Chinese gay men, they may have to re-examine and readjust their roles and behaviours according to the expectations of filial piety in their families under the expanding influences of the gay culture. Confronted with these cultural conflict and adjustment problems, they would have to draw upon various adjustment resources and skills in order to adapt to their situation. This may, in turn, have effects on their personal and gay identities (cf. Davies, 1996b).

In spite of the gravity of the cultural conflict and adjustment problems threatening the well being of Chinese gay men and their families, there has been a lack of research and literature on this topic. A thorough review of past literature indicates that although numerous studies on the subject of being gay in the family have been conducted, majority of these studies are based on the Western experience. In comparison, the studies on being gay in the Chinese family are relatively limited in number. Although these studies touch on the issue pertaining to the conflict of culture/norms between homosexuality and the expected behaviours and roles defined by filial piety, especially marriage and procreation, they are, not the focus of the studies themselves. Furthermore, there is no study done by using the concepts of *role conflict* and *role adjustment* (Bertrand, 1972; Biddle, 1979, 1986) in *role theory* in the study of the conflict and adjustment problems pertaining to the expected behaviours and roles of Chinese gay men in their families.

Up to now, there is no specific study of the Chinese gay men in Malaysia, especially one that focuses on the cultural conflict and adjustment problems of the affected Chinese gay men in their families. Hence, this research aims to fill the void in local knowledge on gay culture in Malaysia.

## **1.2 Objectives of Research**

The three main objectives related to the subjects of this research are:

1. To examine the perceived filial role expectations of Chinese Malaysian gay men with regard to their position as the son in their families.
2. To examine the role conflict experiences of Chinese Malaysian gay men when they are expected to perform the perceived filial role expectations as the son in their families.
3. To describe the adjustment strategies used by Chinese Malaysian gay men in their attempt to resolve the role conflict experiences in their families.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

To achieve the above objectives, this research is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived filial role expectations of Chinese Malaysian gay men with regard to their position as a son in their families?
  - 1.1. What are the factors that influence the emission of these perceived filial role expectations?
  - 1.2. What are their perceptions towards these perceived filial role expectations?
2. What are their role conflict experiences in fulfilling these perceived filial role expectations in their families?
  - 2.1. What are the perceived filial role expectations that lead to role conflict?



- 2.2. What are the differences of their role conflict experiences?
  - 2.3. What are the factors that influence their role conflict experiences?
3. What are the adjustment strategies employed by them in resolving the role conflict experiences in their families?

#### **1.4 The Significance of Research**

Despite the ever-growing presence of gay culture in Malaysia, very limited social studies have been conducted on the realities and experiences of this culture group. This research is done with the hope that it will be able to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of this group within the Malaysian social context. Also, by applying the role theory perspective, this research will provide another researching perspective on the Chinese Malaysian gay men.

In addition, the findings of this research will be able to provide a succinct profile of the contemporary Chinese gay men in Malaysia; and an understanding of the challenges they face in their families and how they cope with it. These findings will also provide a reference for future studies on Chinese gay men in Malaysia in particular or homosexuality in Malaysia in general. This knowledge can also be beneficial to social service providers such as, counsellors or therapists working with Chinese gay men who have adjustment problem with regard to the role conflict in their families.

## 1.5 Organization of Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The organization and coverage of each chapter are as below:

Chapter One is the introduction to this research, which covers the introduction to the issues and research problem, scope of research, objectives of research, research questions and the significance of research as mentioned above.

Chapter Two covers the literature review. The literature review focuses on the previous studies on being gay in the West, and the cultural differences between Western and Chinese societies and its implications in understanding being gay in the Chinese family. (Note: The literature review for the major perspectives on homosexuality and Confucianism, filial piety and descent ideology are enclosed as Appendix A & B)

Chapter Three provides a review of role theory, particularly the concepts of *role conflict* and *role adjustment*, which are adapted as the conceptual framework and conceptual model for this research. The operationalization of conceptual model is also included in this chapter. This chapter ends with the definition of major concepts and terms used in this thesis.

Chapter Four explains the methodology of this research – the case study method and the research procedure, which includes the sampling and recruitment of respondents, data collection procedure and instruments, data analysis, ethical issues and the limitations of this research.

Chapter Five reports the research finding and discussion in four main sections. Section one presents the brief description of the personal, gay culture and family background of the respondents. Section two describes the respondents' perceived filial role expectations as the son, and the various relevant factors that may influence the emission of these filial role expectations. Section three describes the role conflict experiences of the respondents when they are expected to perform the perceived filial role expectations, the various relevant factors that influence their role conflict experiences and the respondents' perception of the filial role expectations. The last section describes the respondents' adjustment strategies in their attempt to resolve the role conflict situations in their families.

Chapter Six is divided into four sections. Section one summarizes the research findings. Section two reviews the conceptual and methodological implications of the research findings; its implication on the subject matter and social policy; section three presents the suggestions for future research and conclusion is drawn in section four.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

In this chapter, the researcher reviews the past studies on the experience of being gay in the Western family, the cultural differences between Western and Chinese society and its implications in the understanding of being gay in the Chinese family with specific reference to the Confucian ethic of filial piety.

Numerous past studies, which focus on the relationship between gay men and their families, have been found in this literature research. Majority of these studies, however, are based on the Western and predominantly Anglo-American experiences. The central themes of these studies are the psychological implications of coming out of gay adolescent to their parents and its impacts on parent-child interactions. In comparison, such studies in the social context of Asian countries, particularly in the Chinese family are relatively few in number. Most studies focused on the cultural differences between Western and Chinese societies and its implication on the outlook, politics and identities of gay and lesbian within and without the Chinese families in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Chou, 1996, 1997, 2000; Kong, 2000; Simon, 2004). A thorough review of the past literature and empirical studies in this area found that, there is no specific study of the Chinese gay men (and lesbian) in Malaysia.

#### **2.1 Being Gay in The Western family**

There have been numerous studies on being gay in the family conducted in the West and they mainly focus on the coming out of gay and lesbian individuals,

especially adolescent in their families (Ben-Ari, 1995; Savin-William, 1998, 2001; Gramling et al., 2000; LaSala, 2000; Merighi et al., 2000; Elizur, 2001; Valentine et al., 2003; also in Wilcox & Allen, 2000). The following discussion describes the meaning of “coming out,” its implications on gay adolescent and parent-child relationship as reported in these studies.

### **Coming Out**

Coming out or coming out of the closet, according to Cohen and Stein (1986: 32; cited in Davies, 1996b) means

*a complicated developmental process which involves, at a psychological level, a person's awareness and acknowledgement of homosexual thoughts and feelings. For some persons, coming out ultimately leads to public identification as a gay man or lesbian. Various factors will affect the relative positive or negative meaning the individual places on the identity which emerges as a result of the coming out process.*

Hence, the coming out process has been regarded as the pivotal part of the development of personal and social identity, self-esteem, and satisfying relations with others for gay and lesbian individuals (Davies, 1996b). Meanwhile, numerous models of coming out (Three models of coming out have been reviewed in Appendix A) have been formulated over the last two decades to account for this developmental process (ibid.). Due to its proclaimed importance in personal and gay identity development, it has become the central theme of studies on the psychological well being and interpersonal interaction among gay and lesbian, particularly among gay adolescent.

### **Coming Out to Parents and Its Psychological Implications**

Numerous studies have been conducted on coming out to parents and its psychological implication on youths (Savin-William, 2001). It is generally agreed that coming out to others is considered psychologically healthy for gay individuals (LaSala, 2000). However, according to Savin-William (2001), the empirical studies on the

relationship between psychological health and coming out, especially adolescents' coming out to parents, have thus far demonstrated three seemingly contradictory results: first, coming out to parents is related to psychological health problem; second, coming out to parents is related to better psychological functioning; and lastly, coming out to parents is unrelated to psychological health. Noting the contradictory nature of these findings, Savin-William (ibid.) states that these studies generally reflect the correlational rather than causal relationship between coming out and psychological health; hence further studies are needed to trace the causality between the two factors.

### ***Coming Out and Parent-Child Interaction***

Past studies have also indicated that coming out to parents can be troublesome and stressful for gay adolescent (D'Augelli, 1991; cited in Savin-William, 1998; LaSala, 2000; Wilcox & Allen, 2000). This is mainly because the adolescent anticipates that their parents will estrange, reject or even abuse them (Savin-William, 1998; Wilcox & Allen, 2000). Savin-William (1998, 2001) and LaSala's (2000) studies show that parents' actual reactions include: shock, guilt, anger, embarrassment, rejection, estrangement, violence or even threats of murder, when they found out about their son or daughter being gay. It has also been suggested that parents experience Kubler-Ross' grieving process – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance [Kubler-Ross' model of grieving is originally used to account for the grieving process in person who discovers one's own impending death (Savin-William, 2001)], after the shock of discovering their son or daughter being gay (ibid.). However, as indicated by Savin-William (2001), so far the understanding of the factors influencing parental reactions to their child's coming out are lacking.

Findings of past studies also show that 60-77% of gay and lesbian decide to come out to their parents (Berger, 1990 and Bryant & Demian, 1994; cited in LaSala, 2000). However, many gay and lesbian adolescent delay their coming out to parents

until they left home for the fear of adverse reaction from the parents, (Savin-William, 1998). The main motivations for gay and lesbian to come out to their parents are the hope to increase the closeness and to be honest with their parents (Ben-Ari, 1995).

Despite the positive or negative implications of the coming out to one's parents, it is evident from the attention given in literature, that coming out has been the central part of the personal and gay identity development, psychological well being, and also in determining the parent-child interaction among gays and lesbians in Western society. Findings from these studies will give some insight into the cultural differences between Western and Chinese societies that affects the experience of Chinese gay men in their families.

## **2.2 Cultural Differences between Western and Chinese Societies and Its Implications for Understanding Being Gay in The Chinese Family**

In a comparative study of gay and lesbian politic movements between the Anglo-American and Chinese (in East Asia) societies, Chou (2001: 32) argues that the Western notion of coming out is the manifestation of the "Western value of individualism, discourse of rights, talking culture, high level of anonymity in metropolitan cities, and the prioritisation of sex as the core of selfhood." He added that, the centrality of coming out in parent-child interaction, as mentioned earlier may also be related to these individualized and liberalized cultural and political values (ibid.):

*The model of coming out is hinged upon notions of the individual as an independent, discrete unite segregated economically, socially, and geographically from the familial-kinship network. In America, individual frankness, the willingness to verbalize one's feelings, and the determination to defend one's right to speak up are treated as major salient features of individual's life (Carbaugh, 1988). Honesty to one's parents through verbal communication is seen as vital to a genuine self.*

Contrary to the Western notion of individualism and liberalism in defining the self and interpersonal interaction, including parent-child interaction (cf. Hsu, 1981); the Chinese individual's conception of self is formed in relation to the familial-kinship and social groups he or she belongs (Elwyn, 1990; Chou, 2001). Furthermore, within this construct, the parent-child relationship is considered as the most important relationship that defines a person's selfhood. Thus, in Chinese society, everyone is first and foremost a son or daughter of his or her parents before he or she can be anyone else (Hsu, 1953; cited in Chou, 2001).

This understanding of selfhood is sanctioned by the Confucian ethic of 五常 (*wu chang*) or the five cardinal relationships, they are relationship between father and son (parent and child); husband and wife; between brothers; between friends and between ruler and subject (Becker & Barnes, 1961; Lang 1968; Hsu, 1981; Lee, 1986). The fact that parent-child relationship is listed on top of the list, and that three of these relationships are family relationships reflect the utmost importance of kinship, especially parent-child relationship in defining one's selfhood and interpersonal interaction in the Chinese society. Furthermore, the interpersonal interaction within these generation, age and sex stratified relationships, is also governed by the Confucian ethic of 孝 (*xiao*) or filial piety – “the root of all virtue” (originated from *Classic of Filial Piety*, cited in Lang, 1968: 10), particularly in the parents-child relationship (cf. Lang 1968; Hsu, 1981; Chou, 2001).

### **2.2.1 Filial Piety**

In more practical terms, filial piety requires the children to respect his or her parents, follow their wishes, provide for them and take care of them any time and under any circumstances (Lang, 1968; Hsu, 1981). As stated by Hsu (1981: 81)



*Economic support is not, however, the only way in which Chinese children are obligated to their parents. The son not only has to follow the Confucian dictum that “parents are always right,” but at all times and in all circumstances he must try to satisfy their wishes and look after their safety ... In the service of the elders, no effort was too extraordinary or too great.*

Filial piety, however, is not just an obligation that the children have to fulfil when the parents are alive; they are also obliged to do so even after the death of their folks. As stated in the Confucian dictum of 生事以礼, 慎终追远 (*sheng shi yi li, shen zhong zhui yuan*) (Shi, 1985: 66), which literally means, serve the parents with respect when they are alive, when they die, conduct their funeral with prudence and keep them in remembrance. Nevertheless, this practice is also extended to the worship of one's ancestors (Hsu, 1971; Stockman, 2000).

In addition to serving the parents, there is another important obligation for the children, particularly the sons, that is, to continue the family lineage through marriage and procreation. This is also sanctioned by the Confucian doctrine of filial piety, which is reflected in the well-known Confucian saying: 不孝有三, 无后为大 (*bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da*), meaning, “there are three unfilial acts, the worst is to be without posterity” (Lee, 1986; Chang, 1990) [The other two unfilial acts are: first, did not warn against the parents' mistake, hence causes the parents to be in embarrassment; and second, did not attempt to improve the destitution of the household, when the parents are aged and ill (Complete Dictionary of Chinese Vocabulary, 2001)].

According to Chang (1990), this Confucian ethic is related to the Chinese descent ideology or the 家族观念 (*jia zu guan nian*), which is patrilineal based. The basic values that the descent ideology promotes are continuity and perpetuation of the patrilineage. Base on these basic values, each male in the patrilineage system is treated as an indispensable part in continuing the descent line (ibid.). While surname or

family name (cf. Freedman, 1970) and the 香火 (*xiang huo*) or the “incense smoke at the ancestral shrines” (Hsu, 1971: 75), which is the ancestor worship, are the two main subjects to be continued and perpetuated by, and only by the male descendants. Therefore, it is considered as the most unfilial act, if the son does not continue the family lineage that encompasses: marriage, having male descendant, continuing the family name and *xiang huo*. Failure to fulfill these filial obligations will have grave consequences for the son in the family. A son is either no more to be regarded as a son, or he has to reclaim his status as the son by returning to the fold of tradition (Becker & Barnes, 1961). See Appendix B for a more elaborated review on Confucianism, filial piety and descent ideology.

### **2.2.2 Being Gay in The Chinese Family**

Based on the Chinese conceptions of self and ethic of conduct, Chou (1997, 2001) has identified several unique features of Chinese 同志 (*tongzhi*) in the Chinese family [*Tongzhi* is the most popular contemporary Chinese word for lesbians, bisexuals and gay people. The word is a Chinese translation from a Soviet communist term “comrade”, which refers to the revolutionaries that shared a comradeship. The term was first adopted by Chinese in Republican China, and then taken both by the Communist and Nationalist Party to refer to comrades struggling for the communist/nationalist revolution. *Tong* (同) literally means “same/homo”, the same Chinese word for “homo(sexual)”, and the word *zhi* (志) means “goal”, “spirit” or “orientation”. It is a telling point that as Hong Kong approached reintegration with China in 1997, *tongzhi* adopted the most sacred term in Communist China as their identity, signifying both a desire to indigenise sexual politics and to reclaim their cultural identity. The reappropriation struck the community for its positive cultural references, gender-neutrality, de-sexualising of the stigma of homosexuality, its politics beyond the homo-

hetero binarism, and its indigenous cultural identity for integrating the sexual into the social. Within several years, it has become the most common usage in Hong Kong and Taiwan, though the English term “gay” is also still commonly used, sometimes interchangeably with *tongzhi*. (Chow, 2001: 27-28)]:

1. that Chinese gay man should be understood within the context of his relationship with his family, and not as an isolated individual that seek for personal liberation.
2. that the major problem for Chinese gay man is not the oppression or discrimination from his social environment, but the reaction of his parents.
3. that the problem for the parents is not only to accept that their son is gay, but also to face the shame for having a deviant son who does not get married (continue the family lineage).
4. since the son is expected to be filial to his parents, hurting his parents can be the worst experience for Chinese gay.
5. hence the Western notion of coming out can be culturally problematic for Chinese gay man because it implies separating oneself from his parents, family and culture that define his existence.

These features are commonly found among Chinese gay men in East Asia – China, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Ho, 1995; Chou, 1996, 1997, 2000; Simon, 2004). For example, Simon (2004) argues that marriage and childbirth are the major questions revolving around the issue of homosexuality in Taiwan. The Taiwanese gay men are under much pressure to get married and continue the family lineage even after they have come out to their parents, as cited in Simon (ibid: 72):

*Gay men, in fact, often quote the Confucian scholar Mencius as they deal with family guilt: “There are three kinds of unfilial behaviour, the greatest of which is not providing descendents” (bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da). These cultural expectations are so strong that some gay men often receive the greatest pressure to marry after “coming out” to their parents. One man in Tainan told me that his mother insists that he marry: “She tells me I have to get married even if I am gay. She says that I can have as many male lovers as I want on the side, but I have to get married and have a family.”*

These features of Chinese gay may also be applicable among the Chinese gay men in Malaysia. A case study by Ismail Baba (2001) has found that a Chinese Malaysian gay man, who has accepted himself being gay faced problems with regard to the social and cultural expectation for him to get married and to continue the family name (Refer Section 1.0.2).

These studies seem to suggest that Chinese gay men are experiencing conflict of norms in conforming to the Confucian ethic of conduct or filial piety, especially with regard to the continuation of family lineage.

### **2.2.3 Adjusting to Conflict of Norms in The Chinese Family Setting**

Previous studies also found that it is not impossible for the Chinese gay men to integrate their homosexuality, including their gay relationship into their family (Chou, 1996, 1997, 2000; Simon, 2004). In this context, Chou (1997, 2001) advocated an indirect, not on-to-the-face yet harmonious approach of “coming out” to one’s parents – *coming home*. Through this approach, one’s same-sex partner can be accepted into his family as close friend or adopted brother. Because the boundaries of the Chinese familial system are flexible and friendship is also treated as one of the five cardinal relationships in Confucian dictum. Thus, so long as one’s partner can be located into the cardinal relationship, as friend or brother in this case, he will be accepted as familial

members. The effectiveness of this strategy is recorded in many cases throughout China, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Chou, 1996, 1997, 2000; Simon, 2004). Nevertheless, not all Chinese gay men have such receptive parents/families. Many Chinese gay men have moved away from their families to either the metropolitan areas or even abroad to avoid the pressure from their families (Simon, 2004; also Chou, 1997).

From the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that the main issues of being gay in the Western family revolving around the question of coming out to one's parents, whereas the major issue for being gay in the Chinese family is centred around the question of locating one's homosexuality in the familial-kinship system and conforming to the Confucian ethic of conduct or filial piety, especially with regard to continuing the family lineage. Therefore, the model of coming out, which is based on the Western approach to self may be inadequate in the understanding of being gay in the Chinese social and cultural context (cf. Hsu, 1971, 1985; cited in Berry, 2001). Although previous studies indicate that one can accommodate his homosexuality or gay relationship in the familial-kinship system by locating one's same-sex partner within the cardinal relationships. However, thus far, there is little knowledge about the difficulty for the Chinese gay men in conforming to the Confucian ethic of filial piety and how do they adjust to this difficulty.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

#### 3.0 Introduction

In order to gain an insight into the adjustment problem of Chinese gay men in their families, two concepts from role theory – role conflict and role adjustment are introduced in this study. The following review will hence focus on the basic tenets of role theory and its two concepts, role conflict and role adjustment, which will be adapted respectively as the conceptual framework and conceptual model for this study.

#### 3.1 Role Theory

Role theory concerns one of the most important part of social life – patterned and characteristic social behaviours or roles (Biddle, 1986). It is derived from a theatrical metaphor that can be captured in some analogues drawn from a famous passage in William Shakespeare's "As You Like It" (Act 2, scene 7; cited in Turner, 2003: 384):

*All the world's a stage  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts.*

From this passage, numerous analogues are drawn between the players on the stage and social actors in society: players' part and social actors' positions in society; script of the play and norms or expected behaviours in society and so on (Turner, 2003). Based on this theatrical metaphor, Biddle (1986) argues that if players' performances on the stage are distinguishable and predictable because they follow the script and part they play, then it is reasonable to believe that social actors' behaviours

are also related to the positions and scripts they assumed. And hence, Biddle (1986:68) contends that role theory “concerns itself with a triad of concepts: patterned and characteristic social behaviours, parts or identities that are assumed by social participants, and scripts or expectations for behaviour that are understood by all and adhered to by performers.”

However, Biddle (1986) warns that due to the vague theatrical metaphor and the different usage of terms, there is some confusion in the use of the term “role” in referring to the three concepts above. For instance, some use the term “role” to refer to characteristic behaviours, others use it to indicate social parts to be played, and some defined it as script for social conduct (ibid.). In order to avoid the possible confusion, Biddle’s (1986:69) terminologies will be used in this thesis: **social position** refers to parts to be played; **role expectation** refers to script for social conduct; and **role** refers to characteristic behaviours.

### 3.1.1 The Key Elements of Role Theory

#### ***Social Position***

According to role theorists, the society is “a network of variously interrelated positions or statuses, within which individuals enact roles” (Turner, 1974: 161). In this construct, social units are made up of interrelated social positions, and the form and size of these units are based on the size, the degree of differentiation, complexity, and interrelatedness of social positions that form them (Turner, 1974). And individual understands his or her identities, placement and function in a group, organization or society bases on the position he or she occupies (Turner, 1974, 2003).