

LENS

Coming Out to My Parents in China by Video

Introduction by Ania Bartkowiak Video by Mengwen Cao

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Before showing her parents a video she had prepared, Mengwen Cao had faith that they would understand. Still, she considered the implications of what she was about to reveal.

“‘Saving face’ is an important aspect of Chinese culture,” she explained. “The stigma of being queer prevents people to come out.”

Although L.G.B.T.Q. rights in China have come a long way in the past few years, largely thanks to social activism, estimates show that only 5 percent of China’s gay community is fully out. And there are few protections for China’s L.G.B.T.Q. community regarding reproductive rights or marriage.

“China is still not a very welcoming environment for queer people to come out,” Ms. Cao said.

Still, she felt she could not be truly close with her parents if they did not know and, after making her video, called them on FaceTime from New York.

To behold their expressions as they follow her graceful cadences while she calmly revealed her greatest secret is to feel an emotional hush at the intimacy glimpsed in this pivotal family moment. The discussion that follows is filled (as is often the case in times of personal unveilings and upheavals) with a complex mix of tentative acceptance, lingering disappointment and the wrestling of deep love with disparate hopes.

“I wanted to leave my parents enough time and space to react and reflect,” Ms. Cao said. “They told me later that they actually shared the video letter to their friends to get advice.”

Her video began as a personal project, but Ms. Cao hopes that it can encourage the use of storytelling to explore queer experiences beyond coming-out narratives, and to further conversations about the issues faced by the Asian queer community.

“I also hope we can all participate in Chinese L.G.B.T.Q. advocacy,” she said, adding that the Chinese branch of P.F.L.A.G., an organization dedicating to helping the families of gay and queer people, has support groups to help parents whose children have come out. “I hope when they feel comfortable, they could join that active community to shift views of their peers.”

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