



“We’re Not Cheaters”: Polyamory, Mixed-Orientation Marriage and the Construction of Radical Honesty

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ABSTRACT: Through self-reflexive ethnography, this paper discusses the notion of radical honesty and an assembly of issues around it, including gay closet, bisexual erasure, marital fidelity, polyamory and the research ethics. Three phenomena in different contexts converge in the author’s academic and intimate life: polyamorists’ dissociation with ‘cheating’ by valuing ‘responsible/ethical non-monogamy’, the denunciation of Chinese same-sex-attracted men for ‘deceiving’ their straight wives (tongqis), and the pressure on the researcher to disclose certain privacies in order to obtain “informed consent” in her fieldwork. This paper shows how ‘cheating’ is Othered in hetero-monogamous marriage, Chinese gay communities, tongqi groups, polyamorists and the academia in different yet interconnected ways. It contextualizes and problematizes the individualistic tendencies and the exclusionary effects in the rising discourse of radical honesty. It also questions the universality of the values of authenticity, transparency and verbal communication in these situations. In the conclusion, this paper suggests several possibilities to rethink radical honesty.

KEYWORDS: Mixed-orientation Marriage, Polyamory, Radical Honesty, Research Ethics, Informed Consent

In the last two decades, the term ‘radical honesty’ has gained great popularity in Anglophone societies. Brad Blanton (1994) first elaborated this term in a best-selling self-help book, encouraging his readers to dig into the “core of truth, not



just the outward trappings”, and to be open about their “true” identities, histories and desires. This idea is especially worshiped among polyamorists in contemporary Western¹ societies. Polyamory, literally ‘many loves’, is often defined as consensual, responsible and ethical non-monogamy, as opposed to ‘cheating’ (Anapol, 2010; Emens, 2009). For polyamorists, radical honesty is counterpoint to the dissemblance attendant to monogamous fidelity; it is also an everyday practice that subverts the structural “compulsory monogamy” (Emens, 2009, p. 38; Fiscel, 2016, p. 188).

While celebrating the emancipatory and transformative effects of this new form of intimacy, few polyamory texts have framed honesty and cheating beyond individual choices; the economic-cultural-legal conditions that make disclosure preferable are less discussed (Haritaworn, Klesse, & Lin, 2006; Noël, 2006). This paper intends to address this gap through self-reflexive ethnography (Plummer, 1995; Stacey, 1988). It unfolds along three interwoven themes: polyamory, mixed-orientation marriage and the fieldwork.

An Engaged Researcher in the Polyamory and Queer Fields

Auto-ethnographers have rightly pointed out that self-exposure has to be “essential to the argument ... not a decorative flourish” (Behar, 1996, p. 14); and the autobiographic accounts should not be uncritically confessional but excite and provoke an engaged questioning in the reader (Jackson, 1990, p. 4). Bearing these caveats in mind, I will explain my personal encounters with radical honesty in different scenarios; specific enough to acknowledge my partial knowledge (Haraway, 1988), while brief enough to avoid navel-gazing.

After two monogamous relationships with a woman and a man serially, I started to practice polyamory and since 2015 have actively participated in related events in Europe. While finding polyamory well accommodating to my bisexuality² without having to cheat, I also think the insistence on radical honesty can sometimes cause as many problems as it solves. I recall in a polyamorists’ meetup a woman was talking with tearful eyes about her struggles: her husband accepted her coming out as polyamorous, but he himself chose to be monogamous, and did not want to know much about her other lovers. However, she wished her husband

would not only recognize her relationship status, but also listen to her sharing and feel whole-hearted “compersion” – the antonym of jealousy, a neologism among polyamorists (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 595). Her full disclosure was overwhelming for her husband, whose refusal to know the details frustrated her in return. Instances like this have made me wonder how the supposedly ethical practice of truth-telling can turn hurtful.

My mixed feelings towards the polyamory community’s disparagement of dishonesty also derive from my sensitivity to the term ‘marriage fraud’ (*pianhun*) in Chinese society, which was one of the main topics of my doctoral research project from 2013 to 2017 (Zhu, 2017a). ‘Marriage Fraud’ is commonly represented in Chinese media as a ‘gay’³ man marrying an uninformed woman (*tongqi*), who later finds out the ‘truth’ and feels deceived. Numerous *tongqis* have come out publicly to condemn the ‘gay frauds’. When I talked about my research at polyamorists’ meetups, my peers often commented, “have any mixed-orientation couples in China thought of consensual non-monogamy? That would be a relief for both of them!”

Indeed, literature has shown that an open marriage is not uncommon for mixed-orientation spouses in Western societies who choose not to divorce (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2016; Wolkomir, 2009). In China, however, openly negotiating a consensual non-monogamous mixed-orientation marriage seems neither appealing nor practical. I have discussed elsewhere why mixed-orientation marriage is problematized as ‘tragedy’ and ‘fraud’ rather than a negotiable relationship in China, and how the two seemingly antagonistic identities *tongqi* and ‘gay’ are in fact symbiotic (Zhu, 2017b). What is yet to be discussed is certain normativity implied in those polyamorists’ reactions and in mixed-orientation-marriage literature, where disclosure and candid communication seem to be the indispensable preconditions of doing mixed-orientation marriage ethically. Negotiation, based on liberal individualism and contractualism, seems to have become a self-evident, universal virtue, which nevertheless contradicts the lived experiences of some of my respondents in a different socio-cultural milieu.

The very research process on ‘marriage fraud’ is closely related to truth-telling, too. I carried out my 8-month fieldwork on same-sex-attracted people in and outside of different-sex marriages in China in 2014. I did participant observation in three online groups of *tongqis* and in some LGBT communities’ online and offline

activities. I also interviewed 12 self-identified *tongqis* and 7 married same-sex-attracted men. While asking them about their stories and opinions on sexuality and marital fidelity, I, an intimate spectator, was also inevitably subject to the inquisition from them about my own sexuality, relationship status and attitudes. Both the researcher and the researched were thus weighing and balancing whether and how much to disclose to each other. As I will show later, such reverse gaze has trapped a bisexual researcher in methodological and ethical complexities.

Overall, polyamory, mixed-orientation marriage and the ethnographic fieldwork are experientially intertwined in my academic-intimate life, all surrounding the theme of non/disclosure⁴. I will quilt them into a patchwork, where one piece is connected and furthered by the other (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 477). The quilting starts with the atypical “coming-out” experience of a Chinese same-sex-attracted man to his wife, which illustrates the grey area between fully passing and being openly gay. Meanwhile, I stitch into the discussion of ‘marriage fraud’ my own struggles with the research ethics of ‘informed consent’ when doing fieldwork as a bisexual researcher among *tongqis* and gay activists. Then I come back to Yao’s non/consensual non/monogamous practices and its implications to polyamory. Read diffractively (Barad, 2007), these three patches will together depict how monogamists, polyamorists, *tongqis*, ‘gay’ men, bisexuals and anthropologists construct themselves as ethical subject via confession and the Othering of ‘cheating’ in different yet interconnected ways. In the end, I will rethink cheating and truth-telling beyond an individualistic and universalized understanding of radical honesty.

Non/Disclosure of Same-Sex Desire in a Different-Sex Marriage

Yao is a civil servant in his forties. He lives with his wife and seven-year-old son in a metropolis in Southern China, while occasionally having secret casual sex via same-sex dating websites. He told me that he had “that kind of feeling” towards men for as long as he can remember, but he did not know the word ‘homosexuality’ until graduate school. Soon after graduation, he got married to a classmate, because they were the only two unmarried, and their teachers and classmates were warm-heartedly matchmaking for them.

Like many other 'gay' and *tongqi* respondents, he took marriage as something "you should do when it's time". Although he had already been in an underground relationship with a married middle-aged man then, he firmly believed in the necessity of a normative marriage for his social status, for continuing his family line and for old-age security. A marriage is believed to be much more stable than a legally unprotected and socially stigmatic same-sex relationship.

"What if I Were Gay?"

I asked if his wife knew about his sexual orientation. He said she did suspect it: "I might have left some traces when I surfed the Internet. She confronted me once, asking if I was gay (*tongxinglian*). I said, 'certainly not!' Of course, I'd never admit it."

Yao acknowledged that his "certainly not!" was probably not convincing at all. He even speculated that his wife had long known about his same-sex attraction, but was just "very smart not to 'poke the paper window'". This is a Chinese saying for unveiling something that all parties have known tacitly. Indeed, there is a subtle but significant difference between knowing and revealing, and between acquiescence and announcement. Naming someone, as Butler eloquently discusses in her works on speech act and interpellation, has a subject-making effect (Butler, 1993, pp. 7–8). If Yao said yes, I'm gay, he would then be burdened with the stigma of a 'marriage fraud', and his wife would also be encapsulated into the dominant rhetoric of victimized *tongqi*, regardless of their own identification. In this sense, Yao's denial is not necessarily a lying about his 'gay truth', but can be a rejection of the gay/*tongqi* identity politics.

Despite denying being 'gay', Yao did not avoid his wife's question altogether. Instead, he tentatively asked her back,

"Let's just suppose, what if I were [gay]? What would you do?"

She said, 'I couldn't do anything with it.'

'But you could divorce me.' I suggested.

She replied, 'Well, even if I divorced you and married a straight man, he might still have affairs with other women. Yet, if I've already had a responsible husband, what's the difference?'"

Within a few words, they have exchanged more than what was spoken. Yao's reversion of the 'are-you-gay' question shifts the conversation from an inquisition into his 'truth self' to a discussion of a hypothetical scenario. As he said, his wife might have guessed right about his orientation. Therefore, this question is neither fully factual nor purely fictional. Like playing Tai Chi, the couple probed into each other's un/knowingness in a careful, roundabout fashion. Yao's 'what-if' question gave himself some leeway: if she turned out nonjudgmental or even supportive, this conversation could be a starting point of a successful coming-out; and if she reacted negatively, he could still go back to his earlier denial. Implicitly he was asking: which 'truth' would you rather live with?

The reluctance of Yao's wife to 'poke the paper window' can be interpreted in many ways: it may suggest her tacit acceptance for Yao's untold same-sex attraction; it may imply her fear of divorce, considering the social importance of a "complete" family for their son; maybe she thought it unnecessary to know in detail what her husband was doing (sexually or otherwise) outside their home; or perhaps in her perception, having a 'normal' husband browsing male-to-male erotic websites occasionally is as 'true' as, if not more than, having a 'gay' husband who conducted 'marriage fraud' from the very beginning. With limited second-hand information, I cannot know what she was really thinking. However, if I simply took the fraud/victim dichotomy, I would have to foreclose the aforesaid possibilities, and shelve a mixed-orientation couple's own understanding of what matters in marriage.

"A Responsible Husband"

In Yao's retelling, his wife used the term "responsible" to describe him. The younger generation may find it unacceptable to say that a closeted 'gay' husband with extra-marital same-sex affairs is responsible at all. Influenced by consumerism and hetero-mono-normative pop culture, many tend to believe that a responsible husband must be faithful, and has to provide romantic love and sexual satisfaction to his wife (Pan, 2006). However, it is only since Western modernity that marriage has begun to be bundled together with love, sex and exclusivity (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2012). This package was popularized in China even later, partly due to the 1980s one-child policy that separated sexual pleasure in and outside of marriage from reproduction (Pan, 2006; Yan, 2003).

In contrast, Yao’s wife’s understanding of responsibility demonstrates a more pragmatic idea about marriage that still has a strong influence on Chinese people’s marital decisions today: a husband is considered responsible as long as he has a stable job, provides for the family, does not beat his wife, does not cheat, and even if he does cheat, he ultimately returns to the family (Zhang, Parish, Huang & Pan, 2012). For the individuals who have been tightly bound by filial obligations in a country where eldercare is mainly provided by the offspring rather than the welfare state (Chou, 1997; Nie, 2016), responsibility in marriage is never just a matter of love, sex and fidelity between two autonomous subjects.

When comparing such an interpretation of responsibility with that of Western polyamory, we should be careful not to adopt an imperialist narrative of the latter as sexually and emotionally advanced (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 519). For polyamorists, a responsible partner should be first and foremost honest. He should also be good at non-violent communication, have safe sane consensual sex, negotiate continuously and, if things don’t work, break up peacefully (Easton & Hardy, 1997; Veaux & Rickert, 2014). Such an emotion-centered understanding of responsibility reflects the rising of the ‘pure relationship’, featuring equality, freewill and reciprocity (Giddens, 1992), a relationship form that is nonetheless not universally idealized.

To avoid the binary thinking of the West and the rest, however, we should notice that Yao and his wife are situated in a hybrid reality (Hall, 1992; Wong, 2010): China is now experiencing rapid individualization and the moralization of the marriage-love-sex-fidelity package, but such a process is mingled with the still burdensome duties towards family continuity and old-age security. The tension in such hybridity is complicating the marital decisions of many Chinese, gay and straight alike. Even for those Westerners whose socio-cultural environments allow them to choose polyamory relatively easily, they also live with many hybrid, conflicting values, which are often understated in the language of progressiveness.

“We Talk about Everything”

Besides responsibility, Yao’s marriage seems to have a different standard of transparency. He told me that he and his wife were very close friends in graduate school, and they would “talk about everything” (*wuhua bushuo*). For instance, he said, as

part of their course work on Marxist Theories, they had discussed the patriarchal nature of hetero-monogamous marriage, and agreed that cheating and prostitution are inseparable supplements of this institution, which was quite radical among their peers. However, besides talking about the theories, they never clearly expressed their personal attitudes towards infidelity, nor did they negotiate before or during marriage how to deal with cheating, if it ever happens.

Yao's alleged willingness to "talk about everything" with his wife may sound self-contradictory, because he did not disclose his same-sex attraction and his casual sex with men. However, no partner can literally share everything in life; and we tend to accept that spouses who do not disclose all the trivialities can still be considered candid. The question then becomes: is homosexuality a deep dark secret so critical to Yao's integrity that withholding it would spoil his sincerity of "talking about everything"? Trapped in the obsession with knowing more about our own and others' sexualities, are we still able to deem certain untold sexual behaviors and desires trivial?

This, I argue, is one of the major flaws of the popular discourse on 'radical honesty': it encourages people to reveal deep-rooted truths, without questioning why certain truths are so fundamental. Foucault has shown us how homosexuality, among other sexual "perversions", has been essentialized and stigmatized in Western modernity (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). Such a subject-making process is now imprinted on Chinese same-sex-attracted subjects, too, via (de)pathologization, (de)criminalization and the increasing gay rights discourse (Kang, 2012). Once the 'gay truth' is established, it is difficult to undo it, nor see a husband's occasional same-sex encounters as mere behaviors, as friendship (Foucault, 1997), or in some Chinese married men's words, as "a small hobby like playing mahjong" (Wei & Cai, 2012, p. 62). The construction of the 'gay truth' locks same-sex-attracted people perpetually in an epistemological closet, where they are not only required to stay silent, but also demanded to reveal more (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 70).

Polyamorists do not necessarily have a gay closet, but they are no less pressured to reveal their own 'truths'. Being radically honest about "everything" as a polyamorist often involves much more meticulous self-scrutiny and self-exposure of one's feelings, behaviors and thoughts; and the more difficult and shameful it is to tell certain "truths", the more relief they can get from the telling (Foucault, 1978). While giving them moral satisfaction, such high standard of transparency also puts

them on the treadmill of knowledge-pleasure. As shown below, the imperative to disclose also manifests in a researcher’s very studies on disclosure.

Researching with Incomplete ‘Informed Consent’

For anthropologists, ‘informed consent’ is a basic principle to establish ethical research relationships. The researched generally need to know at least the topic of the research, the intended results of it, the measures taken to ensure anonymity, and the right to withdraw their consent before the texts are published, so that they can consent to the research based on sufficient information (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Theoretically, a researcher does not have to reveal proactively her sexual orientation and relationship status, because these are her privacies that neither the academic institute nor the respondents should force her to share. This was nevertheless more complex during my fieldwork, because nondisclosure of one’s sexual orientation was precisely an allergy of many *tongqi* respondents and gay activists, yet disclosing my bisexuality was difficult, too. Therefore, I had to constantly manage my image, to the extent that I seemed to be a dishonest researcher with several contradictory identities.

The Bisexual Eraser

The PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) is one of the most influential activist groups in China that supports lesbian and gay children to come out to their parents. It mainly relies on the immutability of the being-true-self rhetoric to encourage gay people to come out for themselves and for the gay rights movements (Wang, 2015, pp. 102–104). Accordingly, it also discourages ‘marriage fraud’, thus becoming one of the few gay groups that have a close liaison with *tongqis*. Introduced by the PFLAG, I accessed an online *tongqi* peer-support group, and started snow-ball sampling for interviewees therefrom.

Before the interviews started, I would routinely inform them of my research project and ask for their written or verbal consent. At this stage, most *tongqis* would ask me if I was a *tongqi* as well, and if not, why I was interested in this topic. Understandably, like any interpersonal story-telling, my *tongqi* respondents needed to know something about the interviewer and the audience before they could

select their wording, engage proper emotions, assemble certain ‘facts’ and ultimately weave them into a coherent narrative (Plummer, 1995). Many *tongqis* had expressed upfront their distrust in gay male researchers, whom they were afraid would only defend ‘marriage frauds’ and misrepresent *tongqis*. Some even went so far as to say that they would not want to talk to a lesbian researcher for the same reason. As for bisexuality, most *tongqis* in this group tended to believe it is “just an excuse of the cheaters”, insisting on the innateness and immutability of homosexuality (Zhu, 2017b). Knowing these taboos, I tried to avoid talking about my own sexual orientation, and focused on my academic interests on this issue.

However, oftentimes I was asked abruptly, “are you gay or straight?” Neither wanting to lie nor to come out as gay or bisexual, I would simply talk about my then monogamous boyfriend. This helped me to get away from further inquisition, because a different-sex relationship seemed suffice to establish my heterosexuality. Scholars have correctly argued that monogamous bisexuals often have difficulty claiming both monogamy and bisexuality because they are taken as mono-sexual (Klesse, 2005; Mint, 2004). Ironically, however, I experienced such erasure as a convenience in my fieldwork as much as oppression. Such convenience appeared in my daily-life, too. My then boyfriend provided me a shield against my parents’ and acquaintances’ prying eyes. I did not have to falter about my ‘singleness’ as I did when I was actually being with a woman. The benefits of my “straight” appearance often reminded me of Yao and other married ‘gay’ respondents, whose ‘normal’ marriage may also have saved them from endless gossips and embarrassment.

When I participated in PFLAG events, however, my answer to the same question “are you gay or straight” was different. Knowing previously their disdain on bisexuals as “poorly-self-identified” (*rentong buhao*) homosexuals, I was hesitant to disclose my heterosexual relationship, but simply told them that I had a girlfriend, yet we had broken up. I tried to carefully probe into the attitudes of some PFLAG parents towards bisexuality, but what I most commonly received were statements like “that’s strange”, “I’m not sure if it really exists”, or “those so-called bisexuals are ruining the reputation of the real gay people like our sons”. At those moments I always wondered, if I came out as bisexual right in front of them, would they change their mind? However, I never dared to speak that *B* word, due to my fear of discrimination, and my worries about losing rapport with these respondents.

Put together, the two statements “I have a boyfriend now” and “I had a girl-

friend before" were both true and false. I was shifting between playing 'straight' and performing 'gay', neither of which was a pre-existing fact. These labels only became temporarily and partially true through the interaction between myself, my interlocutors, the instant environment and the wider discursive-material context. If I were to do the same fieldwork now, I might be much braver to talk about bi-/pansexuality in front of my respondents, but retrospectively, my hesitation and timidity are still valuable. They made me a vulnerable yet compassionate researcher, and they became embodied reminders of the hardship many (sexual) minorities are still enduring today.

The Inevitable "Betrayal"

Just like my maneuvering around my bisexual 'truths', I had to carefully navigate my opinions on 'marriage fraud' as well. I could not promise my *tongqi* respondents that I would help them to condemn 'gay frauds' in my papers, which many journalists did in their one-sided, melodramatic reports.⁵ When some *tongqi* respondents explicitly required me to write in certain ways, I could only express my understanding, without clearly promising or refusing. In my later writing, bearing their trust and wishes in mind, I tried to represent their narratives comprehensively, including some gay-hating expressions attendant to their hurt feelings (Zhu, 2017b). However, as an anthropologist, I could not simply repeat their voice. My *tongqi* respondents may be displeased when reading my analysis that seems to exonerate the evil cheaters in their eyes. They may even withdraw their consent, claiming that they were ill-informed about my research purposes and my political stance.

Similarly, the gay activists may also be unhappy about my airing of the community's 'dirty laundry' by presenting some unhappy mixed-orientation marriages (Taylor, 2011). 'Betrayal' is thus inevitable for a researcher in such a personal-political battlefield; whether picking side or not, she may end up in "double jeopardy" (Becker, 1967, p. 244; Chu, 1997).

Was I being unethical in the field? And am I finally being honest about my previous dishonesty now? By portraying my multiple 'fake selves' in the field, I am not seeking forgiveness or pleasure via confession. Rather, I find it imperative to interrogate what makes speaking up easier in some occasions than others, and to what extent the principle of 'informed consent' is demanding researchers to 'out' their

privacies in exchange for academic integrity. In fact, the surveillance does not only come from the academia. As researchers we are often warned not to be merely voyeuristic when soliciting (sexual) stories (Plummer, 1995, p. 145; Thomas & Williams, 2016), but here we see that, reversely, a bisexual researcher can fall into the hetero- and homonormative gaze from her respondents as well.

Moreover, even for a 'perfectly normal' anthropologist without bisexual or other social stigmas, the ambition to give the respondents all the crucial information is still unachievable. As the research questions and findings are constantly reshaped during and after the fieldwork, and as the consequences of the research are hardly predictable, the informed consent is always incomplete (Davidson, 2008, p. 64). A transparent researcher, just like a transparent respondent, simply does not exist.

Non/Consensual Non/Monogamy

So far, we have seen how homophobia, bisexual erasure and compulsory disclosure in marriage and in fieldwork have worked together to demand gay and bisexual subjects to both keep silent and confess aloud. Polyamorists, on the other hand, seem to be particularly optimistic that our frankness, serving mainly as a self-caring and reciprocal practice, is radically different from Foucauldian confession (Cardoso & Mint, 2011). However, their effects are overlapping, both creating an explosion of knowledge, discipline (in both meanings), guilt and pleasure, and both encouraging endless self-censorship, self-rectification and self-betterment. Moreover, as confession, swaddled in the benign language of radical honesty, becomes increasingly moralized in polyamory communities, we seem to become less tolerant to those who refuse to reveal, and less patient to understand how less transparent relationship forms work.

I argue that such a quick boundary-drawing would be a loss for the polyamory movement, which could have transformed contemporary intimacies in a more profound way than challenging monogamy and promoting an honest way of loving more. As the following story demonstrates, there are many lessons to learn from the highly ambiguous non/consensual non/monogamy, both technically and epistemologically.

As we got more acquainted, Yao started to tell his unconventional sexual stories: having threesomes with his wife and other single men. His words became

much more succinct, and he cautiously requested me not to use a recorder. Since Yao was less sexually aroused by his wife, and she had some childhood trauma that made her fearful of penetration, they never consummated penial-vaginal sex in the first six years of marriage. With increasing reproductive pressure, they started to look for solutions. Instead of resorting to marriage therapy (which was, and still is, unpopular in China) or to assisted reproduction technologies, Yao proposed that they ask another man for help. He boldly suggested that they find a good-looking, more sexually-skillful man to make her relaxed and ready for intercourse. His wife stoutly rejected this idea until one year later, when her own wish to become a mother grew together with the urges from both families.

Throughout this year, the couple rarely exchanged their opinions on non-monogamy. Rather, Yao simply dropped her some links to adult videos and swingers' blogs. They did not discuss the possibilities of simultaneously loving two or more people, either; probably because they both tacitly valued their marriage and prioritized the reproductive goal, to which sex, no matter how 'deviant', was more of a means rather than an end.

After dating twelve single men via a swingers' online forum and having protected sex with some of them, Yao's wife started to feel less nervous about penetration. She got pregnant soon after. Besides the reproductive purpose, Yao told me that he had a "private motive (*sixin*)" in having threesomes – he wanted to watch and touch straight men's bodies. Since he had previously denied his homosexuality, this motive had to be kept as a perpetual secret from his wife. Again, Yao was caught between a rock and a hard place: to disclose this desire in their negotiation of threesomes was likely to essentialize him as a 'gay' man and thus a 'marriage fraud' in contemporary Chinese context; to withhold it, however, may be judged as being insincere, selfish and still dishonest.

Soon after her pregnancy, they stopped seeking threesomes, and never brought this topic up again. Their marriage went on like any 'normal' one, and according to Yao, they are both now focusing on parenting and their own careers. When asked if they would like to have more group sex or other sexual exploration in the future, Yao shook his head. He did not see it necessary to adventure, since they did not have the reproductive pressure any more. "Plus", he said, "she is a very conservative woman".

Yao used the word "conservative" and "traditional" several times to describe

his wife during our conversations, referring to her shyness, her passive sexuality, her diligence in parenting and housework, as well as her dedication to their marriage and family. One may see their sexual activities as rather liberal and even debauched, yet such ‘promiscuity’ is not necessarily contradictory to her “conservativeness”. They both serve the same goals, to procreate, and more broadly, to play the normative social roles as ‘responsible’ spouses as discussed earlier. Moreover, her being shy and “conservative” instead of being openly sex-positive or poly-affirmative may well be an apt survival skill for a married white-collar woman in China, where sexual scandals can easily jeopardize one’s professional and social life.

Admittedly, the whole story is Yao’s one-sided narrative, and his wife remains mysterious to me. I have been struggling with my “epistemic anxiety” (Cabot, 2016) as a researcher: am I doing her justice by muting her voice? Should I interview her in person so that I can cross-examine Yao’s words with hers? However, my goodwill to be fair would be futile and even unethical: it is Yao’s selective disclosure and her ambiguous reactions that made their marriage and threesomes work in the first place, so how could a researcher ethically break the balance and ‘give voice’ to the deliberately unspoken?

Moreover, we should take the adverse legal environment into account. Being silent and cautious about his sex life helps Yao to survive as a civil servant in China – note that consensual group sex among adults in private is still a crime in China: the crime of group licentiousness.⁶ Even with me, a researcher who promised to anonymize him, he may still envisage the risk of being caught and penalized. Therefore, “speaking simply” (Villiers, 2012, p. 25) also functions as self-protection against the oppressive state law.

Yao’s non-disclosure and their monogamous appearance seem very un-poly, but polyamorists do not have to repudiate their tactics altogether. In all these years, Yao and his wife have been surfing the silence and ambiguity in a normal-looking marriage. Within such opaque space, together they tacitly trivialized his same-sex attraction and the licentious aspect of their threesomes. They did not talk and investigate too much in relationships, and they seemed more easily settled with words and behaviors at face value. Polyamorists tend to have a stronger preference to putting “deep-seated truths” on the table, because for many of them the untold is the cause of endless suspicion and jealousy (Wosick-Correa, 2010,

p. 45). However, what if for some people ambiguity is an effective, even pleasurable, antidote to the same insecurities?

Yao's vagueness also provides ethnographers with valuable methodological implications. Qualitative researchers tend to fetishize 'in-depth' interview and be dissatisfied with dubious stories told in too few words. We seem to follow an "ideology of depth" (Chow, 1995), hoping to dig out what is buried in the respondents' (sexual) life and make meanings from them. While the binaries of west/rest, man/woman, gay/straight, closet/coming out has been constantly challenged by feminist, queer and post-colonial theories, fewer efforts are made among intellectuals to complicate the binary between the depth and the surface, the profound and the shallow (cf. Villiers, 2012). In obscure cases like Yao's, we might resist the urge to find out our respondents' 'true' feelings or thoughts 'deep down', but instead take the scarce words literally, read them with and against some seemingly irrelevant stories in other space-time, and see how they grow together unexpectedly.

Conclusion: Rethinking Radical Honesty

In this paper, I have weaved my ethnographic encounters in polyamory, gay and *tongqi* communities into a patchwork. Together they point towards the problematics of the popular discourse on cheating and honesty that is enshrined simultaneously in polyamory best-sellers, in the epistemology of gay closet and in anthropologists' guidelines. First, such discourse assumes certain deep-rooted truth in one's sexual identities and desires, which reinforces the essentializing and problematizing of sexualities. Second, it prioritizes open, predominantly verbal, communication about these truths, demeaning other means of interaction in interpersonal relationships. And third, it universalizes honesty as a noble virtue, a neoliberal free choice made in a socio-cultural vacuum.

The above storylines have another common theme, namely, the construction of ethical subjects by delineating and abjecting its Others (Butler, 1993; Hall, 1996). Polyamory activists have correctly pointed out that mono-normativity sets up cheaters as its Other, creating a false duality of monogamy versus cheating (Mint, 2004). Unfortunately, polyamory tends to deploy the same Othering technique to establish its legitimacy, assertively distinguishing itself from cheating. As an ironic result, cheating becomes a common strawman for both monogamists and poly-

amorists to moralize their relationship forms. Both are also utilizing and consolidating the dichotomy of lying versus truth-telling. In this sense, polyamory is not radically different from monogamy as it claims to be.

We can also see the Othering technique in Chinese gay community. Facing the condemnation of ‘marriage fraud’, those out-and-proud tend to alienate themselves from the “frauds”. In a campaign in 2016, for instance, some lesbian and gay people came out publicly and vowed “I’m homosexual (*tongxinglian*), and I won’t marry someone of the opposite sex”.⁷ This vow is another example of the individualistic framing of dishonesty, which exonerates the social pressure and legal benefits that pushed/seduced both gay and straight people into hetero-mononormative marriage in the first place. Such a strategy further stratifies the Chinese gay community by labeling the respectable and the despicable, echoing the neo-liberal ethos that normalizes desires and privatizes responsibilities (Rofel, 2007).

Likewise, those anthropologists who disobey the academic imperative to obtain ‘informed consent’ are prone to arousing controversies (Babbie, 2011). However, researchers have questioned to what extent this demand is more about circumventing legal liabilities of the researchers and their institutes rather than building trustworthy research relationships (Detamore, 2010; Mitchell, 1993). It also inspects the researcher’s personal integrity too much, while sidelining the environments that pressure a researcher into nondisclosure. Howard Becker (1964) argues that it is misleading to ask under what circumstances a researcher’s ‘dishonesty’ and its consequential conflict can be excused. He sharply reversed the question: “Under what circumstances will the report of a study fail to provoke conflict? Can such a failure be justified?” (p. 276). Turning the spotlight from the controversial research(er) to those who happen to be safe, this reversion is insightful and powerful. It interrogates an anthropologist’s very caution and pride to be ethically unproblematic, and encourages us not to be afraid to make mistakes in dilemmatic situations.

In return, the line that monogamists, polyamorists, gay activists, *tongqis* and academics endeavor to draw between cheaters and truth-tellers is confining these subjects. It pushes us to conduct endless self-anatomy, to essentialize our preferences, to trim the incongruence, and then to reinforce the line – a Sisyphean task indeed. Unfortunately, the line is hardly stable, and the Others can never be fully erased, because they become the subjects’ “constitutive outside” (Butler, 1993,

p. 4). In other words, the specter of the liar is always haunting every ethical subject.

Therefore, it is time that we re-conceptualized radical honesty. I would like to propose four possible directions. First, honesty can still be valued as an ethical principle, but instead of seeing it as a voluntary choice, we may take it as a luxurious privilege that is contingent on socio-cultural environments. In societies where ideas of individualization, democratization of intimacy and pure relationships are more accepted and where consensual sex between two or more adults is decriminalized, coming out as gay and being openly non-monogamous can be less a blasphemy and more mainstreamed. Therefore, if we are privileged enough to be honest in our gay and polyamory life, we may do that with less complacency.

The second and related idea is to decenter radical honesty, putting it in parallel with other seemingly less progressive values, such as family stability, spousal interdependency and intergenerational eldercare that are equally important for many. Such decentering punctures the neoliberal belief that one should pursue their own way of life without bowing to conventional family values. Moreover, it brings to light another insidious binary, that is, non-Western cultures are deemed more family-orientated and the West more individualistic, so truth-telling is more valuable for the latter and face-saving for the former (Chou, 1997). Actually, the flaunting of sexuality and the prioritizing of normativity can co-exist in every society, even in the same person. Telling more complicated stories where people weigh and balance different values in various localities can bridge the posited gaps created by sexual and cultural identities.

The third direction is to appreciate the opacity between darkness and transparency (Villiers, 2012; Zhu, 2017b). If we bear in mind the double-bind of silencing and confessing, then coming out, candid communication, raising hypothetical questions, speaking simply, disclosing selectively, trivializing, dodging and acquiescing can all be effective and justifiable queer-poly tactics. Such an array of tactics takes the potentials of the unknown, the untold and the ambivalent seriously, thus breaking the binary of the closet and coming out. Whether they are ethical is not predetermined, but should be carefully examined in every specific context.

Lastly, following the legacy of other movements, we may embrace the shameful others that are haunting us. Like the reverse discourses of 'slut', 'queer', 'negro' and 'crip' in the existing civil-rights groups, a radical polyamory politics might as well reclaim the term 'cheater' and redefine it. This is surely not an easy or pal-

atable strategy, but it is not groundless. In fact, many polyamorists have openly acknowledged that they used to cheat in monogamous relationships, and many are dating people who are currently in monogamy, which suggests that our relationships with cheaters are more intimate than we like to admit. It has also been argued that bisexuals and polyamorists are “cheating the system”, by intentionally breaking the mono-sexual and monogamous rules and trying to get away with it (Mint, 2004). The reserve discourse is also applicable in the stories told above, where those who lead a non-normative life in an opaque way can also be said to ‘cheat’ the regime that pushes them to confess. The same goes for anthropologists who camouflage or deceive for justifiable reasons against the academic guidelines.

Importantly, these strategies do not have to go against one another. It is with this realization that queer, polyamory and anthropological communities can further unlock the potentials in valuing clarity, opacity, articulate communication and the “not one but many silences” (Foucault, 1978, p. 27) all at once. Like Herman in her discussion of the paradoxes in lesbian families (1990, p. 815), can we also say that “we are not cheaters” and “we are cheaters” at the same time?

Endnotes

- ¹ In this paper, the West refers not to geography but “the type of society that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern” (Hall, 1992, p. 186).
- ² My self-reference as “bisexual” is for the sake of expediency, rather than assuming a fixed identity or sustaining gender binaries.
- ³ The quotation marks in this article highlight the fact that not all of these same-sex-attracted men assume a gay identity.
- ⁴ The slash is used to indicate the blurry line between hiding and revealing. In this paper, “non/monogamy”, “non/consensual”, “un/knowing” and “dis/honesty” will be used in the same way.
- ⁵ See, e.g., Yan L, ‘Chinese *Tongqi*: My Husband Never Saw Me Naked’, *iFeng*, 11 April 2016, at http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160412/48425108_0.shtml; Juan F, ‘600 Thousands *Tongqis* among Tens of Millions Are Still Virgins’, *Souhu Women*, 15 February 2012, at <http://women.sohu.com/20120215/n334726906.shtml>.
- ⁶ Article 301 of the 1997 Chinese Criminal Law stipulates that those who takes a lead in assembling a crowd to engage in promiscuous activities or repeatedly participates in such activities are liable for up to five years of imprisonment. Article 69 of the Public Security Administrative Punishments Law holds anyone who joins in licentious activities or knowingly facilitates any other person to engage in such activities liable for detention and possibly a fine.

- ⁷ Qian J, "China's Gays and Lesbians Vow Not to Marry Heterosexuals", *Sixth Tone*, 8 April 2016, at <http://www.sixthtone.com/news/726/chinas-gays-and-lesbians-vow-not-marry-heterosexuals>.

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