Reshaping boundaries: Family politics and GLBTQ resistance in urban Vietnam

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Although Vietnamese society is currently undergoing significant changes with regards to the rights and perceptions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) people, dominant socio-cultural norms related to gender, sexuality, and the importance of the patrilineal family regime continue to cast a shadow over the lives of GLBTQ in contemporary Vietnam. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the urban centers of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, as well as legal documents and secondary sources, this article illustrates how dominant heteronormative socio-cultural norms have contributed to the political, legal, and social exclusion of same-sex sexualities through a process of outlawing, whereby GLBTQ have been systematically excluded from the rights of law. Drawing on qualitative interviews with gay men and lesbian women between the ages of 20 and 50, the article also highlights how this relation of domination has allowed for instances of GLBTQ resistance, through subversive opposition, strategies of avoidance, and the seeking out of new opportunities in urban spaces outside the dominant sociality. The article thus provides a qualitatively nuanced account of family politics and GLBTQ resistance in urban Vietnam at a significant socio-political historical juncture.

KEYWORDS
LGBT; Vietnam; family; power; resistance; wolves

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status. This life is rendered bare, as *homo sacer*, recognized by the sovereign only as a biological existence (Agamben, 1995; O’Donoghue, 2015; Rydstrom, 2012).

In contrast to Foucault, who distinguished biopower from the sovereign power, Agamben has argued that when zoe becomes a focus of state power, zoe and bios eventually coincide, thus rendering the two figures indistinguishable. In this sense, biopolitics emerges as a manifestation of a relationship between those subjected to the sovereign ban and the very power that expelled them, such as the state. Thus, the state itself is exercising biopolitics, because “the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power” (Agamben, 1995, p. 6; italics in original).

The sovereign retains the power to outlaw particular beings and particular ways of being. Agamben (1998) focused on the violent destructiveness of power and the positioning of the outlaw as a figure included by exclusion. Although studies of physical violence such as hate crimes against the GLBTQ community in Vietnam have certainly highlighted the potential for violence (Centre for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population, 2011, 2012; Horton, 2014; UNDP & USAID, 2014), we focus instead on the dual meaning of biopolitics put forward by Agamben and Foucault. We thus operate with a notion of biopolitics as a combination of bans, restrictions, exclusions, and even inclusions enacted by a sovereign power, as discussed by Agamben (1995), as well as technologies of power constituted in the dynamics of dispersed discourses, which translate into self-governing measures of individuals and populations, in the spirit of Foucault (1998). Exercised through normalizing technologies (e.g., biological, psychological, and social) and the production of regimes of normalcy, the Foucauldian conception of biopower disciplines birth and life from multiple discursive sources (Foucault, 1998; Ojakangas, 2005).

In the section of *Homo Sacer* called “The Ban of the Wolf,” Agamben (1998, pp. 104–111) has discussed how the bandit, or the outlaw, was banned by the sovereign power and thus placed outside the protection of law, to live a life without peace (*friedlos*). Described in the laws of Edward the Confessor as bearing a wolf’s head, the outlaw was thus depicted as a hybrid of human and wolf, that is, as a wolf-man. As Agamben (1998) has explained, the wolf-man dwells in the city as a figure that is included by exclusion; a figure that is denied participation and the associated rights of social and political life. As an emblematic figure, the wolf-man thus projects the paradigm of *homo sacer*; as the citizen who has not yet been fully included with the privilege of enjoying full legal rights (see also Ek, 2006; Rydstrom, 2012; Sanchez, 2004). 2

Criticizing the Freudian figure of the Wolf Man,3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 2002/1980) have conceptualized wolves as the paradigmatic embodiment of possibilities for change and multiple becomings. This is not unlike the theory of potentiality developed by Agamben (1998). Deleuze and Guattari have explained that wolves, which are highly social, collaborative, and nomadic creatures, rather than sacrificing themselves for a dominant sociality (or normalcy), instead exercise their power to break new ground and seek out new horizons. In our analysis, we use wolves as a figurative euphemism for transgression, transformation, and emancipation from the impairing biopolitics that facilitate the configuration of *homo sacer* or the production of self-governing techniques, as conceptualized by Agamben and Foucault, respectively (see also Braidotti, 2001, 2006; Colebrook, 2002; Derrida, 2009; Fiskešjö, 2004; Freud, 1918/2010; Stephenson, 2011; Young, 2012).

Transferring the figure of wolves to the GLBTQ struggle in Vietnam (or anywhere else for that matter), sovereign definitions of sexuality are one obvious focus of contestations. As Deleuze and Guattari (2002/1980, p. 278) have emphasized, sexuality "brings into play too great a diversity of conjugated becomings; these are like n sexes. … What counts is that love itself is … endowed with strange and somewhat terrifying powers. Sexuality is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings." Wolves pose a powerful challenge to centralized and discursive biopolitical power in the family and in society at large, as they contest the heterosexual normalcy regime’s powers of exclusion and inclusion.
The political, legal, and social outlawing of same-sex sexualities

The heterosexual normalcy regime is manifest in the ways in which the Vietnamese state has dealt with questions about sexualities. In 1986, in the face of a deteriorating economic situation, the Vietnamese government initiated the policy of Đổi Mới (renovation) as an attempt to maintain socialism while simultaneously opening Vietnam’s doors to increasing marketization (Hayton, 2010; Martin, 2017; Rydstrom, 2003; SarDesai, 2005). One result of this opening up was an increase in cultural flows in and out of the country. Not unlike governments in other contexts (see, for example, Dalacoura, 2014; Graff, 2010), the Vietnamese government became concerned about a number of cultural flows into Vietnam and their potential effects, in terms of what were deemed social evils (Horton, 2014; Khuat et al., 2009; Nguyen, 2016; Rydstrom, 2006, 2010). Over the years, the label social evil has been applied by the government, in public discourse, and by citizens, to categorize a wide range of social practices deemed damaging for Vietnamese society and tradition, such as domestic violence, drug use, gambling, plagiarism, sex work, sexually transmitted diseases, and even homosexuality (Colby et al., 2004; Fewston, 2012; Horton & Rydstrom, 2011; Newton, 2012; Nguyen-vo, 2008; Pastoetter, 2004; Rydstrom, 2016; Vijeyarasa, 2010).

Vietnam’s first reported case of HIV in Ho Chi Minh City in 1990 served to reinforce the belief that social evils were a threat to traditional Vietnamese values and, in response, the government initiated a campaign to eliminate social evils in 1995 (Horton et al., 2015; Ngo et al., 2007; Vijeyarasa, 2010). Much of the focus of the subsequent HIV work was placed on men who have sex with men (MSM), a group that was seen to be particularly vulnerable to the HIV epidemic (Blanc, 2005; Colby et al., 2004; Khuat et al., 2009; UNDP & USAID, 2014). The linking of MSM with the HIV epidemic increased the risk of stigma for men engaging in same-sex relations and some organizations working with HIV issues focused their efforts on reducing stigma amongst those men (Khuat & Nguyen, 2010). At the same time, however, the conflation of various forms of (male) sexuality under the rubric MSM served to reinforce the perception of homosexuality as something abnormal and hence the normative exclusion of same-sex sexualities from the regime of normalcy; an exclusion which was anchored in a political outlawing, for which the social evils policy allowed.

Prior to the HIV epidemic and the social evils campaign in the 1990s, homosexuality was not seen as an issue of concern in Vietnam, and few people were familiar with the concept (Khuat et al., 2009). Although there were punishments for crimes such as adultery, incest, and cross-dressing during the Le (1428–1787) and Nguyen (1802–1945) dynasties, homosexuality was not mentioned in the Hong Duc and Gia Long laws of those respective dynasties (Khuat et al., 2009; Pastoetter, 2004). Likewise, homosexuality did not receive any attention within the cultural and religious frameworks of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, which play a central role in Vietnamese understandings of family, gender, and sexuality (Khuat et al., 2009). The social evils campaign thus can be seen as an indication of a bio-politics aimed at including by excluding; a strategy through which GLBTQ people, and particularly gay men, were identified, not unlike the figure of the wolf-man as we discussed previously.

The social and political exclusion of same-sex sexualities was clearly highlighted in 1997 when two men organized a wedding party in Ho Chi Minh City, and again in 1998 when a lesbian couple attempted to officially register themselves as a married couple in the southern province of Vinh Long. These events drew protests from the local communities and, in the case of the lesbian couple, also direct intervention from the local authorities (Horton, 2014; Khuat et al., 2009; Luu & Bartsch, 2011; Newton, 2012; Nguyen, 2016; Oosterhoff et al., 2014; Pastoetter, 2004; Rydstrom, 2016). In response to these public acts of resistance to the social and political outlawing of homosexuality, the government sought to assert its dominance over the realm of sexuality and marriage by adjusting the 1986 Marriage and Family Law to more clearly reflect the distinctions between what were considered acceptable and unacceptable desires. Although the 1986 Marriage and Family Law repeatedly made reference to “husband and wife,” it did not expressly
forbid same-sex marriage (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1986, Art. 7). In the 2000 version of the Marriage and Family Law, a fifth category was added to the list of circumstances where marriage was forbidden to include “people of the same sex” (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2000, Art. 10). The 2000 version of the law thus served to reinforce the exclusion of same-sex sexualities through a process of legal outlawing.

Despite the government’s attempt to assert its dominance over the realm of sexuality and marriage through legal adjustments, the issue of homosexuality became more openly discussed following the turn of the century. As Khuat, Le, and Nguyen (2009) have pointed out, prior to the 1990s, the media was heavily subsidized by the government and media outlets were restricted in their choice of material to publish by the Constitution and the 1989 Media Law. The revision of the Media Law in 1999 meant that media outlets were afforded greater freedom in the search for profits, and homosexuality was one of a number of topics that assured high levels of readership because of its scandalous connotations (Khuat et al., 2009). Although, initially, discussions of homosexuality in the media were largely negative in tone, the tone gradually improved (iSEE, 2011; UNDP & USAID, 2014). In a review of Vietnamese newspaper representations of homosexuality in the years 2004, 2006, and 2008, the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy, and Environment (iSEE) and the Academy of Journalism and Communication found that 41% of over 500 newspaper articles expressed “clear discrimination” toward “homosexual people,” although the number of discriminatory articles decreased over the years, from 57% in 2004 to 29% in 2008 (iSEE, 2011, p. 30).

Following the turn of the century, GLBTQ rights issues were also illuminated in numerous Vietnamese language publications and productions.4 This occurred at a time of increased flows into Vietnam, including rising disposable incomes, easier access to the Internet, greater availability of foreign films, increased movement of people in and out of the country, and the associated exchanging of ideas and beliefs. The combination of this increased publicity and Vietnam’s increased globalization facilitated a change in perceptions of gay men and lesbian women, and led to the increasing use of the English abbreviation LGBT and increased focus on LGBT rights. A key moment arrived in 2008, when the American Ford Foundation provided funding for the first LGBT rights project, For a Positive Image of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) People in Vietnam. The study was conducted by the Institute for Studies of Society, Economics, and Environment (iSEE) and represented a major shift in organizational work related to sexuality, from a health-based approach to a rights-based one. As part of the Ford Foundation funded project, iSEE established the group Information Connecting and Sharing (ICS) to “connect and develop the LGBT community” (ICS, 2011, p. 10).

ICS organized conferences, workshops, and art exhibitions, established an online community for Parents and Friends of Lesbians And Gay men (PFLAG), and, together with a number of other organizations, helped set in motion the Pride events that first began in 2012 (ICS, 2011; UNDP & USAID, 2014; ABC Net Australia, 2012). That the Vietnamese government allowed the Pride events to take place indicates a less rigid stance toward sexualities issues since the weddings in 1997 and 1998, but also Agamben’s (1995, 1998, 2005) argument that liberation from the biopower of the sovereign state is inevitably dependent on state acceptance (see also Young, 2000). In this sense, then, rights movements cannot be read one-dimensionally as expressions of greater freedom, but rather they can be approached as products of biopower, which are intimately intertwined with the state. Even when the state allows for critique and opposition, the sphere thought of as civil society tacitly avows the power of the state (Gil, 2007; Ojakangas, 2005; Rydstrom, 2016; Sanchez, 2004; Spivak, 2016). As was noted by Le Minh, an activist marching in the parade, global attention on the issue of LGBT rights may also have played a key role in the government’s more permissive stance (ABC Net Australia, 2012).

In connection with the 2012 Viet Pride parade in Hanoi, the Minister of Justice, Ha Hung Cuong, stated that it might be time to legalize same-sex marriage in Vietnam (“Vietnam to
remove fines on same-sex marriage,” 2013; Channel News Asia, 2012; Mann, 2014; UNDP & USAID, 2014). Following a number of high-profile workshops on the issue of LGBT rights, the government issued Decree 110/2013/ND-CP, on September 24, 2013, as a first step toward the possible legalization of same-sex marriage and revision of the 2000 Marriage and Family Law (Oosterhoff et al., 2014). The decree removed the ban on cohabitation and abolished fines on same-sex weddings. Although same-sex couples were still not allowed to register their marriage, they were allowed to have a wedding and cohabit as a couple with binding relations in terms of property, children and related obligations (Tuoitrenews, 2013, 2014).

On June 19, 2014, the National Assembly followed up Decree 110/2013/ND-CP by amending the 2000 Marriage and Family Law. The amended Law came into effect in January 2015. Although the amended law removed the ban on same-sex marriage, it stopped short of fully recognizing same-sex marriage. There was disappointment among those working for LGBT rights, but also a degree of acceptance that the amended law might be a pragmatic first step toward full legalization, until public support for legalization has had time to grow (Rydstrom, 2016; Tuoitrenews, 2014; UNDP & USAID, 2014).

This acceptance that public support still needed time to grow alluded to the extent to which the exclusion of same-sex sexualities has also been enforced through a process of social outlawing. This was highlighted in a study released by iSEE in April 2014, called Social Perspectives on Same-Sex Marriage Study. This study polled over 5,000 Vietnamese people and found that 52.9% of the participants did not want same-sex marriage to be legalized (GayAsiaNews, 2014; Tuoitrenews, 2014). This process of not only legal, but also social, outlawing has been vividly highlighted in studies of violence against gay men and MSM (e.g., Hoang, Dinh, & Nguyen, 2011); studies of homophobia, transphobia, and bullying in schools (e.g., Hoang & Nguyen, 2012; UNESCO, 2015); and parental violence against LGBT children (Centre for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population, 2011). As Esther Rothblum (2014) has also noted, the legalization of same-sex marriage does not necessarily reflect wider societal acceptance. In understanding the social outlawing of same-sex sexualities, it is necessary to consider more closely the heteronormative and patrilineal family regime and socio-cultural concern about maintaining the face of the family.

This study and ethnographic approach

Our focus in this article is on the dynamism between socio-political processes of outlawing and their attempts to construct people as if they were the hybridized wolf-man, and how these very processes have provided the conditions for the resistance of wolves against such techniques of power. We thus explore how the heterosexual normalcy regime has circumscribed nonheteronormative sexualities, while also facilitating subversive practices, parades and demonstrations, political lobbying, and law revisions (Ahmed, 2010, 2014; Butler, 2006).

Our research findings are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Vietnam’s two largest cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, as well as legal documents and secondary sources. The fieldwork was conducted in 2012 and 2013 and included ethnographic observations and informal interviews at bars, cafes, and restaurants, and semistructured group and individual interviews with lesbian women and gay men between the ages of 20 and 50, and key persons at organizations and clubs working with gender, sexuality, and GLBTQ rights-related issues in both cities. In this article, we draw in particular on semistructured, audio-recorded interviews with seven women and seven men who were living in Hanoi at the time of the interviews. Ten of the informants were recruited with the help of local organizations; the other four were recruited through snowball sampling.

The interviews were conducted in numerous locations around Hanoi and varied in duration, with most averaging an hour. All of the informants were informed about the focus of the research
and were told that any information they gave would be treated confidentially and would remain anonymous. All participants have been provided with pseudonyms for this purpose and no identifying information has been disclosed. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed with the use of thematic analysis. In informing our discussions, we also draw on earlier periods of ethnographic research which we have conducted in Vietnam.

**Findings**

**The heteronormative and patrilineal family regime**

As is also the case in other countries in the region (see Cho, 2009; Kam, 2007, 2013; Tan, 2011), the family is of central importance in Vietnam. “Good families” are put forward in official discussions as the basis of a “good society,” and a good society is seen to help make “better families” (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2000, preamble). Good families are perceived to consist of monogamous, heterosexual couples that have entered into wedlock voluntarily and have no more than two children (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2000, Art.2). Filial obligation dictates that the first duty of married couples is to maintain the family line through the procreation of a son, and failure to produce a son is considered to constitute an expression of filial impiety and selfish behavior (Hirsch, Wardlow, & Phinney, 2012; Khuat et al., 2009; Leshkowich, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2015; Phinney, 2008; Rydstrom, 2003, 2006; Shibuya, 2015). A female employee at an organization dealing with gender and sexuality issues highlighted the importance of the family line and the role of sons when she explained:

> In Vietnam, family is very important and marriage is a must, especially if you are a man, a son in a family. Especially nowadays when families have become smaller. Each family has maybe one son, or a maximum of two, so it is expected that a son gets married eventually, has his own family and produces children [i.e., sons] who can continue the family line.

Her suggestion that families have become smaller is backed up by statistical data from the World Bank, which shows that overall fertility rates have declined from roughly five children per woman in 1980 to less than two at the time of the interview in 2012 (World Bank, 2018).

For a son, the pressure to get married is directly tied to the patrilineage. Cham, a 46-year-old leader of a club for MSM, was the eldest son and had come out to his parents 10 years previously. Although he said that his parents had accepted his decision, he also explained that they were sad, because that meant that they would not get a grandson to carry on the family line:

> They accepted it, but from the beginning they were still very sad, of course, because every family in Vietnam wants their son to have a wife and to have kids later on. That is one of the most important things in Vietnamese culture, to have a son and to have their kids follow the tradition and maintain the family line.

The amount of pressure placed on sons differs depending on whether there is more than one son in the family, with parents most concerned about the eldest son. As Cham explained:

> I can say that if I were the second son in the family, it would be much easier. It is easier to come out as the second son. The first son, in Vietnam especially, is tasked very heavily. There is a lot of pressure.

In line with Cham, Sang, a 36-year-old bar proprietor, said that having an older brother who was married with children had relieved the pressure he experienced from his parents to get married. However, he also said that he still had not told his parents that he was gay for fear of what effect that information would have on them. As he explained:

> I still cannot imagine what would happen if I told them that I am gay. Maybe they accept it or maybe they cannot stand it. That is what I think. Maybe they cannot stand it and get depressed. Maybe I will never see them again because they hate me. I am unsure of many things, so that is why I don’t tell them that I am gay.
Duc, a 27-year-old organization employee, was an only son and suggested that his wish not to get married to a woman would be more easily accepted if he had a sibling, even a sister, because at least there would be a sense that someone was continuing the family lineage. As he elaborated:

This is how you respect your parents in Vietnam. If I don’t get married for some reason … then it shows disrespect to my parents. The idea is that you have somebody who can have a son, for example, and that son carries the name of the family. So, if you don’t do that, then that is going to be a problem. So, if I had brothers or sisters, at least there would be a sense of somebody carrying on some part of the family’s traditions.

Pressure to comply with heteronormative expectations about maintaining the family line is both gendered and age-based. The patrilineal organization of society means that daughters are not able to provide heirs for their natal family, only for the family of their husband. Although there is still immense pressure from parents for daughters to marry, this has more to do with how it reflects onto the collective face of the family (see also Cho, 2009; Kam, 2007, 2013). Although for men, pressure to get married may continue into their 40s, for women there is a more clearly defined cutoff point of 30 before they are considered to be past a marriageable age. Bui, a 25-year-old rights organizational employee, explained that, for daughters, the pressure would be intense until a certain cutoff point, when the daughter would then be perceived as too old to get married. As Bui put it:

The pressure would go like this [indicating up and then down with her hands] and this is the cut off. Before that it goes up because parents want to get rid of you and want to make sure that you’re not gay. They have two concerns. One: whether you are gay or not. Two: whether you are going to get married or not. But after that they would say, “OK, never mind; it’s too late for you. As long as no one asks about your business, I don’t mind. I don’t think you have any hope.” That’s what parents would think. So at least one form of pressure would decrease. The other one of whether you are gay or not is important, but it is not as important as it is before that cut-off point, because whether you are gay or not, you’re not going to get married.

A woman who is not married after a particular age faces a certain degree of social stigma, and as Bui points out, this reduces the perceived importance of her sexuality. As Lucetta Yip Lo Kam (2007) has also observed in the Chinese context, an unmarried lesbian woman is doubly stigmatized and marginalized by the heteronormative and patrilineal family regime.

Bui, whose mother, according to Bui, sensed that Bui was lesbian because of the way she dressed and wore her hair short, explained that her mother threatened her that she would commit suicide if Bui told her she was lesbian. Later, although her mother had partially come to terms with her daughter’s sexuality, she told Bui that she could cope with Bui’s sexual preference but not with how other people would talk about her. As Bui explained:

She said that she could not deal with the insinuation of people around, of people in our family, because we live in a big family with my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, even my grandparents. So, she said that whatever I am, she can accept it, but she could not take other people talking about it. She didn’t say it directly, but I understood from the way she behaved and the indirect way she talked to me that she would prefer me to stay away from home so that people would not see my short hair, they would not see the way I dressed, they would not see the people I hung around with, so that people would not talk about me.

Bui’s explanation points to distinctions between a transparent closet, wherein her mother suspects that Bui is lesbian but would rather she stay in a now transparent closet, and a family closet, wherein her mother also hides so as not to bring shame on herself or the extended family (Svab & Kuhar, 2014). In this way, then, Bui is socially outlawed and excluded from participating as an equal member of the family through her inclusion as a closeted member of the family.

Bui elaborated on her exclusion and the perceptions about homosexuality at the root of it:

When [the rest of the family] talk to my mother, they say a lot of strange things, like, “You know it is the greatest curse of a family to have a gay child. It is even worse than having a drug addict; it is worse than having a prostitute; it is worse than having criminals;” etc. … I think mostly they believe that
homosexuality is a pathology, whereas drug addiction or prostitution is a choice. That means that the person is still fine; he just chooses to behave that way. But homosexuality is a pathology, like you are born with a certain cancer, or you are insane.

As Bui highlights, parents may react negatively to their son or daughter coming out, not only because of their own views on sexuality and the importance of marriage, but also because of wider sociocultural norms and the negative implications it could have for the collective face of the family (Cho, 2009; Kam, 2007; Luu & Cheung, 2010; Tan, 2011).

Hien, a 22-year-old university student, highlighted that parents are concerned about the details of their daughter’s behavior and corporeal styles, and compare them to the expected norms for girls of that age. She explained that her mother was unhappy that she did not behave like other girls in terms of dressing, decorating her room, and dating boys, and that when her mother was angry with her, she would use examples of Hien’s friends as a means to criticize her. As she explained:

When she shouts at me, she uses examples of friends and says, “Look at her room; she’s decorated it in a very nice way. You don’t do that.” And also, “They’ve started dating; why don’t you do the same? You should do that soon or you could become left over. If you are in that situation, you will make our family lose face.” She’s really serious about losing face.

Here, Hien suggests that her mother may actually suspect that she is lesbian, and thus to her positioning in a transparent closet; the emphasis on the face of the family serves to require that she join her mother in the family closet (Svab & Kuhar, 2014). Not unlike other places in the region (see e.g., Tonini, 2016), parents put their children under pressure to start a family to save the face of the family. As was also the case in Kam’s (2007, 2013) research in the Chinese context, parents tended to be the people that our informants were most concerned about.

A number of lesbian women explained that maintaining the face of the family was a major reason why they had not come out to their parents about their sexuality and, instead, managed their privacy through the use of strategic silence (Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014). For example, Vi, a 29-year-old editor, explained that there were both pros and cons associated with coming out, but that the potential losses outnumbered the potential gains. Although she suggested that she was not so much worried about her parent’s reaction toward her, she was concerned about how her parents would cope with the gossip of others. As she elaborated:

There are some losses and gains in terms of coming out. When you come out, the gains could be that it is easier for you to find other people like you, and for them to know who you are and to find you. But the losses outnumber the gains. ... Being looked at, and if I came out, people would talk about it and it might affect my parents in a negative way. My parents themselves might accept my sexuality but if people talked about it too much and kept talking about me behind my back, it would be very uncomfortable for them.

Likewise, Linh, a 23-year-old university student, who was the eldest of two daughters and whose parents were also the eldest born, was conscious of how her behavior could be perceived and the effect it might have on her parents. As she explained:

I don’t want to come out to my family because of the pressure of being the role model for the whole extended family. I don’t fear that my parents would turn their backs on me. I am sure that they would be very supportive and very loving and they would definitely accept me, but other people would look at me and I don’t want to make my parents feel uncomfortable seeing other people.

Taken together with legislative restriction on marriage and sociocultural norms regarding sexualities, the familial politics of pressure, whereby sons and daughters, to differing degrees, are pressured into marriage and procreation and into behaving in particular heteronormative ways to maintain the face of the family, contributes to a regime of normalcy wherein the price for public displays of resistance may be too high for many to consider, even post-Pride. As has also been highlighted in other cultural contexts in the region (e.g., Cho, 2009; Kam, 2007; Tan, 2011), the perceived importance of the face of the family is such that many gay men and lesbian women in
Vietnam do not directly express their sexuality to their parents (Horton, 2014; Laurent, 2005; Newton, 2012). The risk of being socially outlawed, in combination with lax legislation regarding the status of same-sex sexualities in Vietnam, means that young gay and lesbian people need to carefully balance their resistance.

**Keeping a straight face while seeking out the collective**

In navigating the familial politics of pressure, some gay men and lesbian women maintain their deference to their parents by keeping a *straight* face. However, this does not necessarily mean that they acquiesce to their parents’ expectations or demands. Rather, they may resist in less open ways, openly in disguised forms, or seek out new terrain where they may be freer to roam among a more accepting collective. Some of the younger informants spoke somewhat humorously about how they took advantage of their parents’ heteronormative views in navigating their parents’ expectations. For example, Quynh, a 22-year-old university student who had been in a distance relationship, spoke about how it was easier to take her partner home than a male friend, because her parents would not suspect that they might be a couple. As she put it:

Last year, when she was in Hanoi, we met each other every day and we went out. We went to the cinema, we ate with each other, things like that. Sometimes I stayed out with her overnight and it was really interesting. I also took her home to meet my family, but my family just considered her my friend. And they really liked her. … When I invited her to my home, she had just received the decision from her boss that she had to move to work in a distant province. So, my parents just said, “Oh, they can spend some time together and do things they enjoy.”

As Chris Tan (2011) has described the situation of gay men in the Singaporean context, rather than coming out, they instead go home. In the Chinese context, Kam (2013, p. 76) referred to this strategy as a “soft coming out,” whereby the person gradually prepares their parents for their eventual coming out.

In a similar way, although Hien, who was studying in Hanoi away from her family home, did not take her girlfriend home to meet her family, she explained that rigid heteronormative ideas made it easier for her to be with her girlfriend in public. As she explained:

It’s not difficult because, as you know, even in Western countries, girls hang out together, no problem. For intimacy, we often go to my room. I am from the countryside, so I rent a room in Hanoi. It’s private. I don’t take her home [to my family]. Sometimes my girlfriend made presents for me and I took the presents home and my mother asked who the presents were from and I said, “Girlfriend” and my mother just commented, “She is quite talented to make such gifts. Why can’t you be like her?”

For men, the ability to keep coming up with reasons not to be married gets increasingly difficult, particularly after graduating and gaining employment. As Hong, a 33-year-old unemployed project manager explained, “After graduation I didn’t have any excuse because that is the right time for a person to get involved in a relationship, to get married, to have a family.” Likewise, Nam, a 44-year-old designer, elaborated on the difficulties for gay men to keep coming up with acceptable excuses in the face of familial pressure:

When you are 18 or 20 and you don’t have a girlfriend, when you are gay, people ask you and you can say, “Oh, it’s too early” or “I’m thinking about my studies.” Then when you finish your studies, you get the same question and you say, “Oh, I have to find a job.” When you find a job you say, “Oh, I don’t have enough money.” Then, at the age of 40, what can you say? It’s really hard.

Tan (2011, p. 868) has highlighted similar tendencies in the Singaporean setting and identified a strategy of “tacit subjectivities,” which can be understood as a way of resisting being positioned as a wolf-man. In performing these tacit subjectivities, and engaging in subversive opposition, some gay men and lesbian women feel that they have no option but to enter into heterosexual
marriage, and even have children, as a means of appeasing their family and ending the constant barrage of questions about the issue. As Sang put it:

Because, you know, after 30 years of age, they have a lot of pressure from the family. “You have to marry!” “You are a man!” “Marry! Marry!” If you came out and said, “Sorry, I am gay, and I cannot marry because I am together with a boy that I like,” they would be sad. They would ignore you. They would worry a lot. Most of the gay men over the age of 30 in Vietnam get married to a woman.

A number of the men interviewed expressed their displeasure toward those gay men who entered into heterosexual marriage. Nam, who was open about his sexuality, said that some of his gay friends had gotten married and that he sympathized with them, “because they are not courageous enough to live how they want to live.” Chin, Toan, and Sang expressed their concern for the wellbeing of the wives and children of gay men. For example, Chin, a 21-year-old university student, spoke about the pressure that doing so would create: “It’s not good at all because it’s a lot of pressure for you and your wife and then with your lover as well.” Sang was particularly scathing in his critique and argued that those men were only self-interested:

Most gay Vietnamese people use that way; they get married. I think it is a bad way. For me, I don’t think I can do that. That is a bad way. I know that there are many problems after the marriage with the girl, but most Vietnamese people are so selfish. They only think about themselves, so they get married. They just want to have children to make their family happy. … They hurt their wife, hurt their children when they grow up; they don’t care about that; they just say, “I’m a man, I can get married with children and make my family happy.”

Despite having a wife and children, some gay men continue to go out at night in search of other gay men at gay-friendly social sites, such as bars, parks, saunas, cafés, and nightclubs. Nam spoke about one of his friends who regularly attended a gay bar in the evenings and had a boyfriend, but “because of the family pressure he got married with a girl and he still goes to the bar.” Sang likewise suggested that it was very common for gay men over 30 to get married and have children, but that “they are still sneaky and go to the place for gays.” Toward their families, then, they seek to keep a straight face, while at the same time seeking out those social sites where they can express their sexuality more freely. The balancing act between being stigmatized as a wolf-man and resisting by drawing on the collective powers imbued in the collective (of wolves) is one that is fraught with difficulties.

Although some lesbian women and gay men enter into heterosexual marriage as a means of appeasing their family, others, instead, seek to get married to each other to fulfill family expectations while still being open about their sexuality to their partners. Bui suggested that gay men, in particular, actively sought out wives on the online forums for lesbian women, in the hope of convincing them “to marry them, to give them a child, just to fulfill their responsibility.” Bui elaborated that “some lesbian people want to present themselves in a straight way, so this deal satisfies the needs from both sides,” but that many lesbian women do not appreciate it and react negatively toward such proposals. As Bui put it, “If a guy is unlucky enough to post something like that on the forum then he will be in big trouble.” Writing about contract marriages between gay men and lesbian women in South Korea, John Cho (2009) has illustrated the paradoxical nature of these relationships in that such marriages are used to resist pressures to marry, while at the same time conforming to them. As Cho (2009) has also pointed out, the potential costs remain disproportionately gendered and thus involve a great deal of trust.

Instead of seeking to keep a straight face by getting married, others, instead, opt to avoid seeing their family altogether. As Nam explained, they “refuse to see their family, their parents, their sisters, because they don’t know what to say to them.” In seeking to avoid their families, some look to move to other countries or to cities where the likelihood of seeing family is significantly reduced and the prospects of meeting other gay men or lesbians is increased. This may relieve pressure for both those moving and the parents they leave behind (Kam, 2007). As has also been highlighted in other settings (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Fisher et al., 2014; Kuhar & Svab, 2014;
Wienke & Hill, 2013), there are significant differences in terms of being gay or lesbian in rural and urban Vietnam (Newton, 2012). In the countryside, where people live much closer with their local community, there is less space for avoiding the gaze of neighbors and extended family, and also less chance of meeting a partner.

The urban centers have a draw for lesbian women and gay men, because as Thai, a 42-year-old restaurant and café manager, explained:

In the countryside, where the society lives close together and sees them, gay get a lot of pressure from the other people, so ... they will try to get out of the province or small town to get to the center of Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. Gay people usually gather in the big cities where they have more chance to find a partner and have fun.

Likewise, Sang, who had himself moved from the countryside to Hanoi, said that gay men like himself tend to move from the countryside to the cities in search of a life: “They try to come to the big city to find a life. They are looking for a life.”

The urban centers provide a social terrain where it is easier to be part of the social collective of wolves. However, distinctions are also made between urban centers based on perceptions of them. As Vi explained, Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon, is seen to be the destination of choice for many gay men and lesbians in Vietnam because of its greater size and the perceived openness of Southerners:

I think it is easier to meet people in Hanoi than in other provinces, but in Saigon it would be even easier. The lesbian population in Saigon is bigger than in Hanoi and it is the nature of the people in the South to be more accepting.

As Vi’s comment indicates, understandings of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City differ markedly, with Ho Chi Minh City perceived as larger and more accepting, while Hanoi is perceived to be smaller and more traditional. Indeed, as Quynh noted, ‘I think that if my [gay] friend and I moved to Saigon, maybe our life would be easier, because the people in Saigon, the people in the South, are very warm hearted.’ As Nathalie Newton (2012, p. 20) has argued in her study of les, ‘Saigon possesses a powerful psychic, economic, and cultural draw for les and other sexual minorities, seeking the freedom to live out their desires in the city.’

While Vi and Quynh suggested that it is in the nature of people in the South to be more accepting, Mai, a 22-year-old university student who had been to college in Ho Chi Minh City, suggested that it was more about the distance from the family. As she put it:

I don’t think it’s easier [in Ho Chi Minh City] at all. The reason people find it easier to express themselves is because they don’t have family there, so they don’t have to fear who might be watching them. I had a friend in Saigon who comes from a province, 3 hours from Saigon. She was very open [about her sexuality] and very expressive, but that was because her family was in the province, so there was no one watching her in Saigon.

Ho Chi Minh City was central to a number of our informants’ plans for the future. Quynh, for example, said that if she had the chance to live in Ho Chi Minh City, she would move “because the life conditions are much better than in Hanoi.” Sang, who had earlier moved from the countryside to Hanoi, but whose parents later sent his brother to Hanoi to keep an eye on him, spoke in length about his plan to move away from Hanoi. As he elaborated:

I have a plan already. If I get a boyfriend, I cannot live in Hanoi. I have to move away from Hanoi, maybe to Saigon or maybe to Thailand. We have to build another life. So, I have a plan that when I have a boyfriend, we will start a new life. We will move to Saigon, far from the family, and I can start a business there. Or we will move to Thailand. Or maybe we will start a business in his country.

As Mai and Sang point out, moving to Ho Chi Minh City, or indeed to another country, provides a nomadic escape from the surveillance of the extended family, while reducing the need to come out and potentially face being outlawed from the family. At the same time, it offers the
tantalizing possibility of joining a larger social collective of fellow wolves, with whom the boundaries of a restraining normative horizon can be pushed and even transgressed.

**Conclusions**

Dominant socio-cultural norms regarding sexualities have allowed for the normative and legal exclusion of same-sex sexualities in contemporary Vietnam, while at the same time opening up spaces for resistance, through subversive practices, parades and demonstrations, political lobbying, and changes to the Marriage and Family Law. The *social evils* campaign is illustrative of a state power’s attempts at politically and legally outlawing a minority group, while at the same time paradoxically including them through such exclusion (Agamben, 1998, 2005). The campaign, as well as the linking of same-sex sexualities with the HIV epidemic, invited resistance in the form of same-sex wedding celebrations and attempted marriage registrations. Although the government attempted to enforce the exclusion of same-sex sexualities from the regime of normalcy through a process of legal outlawing, subsequent increased focus on the issue invited further resistance in literary form and through depictions in visual media.

This was facilitated, in part, by the increasing cultural flows coming into the country post-1986 and the opening up that came with *Đối Mới*. In particular, the increasing focus on LGBT rights by nongovernmental organizations, publications, films, documentaries, parades and campaigns, and the subsequent increasing global interest in the Vietnam case, saw the government soften its stance on same-sex sexualities and led to Decree 110/2013/ND-CP and the eventual reform of the Marriage and Family Law. Despite the government’s changed stance, however, same-sex sexualities continue to be included by exclusion. Those who openly come out still risk being positioned as outlawed figures, included through exclusion from a regime of normalcy that places great emphasis on maintaining the heteronormative face of the family.

Combining the work of Agamben with the work of Foucault, as well as Deleuze and Guattari, has provided a productive analytical entry point to the study of family politics and GLBTQ resistance in urban Vietnam. As we have discussed in this article, although campaigns such as the *social evils* campaign serve to demarcate definitions of normalcy, such boundaries can be blurred and reshaped through hidden or overt forms of resistance. In contrast to the emblematic figure of the wolf-man, which is rendered an outsider, or an outlaw, wolves are the figurative embodiment of a powerful force that can push and even transgress boundaries and thereby reconfigure understandings and practices associated with normalcy.

Rather than sacrificing their own desires to be included into the dominant sociality, and thus avoid the position of the outlawed or the wolf-man, some lesbian women and gay men have, instead, sought out new ground and have aimed to create new opportunities outside the dominant sociality. For some, this has involved attempting to keep a straight face by utilizing the heteronormative naivety of family members to go home and potentially come out softly. For others, it has involved the performance of tacit subjectivities by avoiding questions about marital intentions. For some, it has entailed entering into marital relations, keeping a straight face when dealing with the heteronormative views, expectations, and demands of family members and members of the local community, while traversing the borders between the dominant sociality and gay-friendly social sites under the cover of night. For yet others, it has been a case of turning away, and, like the forceful image of wolves, seeking out new urban terrains, where new horizons come into view and where they can engage with a larger social collective more openly.

**Notes**

1. By regime, we draw on Foucault (2003, p. 164) and see it as a grid of intelligibility, which establishes “a certain regime, a certain division between truth and error.”
2. *Homo sacer* is a term that Agamben borrowed from Roman legal treatises. Under the Roman Empire, a man who had committed a severe crime would be banned from society and his citizen rights repealed (see Rydstrom 2012).

3. In Freud (1918/2010), the Wolf Man incarnates the image of the Father, the figure upon which desires of revenge might be projected, driven by the libido (see also Deleuze & Guattari, 2002; Derrida, 2009; Young, 2012).

4. These included, amongst others, Bui Anh Tan’s novels Môt thế giới không có đàn bà (A World without Women; 2000) and Lẽ—vọng tuy không đàn ông (Lesbian—Embrace without Men; 2005), the autobiography Bọng (Male Love; 2009) by Hoang Nguyen and Doan Trang, Vietnamese language films such as Chơi với (Adrift; d. Bui Thac Chuyen, 2009), Bi, Đừng sợ! (Bi, Don’t be Afraid!; d. Phan Dang Di, 2010), and Hot boy nổi loạn và câu chuyện về thằng Ca rô, cô gái điếm và con vật (Lost in Paradise—originally titled Rebellious Hot Boy and the Story of Ca rô, the Prostitute and the Duck; d. Ngoc Dang Vu, 2011), and documentaries such as Đường nào đi tới biển (Which Way to the Sea) and Red Over Rainbow (d. Vincent Baumont, 2014).

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