A Review of Homosexuality in China: Urban Attitudes toward Homosexuality In Light Of Changes in the One-Child Policy

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China is home to one of the world’s largest homosexual population with an estimate of 3-4% of China’s population in 2006 which could amount to a whopping 50 million people (Li, 2006), and this number could be significantly larger today. Despite their large numbers and evident presence, homosexuals in China have to contend with overwhelming societal discrimination, family backlash and a lack of legal protection. The literature on homosexuality in China can be said to be in abundance, as most scholars understood the need to draw attention to the plight of homosexuals and to ascertain the grounds for their discrimination. It is worthy to note however, that recent changes in the One Child Policy (OCP) could have an effect on the attitudes towards homosexuality in China, especially those living in the urban areas. Prevailing literature analyses consequences of discrimination across homosexuals in general, without accounting for the possibility of differing experiences of homosexuals living in rural versus urban areas. Intervention methods devised consequently belong to the broad-based categories of education and creating awareness as they do not consider situational differences. Hence, examining urban attitudes towards homosexuality in light of the changes in the OCP is a possible area that one should venture into, as this research could manifest as improvements in the formulation and implementation of interventions. This article would attempt to do so through (1) identifying the underlying causes and major consequences of stigmatisation highlighted in existing literature, (2) highlighting the differences in experiences between homosexuals living in urban and rural areas, and (3) justifying the significance of examining the urban population in light of changes in the OCP.
(1) Underlying Causes and Major Consequences of Stigma

Current literature frames China as a society dominated by Confucian ideals (Koo, et al., 2014) (Feng, et al., 2012) in which a large portion of the population exhibits negative attitudes toward homosexuals, resulting in the production of social stigma. Most academics concur that there are three fundamental causes of stigma, namely legal policies (or the lack thereof), societal norms spearheaded by Confucian ideals and family obligations.

China’s policy on homosexuality and its changes can be considered relatively new, as it was only perceived as being neither a crime nor an illness at the turn of the 21st century. Homosexuality was only omitted from the list of crimes in the revised Criminal Law of the PRC in 1997, and officially recognised as not belonging to the Psychiatric Association of China’s list of mental disorders in 2001 (Xiong, 2010). However, the state’s policy seemed to stagnate thereafter, creating a passive and ambiguous stance toward homosexuality. Zhou describes the state policy as the “‘Four No’s’: no enquiry (bu wen), no mentioning (bu ti), no talking (bu shuo), and no response (bu li)” (Zhou, 2006) whereas Xiong depicts it as the “‘Three Nos' (sanbu zhengce) - no approval, no disapproval and no promotion of homosexuality” (Xiong, 2010). The apparent neutral stance however, does not imply acceptance and this ambiguity creates challenges in the management of homosexuality issues.

Social norms in Chinese society are largely informed by Confucian values and one implication is that the topic of sex is considered inappropriate for public discourse. Little effort is made to educate the public about the innate nature of homosexuality (Yu & Xiao, 2008) and the misunderstanding that homosexuality is a conscious choice results in the opinion that homosexuals are wrong-doers. Since the societal norm is defined by heterosexual orientations (Li, Holroyd, & Lau, 2010), the perception of homosexuality is then
People view homosexuality as threatening because it violates their traditional ideals and beliefs and the established cultural standards of masculinity and femininity (Feng, et al., 2012) (Yu, Xiao, & Xiang, Application and Testing the Reliability and Validity of a Modified Version of Herek's Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale in China, 2011). Such anti-homosexuality sentiments are prominent among people who hold more traditional Confucian gender-role attitudes (Kite & Whitley, 1996, 1998) (Feng, et al., 2012).

Confucian ideals manifested in the realm of the family also contribute to the stigmatisation of homosexuals. One major Confucian teaching narrates that “there are three forms of unfilial conducts, of which the worst is to have no descendants” (Yu, Xiao, & Xiang, Application and Testing the Reliability and Validity of a Modified Version of Herek's Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale in China, 2011). The emphasis on procreation is manifested in familial obligations where the failure to produce descendants is considered to be immoral, a calamity and an act of filial insubordination (bu xiao) (Xiong, 2010). Homosexuals hence suffer backlash from their families due to their lifestyle not being able to satisfy the familial expectations of continuing the family line.

Even though homosexuality is deemed not illegal, conservative silence on the topic coupled with Confucian ideals permeating society and the institution of the family lead to the stigma and discrimination that homosexuals face in Chinese society today (Yu, Xiao, & Xiang, Application and Testing the Reliability and Validity of a Modified Version of Herek's Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale in China, 2011). This stigma leads to real consequences that homosexuals face in their daily lives.

One consequence of stigma is the burgeoning phenomenon of sham marriages among homosexuals. Although this occurrence is present around the world, it is markedly more
prominent in China (Xiong, 2010) and this trend could be attributed to family pressure (Koo, et al., 2014) as more than 70% of homosexuals who married disclosed that their decision was motivated by their parents’ expectations (Zhang, et al., 2008). Due to the aforementioned societal and family customs, homosexuals are hassled into entering heterosexual marriages to procreate, to “conceal their homosexual orientation by achieving a balance between collectivist obligations and hidden individualistic life desires” (Koo, et al., 2014), thus compromising their bodily desires. They have to struggle with the roles of being a tongzhi and a son/husband/father at the same time (Zhou, 2006), leading to mental distress which could potentially be extended to their legal partners and children (Xiong, 2010).

Studies have shown that the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) continues to be a problem in China especially among the homosexual population as their high-risk sexual behaviours translates to a higher potential of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Koo, et al., 2014). HIV prevalence among male homosexuals has considerably risen from 1.4% to 5.3% over a decade (Chow, Wilson, Zhang, Jing, & Zhang, 2011), while the percentage of annual HIV diagnoses attributable to male-to-male sex rose substantially from 12.2% to 32.5% over the 2007-2009 period (Ministry of Health of the People's Republic of China, 2010). With discourses on sex being treated as taboo, sexual naivety could contribute to the risky sexual behaviours of homosexuals (Koo, et al., 2014). Furthermore, the snowballing impact of stigma creates a barrier such that people with HIV are unable to disclose their condition and seek help (Zhou, 2006). Lastly, academics have recognised the unnerving possibility that male homosexuals might spread HIV to heterosexual women (through sham marriages) or the general population since condoms are not often used in China (Choi, Gibson, Han, & Y, 2004). Much of the existing literature do not focus on lesbian women. This may be due to a more urgent concern of stigma against gay men as a study done through the Attitude Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (Herek, 1994) revealed
that heterosexual attitudes toward lesbians are less severe than that of gay men (Yu Y., Study on Gay Men's Living Conditions in Changsha, 2010).

(2) Differing Experiences of Rural and Urban Homosexuals

Current intervention methods proposed in existing literature agree on the primary purpose to de-stigmatise homosexuality, whether through legalising same sex unions (Xiong, 2010) or to call for greater education and awareness about homosexuality (Feng, et al., 2012). However, they do not consider the contextual differences that rural and urban homosexuals might face in their lives.

Through their study on Shanghai, Feng and his colleagues found that perceptions of homosexuality are significantly associated with demographic characteristics (education level, economic status, urban/rural). Urban residents, in contrast to rural populace, have significantly more positive attitudes toward homosexuality. Higher education level and economic status are also associated with the perception of homosexuality as normal. The conclusion of their study is that the most important predictors of attitudes toward homosexuality are individuals’ knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and the extent to which his/her values are traditional (Feng, et al., 2012).

Much of the research then points to the homosexual lifestyle being more tolerated and accepted in urban China, since the urban populace to a certain extent, has greater access to knowledge on sexual and reproductive health and hold less traditional values. Ha, a married peasant interviewed by Koo and his colleagues for their research, laments that it would be shameful to disclose his homosexual identity due to the conservative conventions of rural areas (Koo, et al., 2014). Also, the function of marriage to pass on the family name is particularly prominent in the rural areas (Xiong, 2010). The urban generation with wider
access to mass media and the Internet also allows for greater access to material about homosexuality (Zhou, 2006).

Given the observed differences in perceptions of homosexuality between the rural and urban populace, it is a logical conclusion that urban homosexuals could possibly be in a better situation than their rural counterparts. As such, intervention methods should be tailored to suit the situational characteristics of particular homosexual populations instead of a one-size-fits-all approach.

(3) Significance of Examining the Urban Populace Along With Changes in the OCP

Bearing in mind that the urban populace exhibits less discrimination against homosexuals, it would be interesting to investigate how recent changes in the OCP enhances this position, given that the urban populace would be most affected by the alterations in the OCP.

The OCP was introduced in 1979 to limit demographic growth that was thought to be compromising economic wellbeing and the quality of life (Nayak, 2008). Despite the term ‘one child’, the policy was far from an enforced single child approach. Rather, it became a multi-policy regime as exceptions were made in 1984 and 1986 after there were difficulties in its administration, especially in rural areas where residents were mostly spared (Short & Zhai, 1998) (Wang, 2005).

There has been great controversy and discussion regarding the relevance and consequences of the OCP, with opponents backing their cause through highlighting female infanticide and the development toward an ageing population (Wang, 2005). In November 2013, a China state-run news agency Xinhua reported that China announced its decision to relax the OCP, allowing couples to have two children if either one is an only child (Sun & Gui, 2013). These changes would impact the urban population to a larger extent as the OCP was already relaxed in the rural areas. Urban parents having more than one child could possibly react less strongly
to their child being homosexual as there is a sibling that could relieve the burden of producing descendants. Also, the pressure on homosexuals to enter into conventional marriages to procreate might ease. Overall, there is a need to investigate how perceptions toward homosexuality among urban residents might be altered by the ease in the OCP.

Through an investigation of attitudes toward homosexuality in the urban populace considering the change in OCP, the significance of such research could be extended to the formulation and implementation of interventions. With the possibility that urban attitudes toward homosexuality could improve further as a result of the OCP relaxation, it suggests that instead of applying education and awareness-based interventions to urban population, it could be time for a more forthcoming and proactive method of intervention, e.g. more petitions and a push for legalisation of same sex unions. It must be noted however, that such investigation should be done in areas where the provincial government already implemented the new policy, such as in Jiangsu (Zhang & Yao, 2014), Fujian (Woo, 2014) or Chongqing (Wang & Yao, 2014).
References


