



Mental Health and Social Inclusion: The Human Rights challenges Among LGBT Community in Mainland China

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ABSTRACT

Mainland China has the world's largest population and is also home to the LGBT community's highest proportion. Despite the legalization of homosexuality in mainland China in 1997, the LGBT community faces discrimination in their daily activities. The recent studies carried out in 2019 and 2020 on the LGBT community's prejudice in mainland China showed that these individuals still encountered rejection despite its legalization two decades ago. Rejection starts from family, continuing to school, workplaces, and religious centers. The Burki (2017) study revealed that the majority of LGBT individuals live in their cocoons, fear of discrimination, and the implications of those factors may negatively impact their mental and physical health. In some LGBT communities, marriage is a form of social conformity. Despite the fact that some heterosexual individuals are likely to interact with homosexuals, many are highly opposed to allowing their children to associate with the LGBT community. It is expected that everyone conforms to the norms that are acceptable to the majority of the population. While the available research has led to greater acceptance of the LGBT community, more work is needed, particularly when it comes to recognizing homosexuals by the government. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to increase awareness of LGBT mental health and promote social inclusion.

Keywords: LGBT, men who have sex with men (MSM), social inclusion and exclusion, discrimination, mental health, Mainland China

INTRODUCTION

A world meter elaboration of United Nations data estimated mainland China's population at 1,440,828,045 people, equivalent to 18.47% of the global population (Tang & Yu, 2021). As the country with the highest population globally, it is also the country with the largest gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community (Hua, Yang & Goldsen, 2019). The LGBT community in mainland China lives in their cocoons, the barriers they continue to face in their everyday lives (Burki, 2017). Though these are turbulent times for the world population, the situation has only become worse for the LGBT community in mainland China due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Homosexuality in mainland China was illegal until 1997, when the first version of the mainland China Classification of Mental Disorders recognized homosexuality as a sexual disorder. In 2001, homosexuality was officially removed from sexual disorders (Wang et al., 2020; Table 1). LGBT in different parts of mainland China continue to experience discrimination, even in official and legal offices. Moreover, the population is uncertain whether

they will be able to hold meetings, hold rallies, or provide social services. Nearly all government offices in mainland China continue to discuss the legal status of the LGBT community. As it appears, the government has decided to maintain a cautious and conservative stance on the issue, often called "not encouraging, not discouraging, not promoting" (Mountford, 2017).

Sexual minorities might foresee exclusion and bad encounters and absorb homophobic sentiments as a consequence of living in a heteronormative and discriminatory society. Such processes are close to the ego and may thereby increase the likelihood of psychological suffering. In a longitudinal study with MSM in Beijing, it was shown that anticipating MSM stigma had an effect on both sadness and anxiety by increasing avoidance and decreasing social support-based coping methods with sexual identity-based stigma (Sun et al., 2020). Thus, MSM who expect discrimination and refusal from others might avoid tackling issues and retreat socially, which might exacerbate alienation and suffering. This study lends credence to the mental mediation concept, which asserts that stigma increases maladaptive coping behaviors such as social avoidance, hence mediating the association between stigma and psychopathology (Liu & Kozinets, 2021). Internalized homophobia is shown to have a significant impact on the mental health of MSM in western countries (Li, 2021). Nevertheless, studies in mainland China have produced contradicting findings: multiple studies, both cross-sectional and longitudinal, found no evidence of an association or prediction of emotional problems with internalized homophobia (or internalized sexual identity stigma) (Lee et al., 2022).

A questionnaire of a major state sample of MSM in mainland China discovered that while interpersonal-oriented identity worries such as acceptance concerns and interpersonal marginalization were not linked to emotional problems, minority stress processes proximal to the self (i.e., internalized homonegativity, identity concealment) were (Yu & Peng, 2022). Likewise, a longitudinal study with MSM in Beijing found no notable immediate or subtle influences of internalized gender identification stigma on depression or anxiety, but predicted such psychological wellbeing problems (Ji et al., 2021). A further study of Chinese LGB young adults found no link between proximal minority stress (internalized homophobia, self-concealment, and rejection sensitivity) and psychological maladjustment, but support networks, particularly apparent parental support concerning one's gender identity, were linked to favorable mental consequences (Nichols et al., 2022). Meanwhile, two other studies discovered an association between internalized homophobia and unsatisfactory mental wellbeing.

Discrimination against different groups of people based on their race, age, sex, or disability (Modrakovic et al., 2021). While the Chinese government chooses to remain neutral on the issue, the LGBT community continues to suffer in silence. LGBT individuals continue to face political, legal, social, economic, and cultural discrimination, causing them to remain a hidden sub-population in the country (Ren & Yuan, 2018). Such discrimination has led to the LGBT community's marginalization, with negative impacts on their mental and physical health and their daily lives (Chan, 2021a; Chan, 2021b; Table 2). With over 47 million homosexuals in mainland China, it is only right that their visibility is increased, rights advocated for, and discrimination eliminated at all levels in the society (Parkin, 2017). Previous studies show that with economic development and modernization, the community becomes more tolerant of people with queer sexual tendencies (Xie & Peng, 2018). Mainland China has recently been experiencing one of the most remarkable economic growths in the world and is currently ranked with other superpowers like the United States and Russia. The distinctive Chinese Cultural context appears, however, to have a significant impact on the people's attitude toward the sexual

minority groups.

Year	Event
1973	Declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder in the U.S.
1990	The World Health Organization declassifies homosexuality as a mental disorder in May 2017.
1997	As a result of the "abolition of hooliganism law" in mainland China, homosexuality is no longer a crime.
2001	The Chinese government declassified homosexuality as a mental illness.
2004	International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, & Biphobia celebrated on May 17.
2014	Chinese court rules homosexuality cannot be fixed by therapy.

Table 1| A timeline of homophobia milestones (Lin & Wang, 2021; Wu & Nie, 2021)

One study with MSM in Jiangsu Province found that those with high rates of depression had significantly greater rates of internalized homophobia than those with lower rates of depression (Wang et al., 2021). Another experiment with homosexual and bisexual males in Southwest mainland China classified subjects into two groups depending on their degree of internalized homophobia, with the “high internalized homophobia” group experiencing greater mental discomfort and sexual compulsions (Tan, 2022). Both investigations, however, dichotomized the crucial factors such as depression or internalized homophobia (Fan et al., 2022), which may diminish assessment accuracy and raise the probability of false positive and prejudiced results (Qu, 2022).

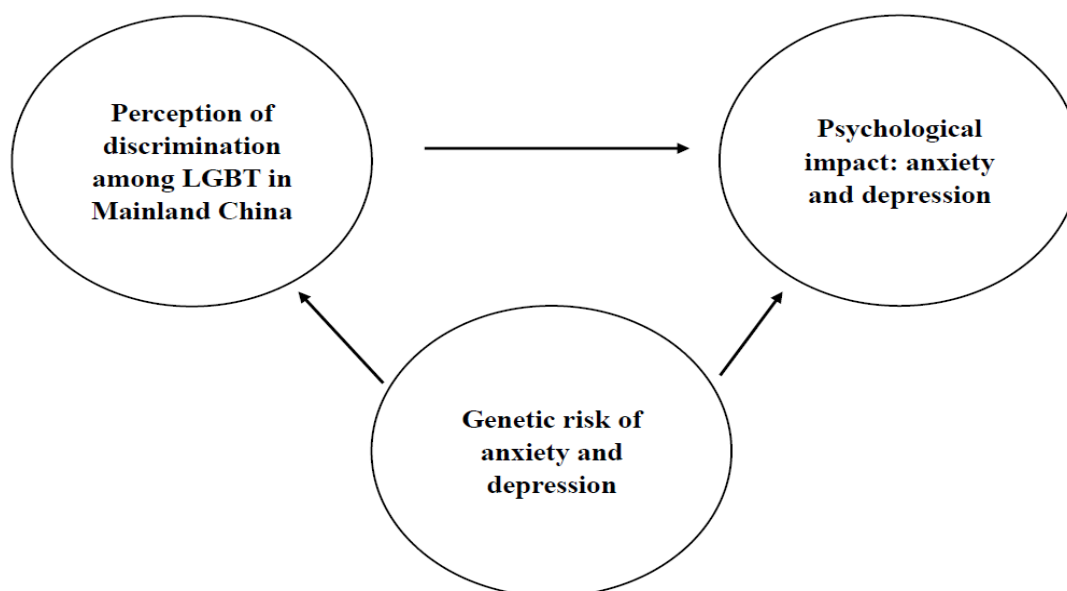


Table 2| Correlation on discrimination and psychological wellbeing among LGBT in mainland China (Zhou & Wang, 2022)

Historical influence of "Confucianism," Chinese culture insists on following ideologies as intended by nature (Yang et al., 2016). Every member of the society is expected to conform to sexual orientations accepted by the vast majority, referred to as average under the laws of Confucianism (Hwang, 2018). Furthermore, mainland China is a collective society with people experiencing lots of influence from their families and society as a whole (Hua, Yang & Goldsen, 2019). Family honor and dignity are highly valued, with the importance of maintaining a great image being emphasized. Therefore, being a part of the LGBT community is considered a great source of shame and victimization to the family and a subject of gossip (Chen et al., 2019).

Minority stress theory is derived from social psychology theories of stress and analyzes the mechanism through which minority stressors have a detrimental effect on the psychological wellbeing of sexual minorities (Goodmann et al., 2021). The model depicts a spectrum of sexual orientation-specific stresses ranging from distal to proximal. Distal stressors may take the form of measurable, external stresses such as prejudice and discrimination. Proximal stresses are associated with more internalized processes, such as anticipating prejudice incidents and internalization of stigmatizing beliefs, such as internalized homophobia and concealment. Given the primacy accorded to social context in generating minority stress (Lin et al., 2021), as well as hypotheses of structural stigma applied to sexual minorities (Tan et al., 2021), we begin this part by examining the historical and cultural context of minority stress in mainland China and summarizing the distinct culturally related characteristics of minority stress concerning MSM. We next summarize study data on the association between minority stress related to sexual orientation/behavior and mental health in MSM, arranged along the distal-proximal continuum. Due to the request to expand minority stress theory to include HIV-related stress among MSM living with HIV (Zhang, 2021), we also discuss the association between HIV stigma and psychological wellbeing among MSM in mainland China.

A REVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In the 1970s, mainland China passed a one-child policy to control the world population. Under this law, every family was expected not to have more than one child, and it was not until 2016 that the policy was changed to allow the birth of two children in each family (Feng, Gu & Cai, 2016). One child system, there was pressure on the offspring to continue with the family lineage. Appreciating this concept helps in understanding the discrimination experienced by homosexuals across the various Chinese cultures. In the past, researchers have emphasized investigating LGBT discrimination in multiple areas such as in public service, churches, and schools. However, not much research has been done on LGBT discrimination in mainland China, the probable reason that triggered the two latest research pieces by Wang et al., (2019) and Wang et al. (2020). Over the years, several laws and policies have been passed to promote the LGBT community's rights, and indeed a change in attitude has been observed over the past two decades (Youn, 2018). However, the LGBT community continues to experience discrimination in various contexts. Even with the removal of homosexuality as a sexual disorder from the CCMD, there are still many mental healthcare professionals who believe that homosexuality is treatable by "*Sexual Orientation Conversion Efforts (SOCE)*." Surprisingly, SOCE is being offered by hospitals across the country, including reputable medical centers (Wang et al., 2019). Besides, transgender healthcare availability is minimal, making it extremely challenging for such people to access hormone treatment or gender-affirming surgeries (Zhu et al., 2019). In addition, contrary to international requirements, transgender people require to go through psychotherapy for at least a year. Notably, one doesn't need to be allowed to go ahead with the transformation even after the year elapses (Coleman et al., 2015).

A recent study spearheaded by the Lancet Public Health Center, UN Development Program, and Beijing LGBT Center were very informative. To the best of the author's knowledge, the first national survey assessed discrimination and acceptance of the LGBT community (Wang et al., 2019). During the study, 10,392 participants from across 31 provinces in mainland China took part. The study showed that heterosexual people were having difficulty accepting their homosexual family members or interacting with them. The study's results were as follows; 11.1% rejection rate of LGBT family members and a 2.1 to 4.1% rejection rate of association with homosexuals by heterosexual individuals (Wang et al., 2019). The rejection rate went a notch higher when the respondents were asked if they could accept their children as being transgender (66.8%), bisexual (25.1%), or homosexual (17.5%). The probable reason is that the Chinese believe in the traditional marriage structure and see it as an important life event that every child must go through. Besides, choosing to be a member of the LGBT community could mean giving up family life, which means the child does not produce an offspring (Wang et al., 2019). Also, the heterosexual respondents believed that the LGBT community should not be allowed to raise children, transgender (21.9%), homosexual (8.2%), and bisexual (6.0%). These results were consistent with a study carried out by Chua, Huang & Jin (2019) between 2014 and 2014, bringing together 11,662 respondents across 31 provinces in mainland China. The purpose of the study was to determine the people's tolerance towards the LGBT community.

References	Country	Methods	Participants/ Sample	Mental health measure	Impact on Psychological Well-Being
Choi, Steward, Miede, Hudes, & Gregorich (2016)	Mainland China	Snowball sampling and peer recruiting in settings frequented by MSM (public parks, brothels)	M= 30 Internalized MSM stigma, as evaluated by a 15-item scale created by the researchers based on their research in India; expected MSM stigma, as evaluated by an adapted scale from previously used indicators of anticipated stigma.	Depression and anxiety disorders, as determined by the Center for Epidemiological Studies Brief Symptom Inventory & Depression Scale (CES-D; 20 items)	Projected MSM stigma had a strong immediate influence on depression and anxiety symptoms through avoidant coping.
Chong, Mak, Tam, Zhu, & Chung (2017)	Hong Kong	Subjects were selected during a trip to a Hong Kong-based HIV outpatient clinic.	M=39.25 Mental discomfort as evaluated by a five-item questionnaire Inventory of Mental Health	Internalized stigma associated with HIV, as evaluated by the self-stigma scale	Path analysis revealed that unfavorable responses to HIV stigma inside the MSM population moderated the association between perceived HIV stigma and mental discomfort within the MSM population.
Liu et al. (2018)	Mainland China	MSM were selected via the use of a structured respondent-driven sampling (RDS) technique.	71.3% are between the ages of 18 and 29, 16.5% are between the ages of 30 and 39, and 12.3% are between the ages of 40 and 64.	Suffering from depression as judged by the Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS, 20 items)	Depression prevalence (SDS > 52) was considerably higher among persons over 40, married to a female, lacking support networks, experiencing gay-related distressing life situations, and HIV-positive.

References	Country	Methods	Participants/ Sample	Mental health measure	Impact on Psychological Well-Being
					GRSEs occurred in 4% of patients. While disagreements with family members, professors, or classmates over same-sex conduct are frequent GRSEs, they have no influence on depression. However, recent conflicts with a supervisor or coworker had the largest impact on depressive symptoms, followed by the death of a good friend, a disagreement with a good friend, and violent abuse.
Wang et al. (2019)	Mainland China	Recruited participants at a public HIV clinic	M= 42.4	Suicide, as determined by two questions assessing suicide thoughts and intent; depression, as determined by the CES-D; and anxiety, as determined by the Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale.	10.7% expressed support for suicide ideas. Suicidal MSM were more inclined to be younger, single, and jobless, to have repeated sleeplessness, and to have increased anxiety ratings.

References	Country	Methods	Participants/ Sample	Mental health measure	Impact on Psychological Well-Being
Tao et al. (2017)	Mainland China	Subjects were selected from a large experiment that aimed to screen and connect HIV-positive MSM with care.	364 Median age = 28 Not reported	Anxiety and depression, as evaluated by the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale	36% were expected to have borderline depression; 42% were expected to have borderline anxiety. Anxiety and sadness were both connected with the earlier beginning of ART.
Wang et al. (2017)	Mainland China	MSM Snowball in Shanghai	M =30.50 [17.33, 65.33] is the range.	Depression is quantified with the CES-D; anxiety is quantified using the GAD. Anxiety; Rosenberg's self- esteem scale UCLA Self- Esteem Scale, loneliness. Loneliness, as evaluated by the Loneliness Scale; sexual compulsivity, as evaluated by the Sexual Compulsivity Scale (10 items)	At least one-third of subjects reported having at least two psychosocial symptoms. UAI was connected to poorer self-esteem.

able 3| An overview of research on the detrimental mental effects of prejudice on LGBT individuals

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF CURRENT RESEARCH

In study of discrimination against LGBT populations in mainland China, Wang et al., (2019) showed that mainland China's LGBT community is still suffering from discrimination and society's marginalization (Table 3). The findings released in 2020 also prove that discrimination against homosexuals is ongoing in the current society we are living in. As a result, most individuals tend to conceal their sexuality to avoid being discriminated against. Notably, the disclosure rates varied amongst the subgroups and in various settings. The highest disclosure rate was in the medical settings, while opening up in religious backgrounds had the lowest rates. Lesbians were more likely to disclose their sexuality to their family or workmates as compared to homosexual individuals. The probable reason is lower rates of self-perceived discrimination amongst lesbians than gays, transgender, and bisexuals. Failure to

accept family has led to the LGBT community getting into marriage for formality reasons to please the society. "Tongqi" is the term for wives of men who have sex with men.

Therapy and psychotherapy treatments are relatively new and undeveloped sectors in mainland China, at least for the general public. Mental disease consciousness stays low in the general population, and stigma associated with obtaining expert psychological treatments persists, resulting in just 10% of persons suffering from a psychiatric disorder seeking therapy (She et al., 2021). Around 173 million individuals in mainland China are believed to suffer from psychological diseases, with only 40,000 therapists working full- or part-time [128, 129]. In response to the increased demand for psychiatric services over the last decade, the administration established a registration system for therapists with comparatively lax criteria (e.g., no requirement for a university degree, oversight, or work placement experience), resulting in inconsistent training performance among providers (Duan et al., 2021). According to a nationwide poll of therapists, 70% had a bachelor's degree or less, and just 36.4 percent had majored in psychology (Barrientos et al., 2021). Due to a lack of adequate technical education in mainland China, combined with a record of pathologizing same-sex activities, widespread misconduct in psychiatric care for LGBT clients has occurred. Numerous clinics have promoted conversion therapy with a focus on aversion-based treatment (Taha et al., 2022). A 2014 case in Chongqing against conversion treatment, which resulted in a favorable verdict for the plaintiff, pushed this subject to the forefront of public discussion (Li et al., 2021). However, a 2015 nationwide poll of over 1000 counselors in mainland China indicated several concerns: although 88.6% of counselors reported "accepting homosexuality," just 67.5% approved acceptance of bisexuality, and 41.7% recommended acceptance of transgender individuals (Tantirattanakulchai & Hounnaklang, 2021).

DISCUSSION

Along with counselor-related variables, minority stress has an effect on MSM's assistance seeking. In a survey of MSM in Hong Kong who admitted experiencing psychological problems in the previous year, those who reported elevated rates of internalized homophobia and perceived public stigma toward requesting psychiatric treatment were less likely to seek assistance, whereas those who perceived greater empathy from psychiatrists were more likely to seek assistance (Kittiteerasack et al., 2021). Therapy, however, may aid disclosure: MSM who had ever had counseling were more likely to reveal their same-sex activity to their family (Spielmann et al., 2021). Minority stress, psychological wellness stigma, and the widespread pathological perspective of same-sex behaviors held by numerous psychotherapists which including the practice of conversion therapy can lead to the perpetuation of emotional problems, underutilization of psychiatric services, and unsuccessful therapeutic interventions for MSM in China. As a result, it is vital to teach therapists in China to offer expert, contextually sensitive, LGBT-affirming treatment to MSM.

Research has encouraged various organizations to campaign for LGBT rights to improve LGBT visibility and minimize discrimination. Everyone seems to wish to take part in recognizing the LGBT community. In 2018, some Chinese artists started a protest against SOCE, drawing attention to the issue. Dozens of homosexual social applications have been developed to create a community where the individuals relate and understand one another. These apps have joined in the research to find a lasting solution for their members. For example, in 2020, Blue, one of the homosexual social applications, held a study to determine the experience of

gay workers and the relationship between sexuality and professionalism (Miao & Chan, 2020). Advocates for LGBT equality argue that the diagnosis has been used to justify conversion therapy. mainland China's Beijing LGBT Center's 2014 report on the mental health of LGBT people found that the main motivation for self-discovery and change was "gaining approval from family and friends or fitting in with society. The research was done after Wang et al., 2020 study showed that homosexual individuals are less likely to be employed. Despite the same studying, that is even though economic growth is directly related to the LGBT community's acceptance.

LIMITATIONS

While there is no disputing that research on discrimination against the LGBT community in mainland China has been previously done, previous studies barely documented these individuals' various discrimination levels. Wang et al., (2020) noted that for the development of appropriate strategies to protect the LGBT community, it is crucial to investigate the various aspects of homosexuals' discrimination. It is also vital to determine the geographical variation of discrimination against lesbians, transgender, gay and bisexual individuals. This way, activists and policymakers will be aware of the areas requiring the most effort to transform their ideologies towards homosexuals.

Wang et al., (2020), was a cross-sectional study, making it impossible to investigate the study's causal relations. Besides, according to the researchers, the sampling technique may limit the generalization of the results. That is because a majority of the participants were young people with internet access, who may or may not be frequent subscribers to the LGBT community. The current study does not cover all aspects of discrimination, such as the legal elements facing the LGBT community, such as same-sex marriage and adoption. Also, the study settings were based on the Chinese cultural context, which has majorly evolved overtime. Therefore, the validity and reliability of these measures should be determined. The researchers admitted to applying the expert consultation method to boost the results' reliability (Peng et al., 2019). Researchers should investigate the association amongst various discrimination settings, influence perceived discrimination, and use LGBT scales with good psychometric properties.

CONCLUSION

Despite efforts to eliminate discrimination against the LGBT community in mainland China, homosexual individuals continue to be discriminated against, whether by family, workplaces, or religious centers. The situation has been made worse by the government's silence on the issue, with the LGBT community left unsure whether they are a recognized population. Other countries, such as the US, have gone ahead to legalize LGBT, with same-sex marriages being recognized (Smith, 2016). The studies that have been carried have had a significant impact on reducing discrimination against the LGBT. However, more is expected of future studies, such as factors influencing discrimination and reasons for the different rejection rates among the subgroups in various settings.

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