Gender Differences in Attitudes towards Homosexuality in China

Chang Liu*

1School of Liberal Arts, Pennsylvania State University, PA, 16801, USA

*Corresponding author: cjl6006@psu.edu

Abstract. The sexual liberation movement across many regions globally has resulted in a shift in individuals' perspectives and dispositions towards homosexuality. This research investigates the gender disparities in Chinese attitudes toward homosexuality and some of the causes behind these disparities based on a review of the literature. The research topic centers on the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights and the pursuit of gender equality. The study's findings indicate that there exist gender disparities in attitudes towards homosexuality in China, with women exhibiting more favorable attitudes compared to men. Moreover, it was observed that men tend to demonstrate greater consistency between their explicit and implicit attitudes towards homosexuality, whereas certain women exhibit incongruence between their explicit and implicit attitudes. Some women display positive explicit attitudes towards homosexuality, yet their implicit attitudes are negative. Both men and women tended to hold more negative attitudes towards gay individuals compared to lesbian individuals. Notably, men's attitudes towards gay individuals were significantly more negative than those of women, whereas there was minimal disparity between men's and women's attitudes towards lesbian individuals.

Keywords: Homosexuality; Gay; Lesbian; Gender Disparities; China.

1. Introduction

In recent times, there has been a noticeable rise in the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community and the accomplishments of the gay and lesbian rights movement. Consequently, there has been a gradual surge in public attention and consciousness regarding homosexuality. Historically, there existed a prevailing societal disapproval towards homosexuality for an extended duration. The global expansion of the sexual liberation movement has led to varying perspectives and attitudes regarding homosexuality. The investigation of variations in views towards homosexuality based on gender is located within the wider framework of LGBTQ+ rights and societal acceptability. This study examines the gender differences in Chinese perspectives on homosexuality and explores the underlying factors contributing to these disparities through a comprehensive literature analysis. Understanding the gender-related differences is of utmost importance to effectively tackle the intricate issues surrounding sexual orientation, as well as to promote societal inclusivity and achieve gender equality.

According to the findings of Hildebrandt et al. [1], disparities in attitudes towards homosexuality based on gender are observed exclusively in developed nations such as Europe and the United States. Conversely, there is a lack of substantial evidence supporting the existence of gender-based variations in attitudes towards homosexuality in regions characterized by lower levels of gender equality and development, including China. The data utilized in this conclusion may not possess a representative nature with regards to the Chinese region. Several research conducted in China and Europe have revealed that gender disparities in attitudes towards homosexuality are present among China or some populations in China [2-5]. This study presents a comprehensive review of gender disparities in views towards homosexuality in China, drawing from a range of Chinese and English literature. Additionally, it offers an initial examination of the factors contributing to the emergence of these disparities within the Chinese context.

2. Gender Disparities in Views on Homosexuality

2.1. Definition of Concepts

Homosexuality, like heterosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, and other variants, represents a range of human sexual orientations. The homosexual community is classified as a minority group, among other individuals who identify as non-heterosexual. In this study, the term "sex differences" pertains to the distinctions between individuals who identify as cisgender men and cisgender women. Additionally, "homosexuality" is used to describe intimate or sexual relationships between individuals of the same sex, namely male-male and female-female relationships, often known as gay and lesbian, respectively.

2.2. Male's Overall Attitudes Toward Homosexuality vs. Female's Overall Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

The notion that there is no disparity in attitudes towards homosexuality between males and females, as posited by Oliver and other scholars [6], was discredited as early as the previous century. Whitley, Kite, and LaMar all corroborated in their own research that there exists a disparity between men's and women's opinions towards homosexuality, with males generally exhibiting more negative attitudes compared to women [7-9]. Hildebrandt et al. conducted a study utilizing data from the seventh wave of the World Values Survey (2017-2021) [1]. Their findings indicate that males in only European and American countries exhibit lower levels of acceptance towards homosexuality compared to females. Moreover, the study reveals that this gender disparity in attitudes towards homosexuality becomes more pronounced in regions characterized by higher levels of gender equality and development. In other words, when women's attitudes towards homosexuality are more positive relative to men's attitudes, it serves as an indicator of greater gender equality and development within the respective region.

Indeed, there exists an enormous gap in attitudes regarding homosexuality between Western nations and most Eastern nations. According to Gordon [10], Western nations maintain the belief that upholding a heteronormative gender system serves as the foundation for sustaining gender bias. Conversely, it is widely acknowledged that advocating for equal rights for individuals with non-heterosexual orientations is not considered politically acceptable in many Eastern countries. Within the field of Chinese studies, Gao has also found evidence suggesting that Eastern cultures exert a greater adverse influence on the attitudes of Chinese college students towards homosexuality when compared to Western cultures [2]. However, in contrast to the findings of Hildebrandt, Bettinsoli et al. discovered that males exhibited more negative attitudes towards homosexuality than females across all 23 countries examined, including China, Japan, and South Korea, which are commonly associated with Oriental cultures [5].

A considerable portion of the relevant Chinese literary works also provides evidence supporting the presence of gender disparities in attitudes towards homosexuality within the Chinese context. According to Gao's mentioned study, Chinese male college students were seen to have more negative extrinsic and implicit views towards homosexuality in comparison to their female peers [2]. Previous research on the opinions of Chinese college students towards the homosexual community has consistently indicated a prevailing inclination among women to hold more favorable views towards homosexuality in comparison to men [11-13]. According to a study conducted by Guo et al. at Beijing Normal University, it was observed that elementary school girls had more favorable attitudes towards homosexuality compared to elementary school males following their participation in a sex education program [14]. According to Zheng's research on the analysis of Weibo (one of the most popular social media in China, similar as Twitter) big data [3], it was observed that female Weibo users across different age groups exhibited a comparatively more favorable attitude towards homosexuality as compared to their male counterparts. Chen conducted a study to examine the views of Guangzhou inhabitants towards people identifying as homosexuals [4]. The research focused on a random sample of 446 individuals residing in Guangzhou, a prominent first-tier city located on the southern coast of

China. The findings revealed that women exhibited a higher level of tolerance towards homosexuality compared to men. In a manner akin to Europe and the United States, Chinese males exhibit a more negative attitude towards homosexuality as compared to Chinese female.

2.3. Additional Disparities in Gender-Based Dispositions towards Homosexuality

In contrast to Europe and the United States, research conducted in China has identified a relationship between the "discrepancy between implicit and explicit attitudes" towards homosexuality and gender [3]. According to prior American studies [15, 16], it has been observed that there exists a disparity between individuals' implicit and explicit attitudes towards homosexuality. This disparity, however, does not exhibit any significant correlation with gender. In other words, both men and women demonstrate a similar distinction between their implicit and explicit attitudes towards homosexuality. Furthermore, it has been found that the explicit attitudes of both genders towards homosexuality tend to be more positive compared to their implicit attitudes. Wang conducted a study in China that revealed a lack of association between gender and the disparity observed in implicit and explicit views towards homosexuality among college students in the country [17]. In the study carried out by Zheng on the analysis of Weibo big data, it was observed that female Weibo users exhibited more favorable attitudes towards homosexuality in general when compared to their male counterparts [3]. However, concerning the behavioral tendency towards homosexuality, male Weibo users displayed a significantly higher level of acceptance towards homosexuality compared to female users. This implies that female users held more positive explicit attitudes towards homosexuality, while simultaneously expressing more negative implicit attitudes towards it, in contrast to their female counterparts. The distinction between implicit and explicit views towards homosexuality among Weibo users is associated with gender.

Diverse views exist among men and women on gay or lesbian relationships as well. Research has indicated that there exists a notable disparity in the attitudes of men and women towards individuals who identify as gay, with men generally exhibiting more negative attitudes compared to women. Conversely, the distinction in attitudes between men and women towards individuals who identify as lesbian is relatively insignificant. Furthermore, it has been observed that both men and women tend to hold more negative attitudes towards individuals who identify as gay, as opposed to those who identify as lesbian. These findings have been supported by various studies conducted by Kite and Whitley, Xie and Zeng, and Bettinsoli et al. [5, 8, 12].

3. Factors Contributing to Gender Disparities in Views towards Homosexuality

3.1. Inclination towards Reproductive Pursuits

According to Clutton-Brock, there is a common pattern observed in many animal species where the sex that has lower investment in offspring conception, typically males, exhibits greater activity in pursuing reproductive chances compared to the sex that has higher investment, typically females [18]. In the context of human civilization, it can be observed that females exhibit a higher level of investment in the production of offspring compared to males. Consequently, it is plausible to suggest that males, in comparison to their female counterparts, may display greater levels of activity in their pursuit of reproductive chances. Nevertheless, individuals of the same gender are unable to engage in natural reproduction with one another. Homosexuality's transgression of the desire to procreate increases males' incomprehension and hostility toward homosexuality, resulting in an increase in negative attitudes.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that throughout Chinese history and culture, there has been a pervasive influence of patriarchy on individuals' cognitive frameworks. This influence has been particularly pronounced in the context of family dynamics, where men have traditionally assumed the crucial role of continuing the family lineage [2]. Males without offspring are regarded as "unfilial" in Chinese feudal culture, and the absence of male progeny to carry on the family's "inheritance" is seen as a dishonor and a sign of the family's decline. The paternal line is valued higher than the maternal

line according to the Chinese feudal family ethic. Maternal relatives are commonly denoted as "external relatives". In this framework, the mother/wife and her children are perceived as belonging to the family of the father or husband; and the offspring adopt the paternal family name as a matter of course. The presence of homosexual families or relationships challenges the traditional model of reproduction, wherein the father or heterosexual man typically holds the greatest interest. Men may exhibit a stronger subconscious dread and resistance towards the collapse of patriarchal structures compared to women. Consequently, this may result in men retaining more negative opinions about homosexuality as compared to women.

3.2. Breaking down Traditional Gender Norms and Stereotypes

According to Bosson's Gender Threat Theory, instances that lead individuals or others to doubt their adherence to conventional gender standards, so challenging their sense of being a genuine man or woman, can potentially jeopardize their gender identity [19]. According to the findings of Feng's study, there was a differential response between males and females when exposed to gender threat [20]. Specifically, males exhibited a stronger reaction compared to females in the face of gender threat. Furthermore, among males, those who experienced gender threat displayed more negative attitudes towards homosexuality in comparison to males who did not experience gender threat, as well as females who did experience gender threat. The apprehension and reluctance of men to deviate from established gender standards resulted in a greater inclination towards unfavorable perspectives about homosexuality, in contrast to women.

The notion of gender equality is more likely to foster positive attitudes about homosexuality among females, as opposed to males. The study conducted by Guo et al. at Beijing Normal University revealed that a sex education program had a greater impact on enhancing the attitudes towards homosexuality among elementary school females in comparison to elementary school boys [14]. In a study conducted by Zheng utilizing Weibo big data, it was observed that Chinese female users of Weibo exhibited more positive attitudes towards homosexuality in general, in comparison to their male counterparts [3]. However, when examining their behavioral inclinations towards homosexuality, it was found that female Weibo users displayed more negative tendencies. Specifically, they were more prone to distancing or excluding individuals who identified as homosexual in their real life, such as family members or friends. In the same context of China, various studies have examined the attitudes towards homosexuality among different groups, such as Chinese university students [11-13], sexually educated primary school students [14], and Guangzhou citizens [4]. However, these studies did not reveal a higher prevalence of negative attitudes towards homosexuality among females compared to males. This finding holds true across studies that investigated both explicit and implicit attitudes. One notable distinction between the five experiments and Zheng's study utilizing Weibo Big Data lies in the composition of the samples [3]. Specifically, the samples utilized in the five experiments were sourced from individuals with higher levels of education [11-13], individuals who received formal sexuality education [14], or populations residing in more developed regions [4]. In contrast, the Weibo Big Data study conducted by Zheng employed a data sample derived from a not restricted population of Weibo web users spanning the years 2010 to 2016 [3]. The data sample utilized by Zheng is significantly larger in comparison to the five experiments mentioned [13]. Moreover, it is likely that the proportion of individuals within the sample who possess awareness of gender equality notions is smaller when compared to the participants in these five tests. This implies that the promotion of gender equality and a thorough comprehension of sexual concepts through sex education are more likely to positively influence women's attitudes towards homosexuality, while having a comparatively lesser impact on men's attitudes towards homosexuality. In contrast to males, women's gender perceptions may present relatively greater opportunities for challenging and dismantling established gender norms and stereotypes. This disparity arises due to the prevalence of gender norms that grant men greater freedom and rights compared to women. To challenge conventional gender norms, men have to give up the established privileges and social standing.

This supports Hildebrandt's observation that attitudes toward homosexuality are more positively held by women than by males and that there is a larger gender gap in attitudes toward homosexuality the more gender equality and development there is [1]. The general level of gender equality perceptions among users of Weibo, a popular social media platform in China, is rather low. It is possible that there exists a subset of the Chinese population, comprising both males and females, who possess a lower degree of awareness of gender equality perceptions. The general level of gender equality in China is potentially substandard. These results align with the evaluations of gender equality in China as indicated in the data analysis conducted by Bettinsoli et al. [5].

Moreover, individuals who have positions of majority and power within a community may encounter difficulties with cultivating comprehension and empathy towards marginalized and vulnerable populations. Heterosexual males, particularly those of Han Chinese descent, who occupy a position of dominance within patriarchal systems and adhere to traditional gender norms, may have challenges in cultivating comprehension and empathy towards sexual minorities, relative to their female counterparts. In their examination of data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), Shi et al. discovered that ethnic minorities had a higher level of acceptance towards same-sex sexual activity compared to the Han Chinese population [21]. In a study conducted by Mohammadreza et al., it was shown that females, as well as individuals identifying as African-American and Hispanic/Latino/Spanish, had higher levels of empathy compared to their respective counterparts [22]. Heterosexual men may exhibit a greater propensity for negative attitudes towards homosexuality due to comparatively lower levels of empathy when compared to women.

4. Summary

The findings of this study indicate that gender disparities exist in attitudes towards homosexuality within the Chinese context, with women exhibiting more favorable sentiments compared to men. The consistency of men's explicit and implicit attitudes towards homosexuality tends to be higher compared to women. Some women exhibit consistent attitudes towards homosexuality, both explicit and implicit, while some women display a positive explicit attitude but a negative implicit attitude. In comparison to lesbians, both males and females tend to hold more negative attitudes towards gay individuals. Notably, men generally exhibit significantly more negative attitudes towards gay individuals than women, whereas there is minimal disparity between men's and women's attitudes towards lesbians. There are two possible explanations for the disparities in gender-based attitudes on homosexuality in China: there is an opportunity that males may demonstrate a higher propensity towards engaging in reproductive activities compared to females; Deconstructing conventional Challenging old gender norms and stereotypes may provide more difficulties for men in comparison to women. The availability of statistical data regarding attitudes towards homosexuality in China is limited, and there appears to be a lack of emphasis and support for research in this domain from scholars and other fields. Currently, there is a lack of study evidence regarding Chinese opinions towards homosexuality, which hinders the ability to conduct a thorough investigation of gender disparities in this area. In future investigations pertaining to gender disparities in Chinese perspectives on homosexuality, it is imperative to gather a more extensive and dependable dataset. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to conduct further scrutiny into the underlying factors contributing to gender discrepancies beyond overall attitudes. For instance, it would be valuable to explore the observation that men tend to exhibit more unfavorable attitudes towards gay individuals compared to women, while both genders display relatively similar attitudes towards lesbians. Another observation is that men generally exhibit more consistent explicit and implicit attitudes towards homosexuality, whereas some women may display positive explicit attitudes but negative implicit attitudes towards homosexuality. The causes of these discrepancies are worthwhile of further study.

References

[1] Hildebrandt, A., & Jäckle, S. (2023). Particularly in highly developed and more gender egalitarian societies: Sex differences in attitudes towards homosexuality. The Journal of Sex Research, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2023.2198500

[2] Gao, X. (2018). The Attitude of College Students towards homosexuality according to different culture priming [Master's Thesis, Sichuan Normal University]. https://doi.org/kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CMFD201801&filename=1017155824.nh

[3] Zheng, Q. (2018). Research on Weibo User's Attitudes Towards Homosexuality: Text Mining Based on Big Data [Master's Thesis, Sichuan Normal University].

[4] Chen, J., & Liu, J. (2013). Contact and Identity:Study on Guangzhou Residents' Attitudes towards Homosexuality. Proceedings of 2013 3rd International Conference on Applied Social Science(ICASS 2013), 3, 442–447.

[5] Bettinsoli, M. L., Suppes, A., & Napier, J. L. (2019). Predictors of attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women in 23 countries. Social Psychological and Personality Science, 11(5), 697–708. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619887785

[6] Oliver, M. B., & Hyde, J. S. (1993). Gender differences in sexuality: A meta-analysis. Psychological Bulletin, 114(1), 29–51. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.114.1.29

[7] Whitley, B. E., & Kite, M. E. (1995). Sex differences in attitudes toward homosexuality: A comment on Oliver and Hyde (1993). Psychological Bulletin, 117(1), 146–154. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.1.146

[8] Kite, M. E., & Whitley, B. E. (1996). Sex differences in attitudes toward homosexual persons, behaviors, and civil rights a meta-analysis. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 22(4), 336–353. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167296224002

[9] LaMar, L., & Kite, M. (1998). Sex differences in attitudes toward gay men and Lesbians: A multidimensional perspective. Journal of Sex Research, 35(2), 189–196. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499809551932

[10] Gordon, A. R., & Meyer, I. H. (2007). Gender nonconformity as a target of prejudice, discrimination, and violence against LGB individuals. Journal of LGBT Health Research, 3(3), 55–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/15574090802093562 Ma Kunlong. Short term distributed load forecasting method based on big data. Changsha: Hunan University, 2014.

[11] Gai, Y., Wang, Q., Gai, H., & Xun, M. (2013). Research on Attitudes of Contemporary University Students Towards Homosexuals. Health Medicine Research and Practice, 10(1), 60–62.

[12] Xie, L., & Zeng, G. (2018). A survey report on the attitudes of post-1995 college students towards homosexuality. Course Education Research, (24), 181–182.

[13] Liu, X. (2020). A survey of college students' attitudes towards homosexuality. Journal of Campus Life & Mental Health, 18(2), 121–122.

[14] Guo, L., Fang, S., Li, Y., Liu, S., & Liu, W. (2019). Effectiveness of sexuality education curriculum to improve the attitude towards homosexuality in primary school. Chinese Journal of School Health, 40(10), 1478–1481.

[15] Nathan, M. L., Ormond, K. E., Dial, C. M., Gamma, A., & Lunn, M. R. (2019). Genetic counselors' and genetic counseling students' implicit and explicit attitudes toward homosexuality. Journal of Genetic Counseling, 28(1), 91–101. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10897-018-0295-8

[16] Steffens, M. C. (2005). Implicit and explicit attitudes towards lesbians and Gay Men. Journal of Homosexuality, 49(2), 39–66. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v49n02_03

[17] Wang, H. (2019). Impact of Gender-Based Stereotype Threat on the Attitudes of Heterosexual College Students towards Homosexuality [Master's Thesis, Jiangxi Normal University].

[18] Clutton-Brock, T. H., Hodge, S. J., Spong, G., Russell, A. F., Jordan, N. R., Bennett, N. C., Sharpe, L. L., & Manser, M. B. (2006). Intrasexual competition and sexual selection in cooperative mammals. Nature, 444(7122), 1065–1068. https://doi.org/10.1038/nature05386

[19] Bosson, J. K., Weaver, J. R., Caswell, T. A., & Burnaford, R. M. (2012). Gender threats and men's antigay behaviors: The harmful effects of asserting heterosexuality. Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 15(4), 471–486. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430211432893

[20] Feng, Y. (2019). The Impact of Gender Threats on College Students' Homosexual Attitudes: The Role of Asserting Heterosexuality [Master's Thesis, Jiangxi Normal University].

[21] Shi, S., Zhi, K., Xue, D., & Zhang, Y. (2021). The Correlation between Gender Discrimination and Sexual Tolerance in China: an urban - rural comparison. The 23rd National Academic Conference of Psychology, I, 200–201.

[22] Hojat, M., DeSantis, J., Shannon, S. C., Speicher, M. R., Bragan, L., & Calabrese, L. H. (2020). Empathy as related to gender, age, race and ethnicity, academic background and career interest: A nationwide study of osteopathic medical students in the United States. Medical Education, 54(6), 571–581. https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14138