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Analysis of Differences in Coming-Out Experiences Between Chinese and Foreign Minority Groups

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Abstract. Coming out, the process of disclosing one's sexual orientation or gender identity, is a pivotal experience for LGBTQ+ individuals, yet its prevalence varies significantly across cultures. This study examines the underlying causes of the disparity in coming-out rates between China and Western countries, employing a qualitative comparative research design that combines historical documentation review. The findings reveal that the disparity stems primarily from three interconnected factors: (1) the contrast between traditional Chinese family and clan values emphasizing that collective interests take precedence over individual interests, and the West's spirit of individualism, which emphasizes personal development. (2) differing legal and policy environments regarding LGBTQ+ rights and protections; and (3) distinct historical development—specifically, the Western path from "sin" to "sickness" to "identity" versus China's context of relative silence and ethical familism. The study concludes that "coming out" cannot be universally prescribed as the benchmark for LGBTQ+ liberation; instead, it is deeply embedded within specific cultural scripts and institutional histories. Previous research has shown that coming out can enable LGBTQ+ individuals to integrate their self-perception better, accept genuine feedback and support from the outside world, and thus improve their self-acceptance and enhance their mental health.

Keywords: Coming out, Cultural Variance, LGBTQ+ Rights

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed growing academic and public interest in the mental health and social well-being of LGBTQ+ populations, with "coming out" often identified as a critical factor [1]. A substantial body of Western literature has firmly established a positive correlation between coming out and indicators of psychological health, such as reduced internalized stigma and increased life satisfaction [2]. Despite extensive research on Chinese LGBTQ+ groups focusing on different factors influencing the coming out of domestic LGBTQ+ individuals, little attention has been paid to comparing the national-level reasons, including cultural aspects and historical events, causing the disparity in the coming-out rate between China and Western countries. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the factors contributing to the disparity. By doing so, this study offers a new perspective on understanding cultural differences between China and the West, analyzing the basic reasons for the low social acceptance of LGBTQ+ populations in China, and providing a new reference point

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for coming out in China. The remainder of this article proceeds in two general parts: the traditional concept and the historical concept.

2. The impact of traditional beliefs on the LGBTQ+ community in China

One factor causing this disparity is traditional concept reasons. China evolved from an agrarian society. A thriving population means greater workforce availability and stronger family influence. As a result, progeny plays a necessary role on the social level. The classic Chinese philosophical concept of Confucianism can prove this. Confucian family ethics promote "There are three forms of ingratitude, but having no offspring is the greatest." [3] Forced by this pressure, a lot of the LGBTQ+ population face the problems of having children in large numbers. What's more, Chinese people have a strong sense of family and clan identity and awareness, which emphasizes that collective (family, society) interests take precedence over individual interests. As a result, an individual's emotions and desires must be subordinated to the family's responsibility to perpetuate the lineage and enhance the family's reputation. Publicly disclosing one's sexual minority identity is viewed as a potential act that could disrupt family harmony and disgrace the family. As a result, many people choose to suppress their identities to maintain collective "harmony." In contrast, Western culture emphasizes personal development because it believes that social well-being is founded on individual interests. Therefore, Western individualist cultures tend to encourage individuals to pursue self-actualization and express their true selves.

3. Historical development and the criminalization of LGBTQ+ identity in the west

Another factor is historical development. In Western history, religion played a significant role [4]. The overall historical path is 380 years later. Fathers such as Augustine (The City of God) integrated Greek philosophy with Christian thought to create systematic theology. After the collapse of the Roman Empire (476 AD), monasteries became centres of knowledge, transcribing texts, spreading the faith, and preserving the flame of Western civilization during the "Dark Ages." Roman bishops gradually became the leaders of the Western Church (the Pope), with figures like Gregory I (590–604) strengthening the authority of the Holy See and cooperating with secular rulers. However, Christians considered LGBTQ+ people to be a kind of sin [5]. Chapters in the Bible, such as Leviticus, explicitly classify same-sex sexual behaviour as a "detestable" sin. During the Middle Ages and the early modern period, this was not merely a moral issue but a criminal offense, severely punishable by ecclesiastical courts, often linked to capital punishments such as burning at the stake. This resulted in the systematic portrayal of same-sex desires and behaviours as active violations of God's laws, a "sin" that needed to be confessed, punished, and eradicated. This tradition of "sinification" provided a theological foundation for its subsequent criminalization. Also, the Bergkhoff Act of 1885 made consensual homosexual acts, even within private residences, illegal. This direct involvement of the state in citizen s' private lives was thus established. In the late 19th century, European physicians and sexologists (such as Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany) began to define "homosexuality" as a naturally occurring, fixed identity category, rather than a sinful or temporary behaviour. They diagnosed LGBTQ+ as "sexual deviants." This laid the groundwork for later identity politics, although it was still viewed as "pathological" at the time. Take, for example, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs – a pioneering theorist. He proposed the concept of the "third sex." According to him, a "sexual pervert" (a gay man) was essentially a female soul trapped within a male body (and vice versa for a lesbian). He coined the term "Urning" to refer to gay men. Ulrichs himself was gay and sought to advocate for the repeal of anti-homosexual laws in Germany by defining

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homosexuality as a natural, innate variation. His work was one of the earliest efforts to decriminalize homosexuality, albeit by framing homosexuals as "naturally abnormal." Richard von Krafft-Ebing – Medicalization and Pathologization. His seminal work, Sexual Neuroses, systematically categorized "sexual perversion" as a neurological disorder or a sign of "degeneration." In his classification, homosexuality (sexual perversion) was placed alongside other "sexual deviations" such as sadism and masochism. Krafft-Ebing's work significantly contributed to the medicalization and pathologization of homosexuality. While his intention may have been to replace moral condemnation with scientific empathy, the outcome was the transformation of homosexuals from "criminals" to "patients," a label that remains inherently negative.

4. The emergence of LGBTQ+ rights movements and their challenges

Since 1897, the movement and revolution of the rights of LGBTQ+ people started to pour out [6]. In Germany, Magnus Hirschfeld founded the "Committee for Scientific Humanitarianism" in 1897, which was the world's first organization advocating for gay rights. They initiated the first petition campaign calling for the repeal of Section 175 of the German penal code, which punished male same-sex conduct. In the UK, writers such as Edward Carpenter also publicly advocated for gay rights through their writings. However, there are some frustrations. The rise of Nazi Germany destroyed the early movements. The Nazis viewed LGBTQ+ people as "degenerates" and sent large numbers of them to concentration camps, where they wore pink triangle badges. Post-World War II, political persecution under the backdrop of the Cold War (such as in the United States with McCarthyism) further oppressed LGBTQ+ individuals, viewing them as a "security risk." In the United States, organizations like the Mattachine Society and the Lesbian Rights Organization "Daughters of Bilitis" were established in the 1950s and 1960s. They adopted more moderate assimilationist strategies, emphasizing that homosexuals were also law-abiding and normal citizens and sought to gain rights through education and dialogue. In 1967, the Sexual Offenses Act finally legalized same-sex sexual activity between consenting adults over the age of 21 in private. This effectively repealed the Bergthoff Act's application in the private sphere. The Stonewall Riots in June 1969, sparked by yet another routine police raid at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York City, led to several days of violent resistance by the gay community. This event is considered the beginning of the modern gay rights movement. Unlike the previous, more moderate assimilationist strategies, the Stonewall incident gave rise to a more radical, emphasizing the "beauty of homosexuality" liberation movement. New organizations such as the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance were formed, employing direct action, public demonstrations, and "coming out" strategies, with the slogan "Come out of the closet and into the streets."

5. Conclusion

On the traditional concept level, the factor driving the disparity in coming out is that China is still profoundly influenced by a Confucian family ethic, which requires that individual interests be subordinated to collective interests. But Western culture promotes the idea that social interest is built on personal interest. Moreover, on a historical level, Western countries list LGBTQ+ as a sin and use laws to prevent it, forcing people to initiate a movement to cancel the rules. But in China, the unacceptance is limited and opposed at the ethical and social levels, which did not lead to movement or revolution to cancel the social rule, so nowadays, the social acceptance of LGBTQ+ in China is still very low.

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