

Research Article

Attitudes towards Gender Inequality and Acceptance of Homosexuality: A Study of Chinese Populations

Jie Zhang^{1*}, Junnan Li², and Jichao Wang²¹Shandong University School of Public Health, China²Central University of Finance and Economics Department of Sociology, China***Corresponding author**Shandong University School of Public Health, China;
SUNY Buffalo State University Department of Sociology,
Buffalo, NY, USA**Submitted:** 15 July 2024**Accepted:** 08 August 2024**Published:** 10 August 2024**ISSN:** 2476-2016**Copyright**

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Abstract

With the increased social attention to individual sexual orientation and homosexuality in China, scholars have begun to study how to improve the public acceptance of the non-traditional groups and try to change their adversities. We used a sample of 9,452 cases in the data from the Chinese General Social Survey in 2017 (CGSS 2017) and Stata (15.1) software to explore the impact of gender discrimination on homosexual animosity, with a hope to promote the “de-marginalization” of homosexual groups. By the ordinal logistic model analysis, it is found in most the respondents of the survey, that the stronger the awareness of gender equality, the more acceptance of homosexuality. Women are more likely to accept homosexuality than men, and less educated people are less likely to accept of homosexuality. As other relevant variables, age, political orientation, income, marital status, and internet usage frequency all have significant effects on acceptance of homosexuality.

INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality, which used to be a stigma, has become more and more acceptable in Chinese societies, especially in the past two decades. There were more than 21 million gay men and 12 million lesbians in China in 2013, and the numbers have been growing [1]. However, as a result of Chinese traditional social values and stereotypes, many people still associate homosexuality with psychosis, AIDS and so on. The traditional social values have made those individuals of different sexual orientation experience social stigma, and it is difficult to gain respect and understanding, let alone social support. These prejudices and discriminations may make them feel fear and suffer unfair treatment [2], which damage their physical and mental health greatly [3], increase the risk of suicide [4,5]. The situation is not conducive to promoting social civilization and maintaining social stability.

In the West, early studies showed that people's attitudes towards homosexuality were relatively negative [6]. With the improvement of education level, the changes in cultural values [7], and the political atmosphere [8], the diffusion of favorable global cultural messages [9], the public's attitudes became more and more positive [10]. Generally speaking, women gender, younger age, high education, being white, living in big cities, high-income, and liberal religiosity contribute to the tolerance of homosexuality [8,11-13]. Further, political liberals

are more tolerant than moderates and conservatives towards homosexuality [13,14].

Similar to some western societies, the overall acceptance of homosexuality in the Chinese public is low, although there has been an increasing trend in the past few years. Among the relevant variables, age and marital status are the most important to predict their attitudes towards sexual orientation, and gender is the least influential [2]. Compared with low-income and high-income groups, the middle-income public is less tolerant of homosexual groups [15]. In addition, age, education level, urban and rural areas influence the attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay men in Chinese culture background, older, less educated and the rural public is more negative [16,17].

The rise of feminism and gender egalitarianism challenged traditional gender roles in the 1960s. Beauvoir pointed out that gender is socially constructed rather than inherently possessed in “The Second Sex” [18]. The inequality between men and women is the result of the differentiated treatment of the two sexes in the process of constructing society. The obvious separation of the sexes leads to a series of problems such as gender discrimination [18]. Oakley demonstrated the difference between biological sex and cultural gender in “Gender, Sex and Society” and pointed out that gender division of labor is not a natural entity determined by the biological differences between men and women, but a social

norm of gender inequality deliberately caused by society [19]. These theories make people begin to realize that the existing gender concept is the product of socialization and can be changed [20]. In this sense, the construction of gender equality cognition between the sexes is the key link to achieve equality. So, since there is no difference in gender in social construction, there is no difference between men and women in the social sense naturally, and love should also be a genderless social action [21].

Regardless of the efforts, gender stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination continue to be prevalent [22]. Such sexist attitudes have affected the way people connect and interact. From a national perspective, the higher the level of gender inequality and human rights violations faced by citizens, the higher the degree of homophobia in countries [23]. A study of Italians showed that people with sexist tendencies are more likely to have a negative attitude towards homosexuality because they strongly accept traditional gender roles and believe that legal sexual and emotional relationships exist only between men and women [24]. Intolerance even fear of homosexual groups is deeply rooted in a value system that refutes gender equality [25]. Because the awareness of gender equality has blurred the boundaries of traditional gender roles, the society's attitude towards homosexuality will become more tolerant [26]. In addition, although Western egalitarian social changes can help reduce gender inequality and improve attitudes among groups, it may also prompt some men to confirm their masculinity by emphasizing heterosexuality and rejecting homosexuality [27].

The researchers also found that the more frequently the Internet media is used [28], the more it is the main source of information [29], and the more open and tolerant of homosexuality. However, some scholars pointed out that the negative stereotypes of homosexuality are associated with heavy media use [30].

Previous studies in China of this area were more likely to collect data from college students, medical students, and people with specific religions, and there is a lack of studies on national data. Also, most of the research on the attitudes of Chinese citizens comes from self-developed questionnaires. Further, there is almost no research on applying gender equality or gender discrimination to Chinese citizens' attitudes towards homosexuality. Therefore, in this study, we try to fill this academic gap.

The major research hypothesis of the current study is, controlled for certain relevant variables, the higher an individual's gender equality level, the higher the acceptance towards homosexuality. Besides, we believe social demographic characteristics also affect the public's tolerance of homosexuality. Such as gender, age, religious belief, education level, income level, political party, registered residence (*hukou*), marital status and internet usage frequency.

DATA AND METHODS

Data source

This study mainly focuses on the relationship between

individual citizens' attitudes towards gender equality and acceptance of homosexuality. In this study, we use the data from the Chinese General Social Survey 2017 (CGSS 2017) to test the hypotheses. The Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) launched in 2003, is the earliest national representative continuous survey project run by academic institution in mainland China. It is aimed to summarize the long-term trend of social change by regularly and systematically collecting data on Chinese people and all aspects of Chinese society. At present, it has become the most important data source for studying Chinese society and is widely used in scientific research, teaching and government decision-making. CGSS2017 data was released on the official website of China National Survey Database (CNSDA) on October 1, 2020. The data is not only highly scientific, representative and comprehensive but also includes specific issues of public attitudes towards gender equality and homosexuality.

Samples and Variables

The survey used multi-level stratified sampling to collect relevant information in the form of face-to-face interviews, covering 31 provinces/municipalities/autonomous regions of the country with a total of 12,582 respondents. With selected variables for the current study, a total of 9,452 cases were included after processing and selection. In addition, all data analysis was completed in Stata (15.1) software.

As the dependent variable, tolerance to homosexuality is measured in the protocol by the question: "Do you think same-sex sexual behavior is right?" Choices for the answer are: "Always wrong= 1," "It is wrong in most cases= 2," "It is not right and wrong= 3," "Sometimes right= 4," "Completely right = 5." Value size is the level of public homosexual tolerance. The higher the score, the higher the acceptance.

The core independent variable for this study is gender equality awareness. There are five statements on social values for the respondents to give their opinions: 1) Men should focus on career and women focus on family; 2) Males are naturally stronger than females; 3) It is better to marry than do well; 4) Women should be let go first when the economy is depressed; 5) Husband and wife should share the housework equally. The answer options are 1=completely disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=completely agree. In order to facilitate analysis and understanding, we have reverse-coded the items. The higher the score, the more the public disagrees with the above point of view, and the stronger the tendency for gender equality. In addition, we added these five questions into one question, the value range becomes 5-25, the higher the score, the stronger the awareness of gender equality, and the more liberal the gender role attitudes [31].

According to the previous studies, we introduced some control variables related to public acceptance of homosexuality: gender, age, religious belief, education level, income level, political party, registered residence (*hukou*), marital status and internet usage frequency. Among the gender variables, the male is coded as 1, and the female is coded as 0. Age ranging from 18 to 103. In the

variable of religious belief, the code of religious belief is 1, and the code of no religious belief is 0. The 14 answers of educational level are recoded into 4 questions: 1 “less than primary school,” 2 “junior and high school,” 3 “college and university,” 4 “master degree and above.” The political party variable is re-coded as: “non-CPC = 0,” “CPC member = 1.” Income level is measured by the personal annual total income in 2016 and the logarithm is taken. Among *hukou* variables, the agricultural household registration code is 0, and the non-agricultural household registration code is 1. In marital status variables, 1 “unmarried,” 2 “cohabitation,” 3 “first marriage with a spouse,” 4 “remarriage with a spouse,” 5 “separation without divorce,” 6 “divorce,” 7 “widowed.” The frequency of Internet usage is measured by “How did you use the Internet in the past year?” The answers to the questions and assignments are: “Never = 1,” “Rarely = 2,” “Sometimes = 3,” “Often = 4,” “Very frequently = 5.”

Model

Because the dependent variable of this study “public acceptance of homosexual” is a five-class ordinal variable, we will use the ordinal logistic regression model for analysis.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

From the perspective of independent variables, the average value of gender equality awareness is 15.073. On the whole, the respondents’ gender equality awareness is at a medium level, and there is no strong prejudice or demand. From the perspective of dependent variables, the respondents’ acceptance of homosexuality was low. 74.64% of respondents think it is always wrong; 5.88% think it is wrong in most cases; 15.51% say it is not right and wrong; only 1.21% of respondents express it is completely correct.

In the sample, the gender and the urban-rural ratio are basically 1:1, and the number of men and women and the urban-rural distribution are balanced. The average age is 51 years old, after 50 to 70 about 60%, and the data tends to reflect the attitude of the middle-aged. Only 10 % of people believe in religion. The Communist Party of China (CPC) accounts for about 13%. According to statistics in 2019, the CPC members accounted for about 6.57% of the total population. It shows that the quantity of party members is at a high level in this sample. In terms of personal total annual income, it is mainly middle-income groups. At the level of education, it is mainly junior high school and below, with colleges and above accounting for about 21%. The number of married people is higher, about 90% of respondents were married, at the same time, most people have a spouse in their first marriage. The above three situations are related to the age structure of the respondents. The average Internet usage frequency is 2.885, and the overall usage is not high. The public who never use the Internet account for the largest proportion, about 40.08%, followed by very frequent, accounting for 27.5% (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographics of the sample with distributions

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Acceptance of homosexual						
Always wrong	7,055	74.64				
It is wrong in most cases	556	5.88				
It is not right and wrong	1,466	15.51	1.500	0.933	1	5
Sometimes right	261	2.76				
Completely right	114	1.21				
Attitudes towards gender equality			15.073	3.547	5	25
Gender						
Female	4,618	48.86				
Male	4,834	51.14			0	1
Age			51.486	16.234	18	103
Religious belief						
No	8,492	89.84				
Yes	960	10.16			0	1
Education level						
Less than primary school	2,919	30.93				
Junior and high school	4,534	48.04			1	4
College and university	1,849	19.59				
Master’s degree and above	136	1.44				
Political party (CPC)						
No	8,211	86.87				
Yes	1,241	13.13			0	1
Income level			9.973	1.318	4.382	16.117
Registered residence status						
Rural <i>hukou</i>	4,711	49.84				
Urban <i>hukou</i>	4,741	50.16			0	1
Marital status						
Unmarried						
Cohabitation	827	8.75				
First marriage with a spouse	177	1.87				
Remarriage with a spouse	7,068	74.78				
Separation without divorce	202	2.14			1	7
Divorce	51	0.54				
Widowed	258	2.73				
Internet usage frequency						
Never	869	9.19				
Seldom	3,788	40.08				
Sometimes	536	5.67				
Often	708	7.49	2.885	1.715	1	5
Very often	1,814	19.19				
	2,606	27.57				

Regression analysis

We established two basic regression models. In Model 1, only sociodemographic variables were included. The results show that gender, age, education level, political party, income level, *hukou*, some marital status and internet usage frequency variables all affect the public’s acceptance of homosexuality significantly, but the effect of religious belief is not significant. Gender and age affect the public’s acceptance of homosexuality at the level of 0.001 significantly. The income level is significant at the 0.01 level. Men, older, and lower incomes people are less likely to accept homosexuality. Among the education level, compared with less than primary school, college and master’s degree have a significant positive impact on public acceptance at the level of 0.001. Starting from the college, the higher the degree, the more likely to accept homosexuality. Middle and high school education affected the public’s acceptance of homosexuality negatively at the 0.01 level. They are more likely to not accept homosexuality

than the public with primary and below. Therefore, it is not that the higher the degree of education, the higher the acceptance of homosexuality. Political party at the 0.01 level and the *hukou* at the 0.05 level are correlated with public attitudes significantly. CPC members and rural residents are more likely to hold negative attitudes. Different marital status has a large gap in attitudes towards homosexuality. Compared with the unmarried public, the first marriage with a spouse and widowed at the level of 0.001, remarried with a spouse and divorce at the level of 0.05 are significantly related to the acceptance of homosexuality. The unmarried public hold a more positive attitude; cohabitation and separation without divorce have no significant impact on the acceptance of homosexuality. But overall, married people are more likely to not accept homosexuality than unmarried people. Compared with people who have never used the internet, people who use it very frequently have a higher acceptance of homosexuality.

In Model 2, the differences in sociodemographic variables did not change much, and most variables only differ in correlation coefficients and individual significance levels. Gender, age, education level, political party, marital status, and frequency of internet use have not changed, and religious beliefs still have no significant impact on public attitudes. The *hukou* changed from significant to insignificant. The variable of income level has changed from being significant at the 0.01 level to being significant at the 0.05 level, indicating that the impact of this variable has been reduced. In addition, the awareness of gender equality has a significant positive correlation with the acceptance of homosexuality at the level of 0.001. The poorer the awareness of gender equality, the lower the acceptance of homosexuality. On the contrary, the public with a liberal sense of gender roles has a positive attitude towards homosexuality, and its acceptance and tolerance are likely to be higher. From the perspective of marginal effect, after controlling for other variables, when the public's gender equality consciousness increases by one unit, the possibility of very negative acceptance of homosexuality decreases by 0.008 units, and the possibility of relatively acceptable and very acceptable increases by 0.001 units respectively, both of which are significant at 0.001 level. In other words, greater awareness of gender equality can increase public acceptance of homosexuality. This supports the hypothesis (Table 2).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Using the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) 2017 data, we examined the relationship between the public attitudes towards gender equality and the acceptance of homosexuality. There are a number of findings. First, the public's awareness of gender equality has a significant positive impact on the acceptance of homosexuality. The stronger the public's awareness of gender equality, the higher acceptance of homosexuality. On one hand, it may be because people with a stronger awareness of gender equality will blur the boundaries between the two sexes and have a looser gender awareness of love or marriage, and they are more inclined to accept or agree with no gender of love. On the other hand, it may be because people with a stronger awareness

Table 2: Multiple regression analyses on homosexual acceptance

	Model 1	Model 2
Attitudes towards gender equality		0.046*** (6.17)
Gender (Female)	-0.233*** (-4.62)	-0.200*** (-3.94)
Age	-0.021*** (-8.77)	-0.021*** (-8.71)
Religious belief	-0.144 (-1.70)	-0.127 (-1.50)
Education level (less than primary school)		
Junior and high school	-0.195** (-2.71)	-0.233** (-3.22)
College and university	0.391*** (4.00)	0.326*** (3.32)
Master's degree and above	1.226*** (6.39)	1.159*** (6.04)
Political status (CPC)	-0.218** (-2.69)	-0.241** (-2.97)
Income level	0.071** (2.81)	0.058* (2.29)
Registered residence (Urban <i>hukou</i>)	0.124* (2.00)	0.105 (1.70)
Marital status (Unmarried)		
Cohabitation	-0.256 (-1.39)	-0.236 (-1.28)
First marriage with a spouse	-0.638*** (-7.62)	-0.611*** (-7.29)
Remarriage with a spouse	-0.464* (-2.50)	-0.423** (-2.27)
Separation without divorce	-0.442 (-1.29)	-0.438 (-1.28)
Divorce	-0.403* (-2.56)	-0.386* (-2.45)
Widowed	-0.515*** (-4.17)	-0.566*** (-4.05)
Internet usage frequency (Never)		
Seldom	0.123 (1.03)	0.110 (0.91)
Sometimes	0.0499 (0.46)	0.020 (0.18)
Often	0.166 (1.88)	0.140 (1.58)
Very often	0.373*** (4.17)	0.338*** (3.77)
Pseudo R ²	0.0644	0.0668

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

of gender equality are more open-minded. As a result, they are more able to respect different types of sexual minorities and defend the right of others to love and be loved unconditionally, whether they genuinely agree or not.

Second, men are less inclined to accept homosexuality than women, which is consistent with the conclusions of mainstream research in China and the West [2,8,32,33]. It may be because males have a higher degree of gender dichotomy than females in terms of gender group identity. When they think that the gender status of the male group is unstable, they will have a strong motivation to restore their gender status [34].

Third, young, high-income, non-CPC members, unmarried and very frequent internet users have a higher acceptance of homosexual groups. The older public is more deeply influenced by traditional Confucianism and are more inclined to think that the purpose of sex is to give birth and form a family, so their attitudes towards love and marriage are relatively conservative. The CPC members may be more standardized in their way of thinking, have a strong sense of discipline in work and life, so they're more cognitively standardized. The difference in marital status may be because married people have a stronger sense of family ethics than unmarried people, especially when they have children. On one hand, they hope that the children can be passed on from generation to generation, on the other hand, they are unwilling to see their children being excluded by society. The use of internet media constantly reconstructs people's thinking and concepts, so the attitudes of people who frequently use the internet are more tolerant. However, the information provided by the online media is fragmented and mixed. Therefore, the public's attitude should be treated rationally, and acceptance should be improved through active education and cultural propaganda.

Fourth, people with junior high school and high school education are the least accepting of homosexuality. Starting at university, the higher the degree, the more tolerant attitudes are. This is inconsistent with the conclusion that people with a bachelor's degree and a master's degree or above have no difference in attitudes towards homosexuality [16]. This may be due to sample differences. Junior and high school are in adolescence, lack of understanding of sexual orientation and sexual knowledge, shy to express and discuss, and the concept of love is conservative. Those who receive higher education are influenced by multiculturalism, their minds are more open, and attitudes are more tolerant.

Finally, religion do not have a significant impact on the acceptance of homosexuality among Chinese people, which is significantly different from that of Westerners. This may be influenced by the mainstream Chinese culture. Most Chinese people are atheists, and few have religious beliefs. In addition, *Hukou* is not a factor affecting people's homosexual attitude, which is inconsistent with some scholars' research [15,35]. This may be because, with the economic and social development, the gap between urban and rural areas is narrowing, and rural attitudes have also changed a lot. So there is no big difference in attitudes towards homosexuality. It may also be because China's population is relatively mobile. Some people have lived in cities or towns for a long time, even though their hukou is in the countryside. Therefore, rural residents and urban residents have the same ideology and cultural habits, and there is no significant difference in attitude to homosexuality.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION STATEMENTS

All authors participated actively and made substantial contributions to the entire research and review process, including interpretation of results and revising manuscript drafts. Zhang conceptualized the paper and directed the draft writing. Li drafted the first version and submitted the paper. Wang managed the data analyses and provided support for the writing. All the three authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

CGSS data is open to researchers from domestic and foreign research institutions, teaching staff from domestic and foreign universities, students from domestic and foreign universities, staff from domestic and foreign government agencies, and people who need to use the data for non-commercial (for-profit) and political purposes. For those eligible to use CGSS2017 survey data, log on to cnsda.ruc.edu.cn or www.cnsda.org. After simple registration, they can download the CGSS2017 survey data for free.

CODE AVAILABILITY

We used the STATA software. Do-files codes can be obtained from the authors on request.

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