

The Intersection of Identity and Economic Geography: LGBT+ Economic Rights and Economic Development in China

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Abstract: This study investigates the social impact of economic geography by focusing on the LGBT+ population in China. Specifically, it examines the extent to which LGBT+ persons in China enjoy the right to economic development, considering the country's overall conservative cultural landscape—particularly in rural areas—and the dual urban-rural system that spatially distributes economic activities in the country. The paper explores the relationship between economic growth and acceptance levels for LGBT+ ideologies across China's urban and rural areas. It identifies demographic factors that potentially impact the economic status of LGBT+ persons in the country. The paper employed a qualitative research method comprising extensive desk research and interviews with four participants: 2 from urban areas and 2 from rural regions. Interviews were conducted both in-person and via phone calls, and data on participants' religious and ideological beliefs regarding same-sex relationships were collected. Findings from both the literature review and interviews demonstrate significant differences in the way urban and rural areas in China view the LGBT+ identity. Results show that urban centres, particularly large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, are more accommodating to and accepting of LGBT+ persons than are rural areas and, in turn, offer greater employment prospects and entrepreneurial opportunities to LGBT+ individuals. The paper concludes by emphasising the need for policies that acknowledge LGBT+ persons' right to self-expression in China and those that support their integration into the country's broader economic landscape.

Keywords: LGBT Rights, China LGBT Economy, Economic Geography, Economic Distribution, LGBT Discrimination.

1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, the world is increasingly becoming inclusive as more countries globally embrace liberal ideologies such as same-sex relationships. Sexual orientation and gender identities are increasingly being considered personal and malleable, especially in urban areas, and this is especially true in countries such as China that are characterised by distinct dual urban and rural setups. Briefly, the dual urban-rural system describes a national strategy dating to the Maoist era in which the State extracts resources from the rural sector and uses them to fuel urban-industrial development [1]. Today, the

dual system functions as a source of low-cost migrant labour for China's urban industries following the country's integration into the global economy as a manufacturing hub [1]. Unfortunately, policies that separate economic activities by geography will have unintended negative consequences since geographic heterogeneity itself, notwithstanding policy or agglomeration effects, can hamper national economic performance through increased spatial inequality [2]. Countries with varied terrain, climates, and natural endowments, such as China, tend to face greater challenges in achieving balanced economic development across regions, especially when policy frameworks encourage geographically defined unequal development [2]. Moreover, the dual urban-rural system in China has had social implications since rural migrants are allowed to work in cities but remain second-class citizens excluded from urban welfare and public services [1].

Principles of economic geography contend that economic or political decisions that manifest at the geographic level often produce uneven development whose impacts can be observed at the societal level. For instance, top-down approaches to development can produce unequal effects that spur new forms of social and political mobilisation in developing countries, with such movements often representing conflicts between different groups in society over, for example, the control and use of space and resources [3]. It has been observed that the social division of labour under capitalist systems produces geographically-defined areas of opportunity, particularly in urban areas, and subsequently, areas of discrimination that affect marginalised groups such as women and persons from minority races [3]. Such consequences of unequal development can then be extrapolated to China's dual urban-rural system and examined against minority groups such as persons identifying with the LGBT+ identity. That is especially consequential when one considers the struggle for the recognition of LGBT+ rights in China, and more so in the country's rural areas that may host conservative populations.

While respect for individual agency and liberties remains a central focus of liberal societies, China's dual urban-rural economic geography has created a cultural and ideological rift that potentially affects how residents from either region interpret subjects such as sexual identity. Already, the US has documented ideological resistance in its small towns and rural communities as the conservative populations residing in such areas resist or resent the expansion or acceptance of gay and transgender ideologies. Rural communities in the US are thought of as defining themselves in opposition to urban areas, which they consider as areas of elitism, moral decay, and detachment from traditional values [4]. Rural folk considers the components of rural identity—community solidarity, self-reliance, and adherence to gender and sexual norms that are informed by religious principles—as being in direct contradiction with the LGBT+ ideology and, as such, consider the practice an urban phenomenon [4]. Considering that community solidarity in rural areas demands conformity and that residents are expected to blend in rather than stand out, coming out as gay or transgender inherently amounts to joining a marginalized section of society [4]. Consequently, LGBT+ individuals in American rural towns who wish to remain part of their communities often lead quiet, discrete lives to avoid discrimination and those who are most open about being LGBT+ often are ostracised by their communities [4]. China's rural areas can be compared to those of the US, considering the low levels of acceptance of LGBT+ ideology as noted by several scholars (for instance, see [5]). In contrast, and similar to US urban areas, Chinese urban areas are more accepting of the LGBT+ ideology, as seen by several scholars (for example, see [6]). Anecdotal evidence from casual observation suggests that the dual system in China has yielded uneven development, with urban areas being economically dominant compared to rural areas. The result, again anecdotal, is that Chinese urban areas often boast a higher educated population than rural areas (subsequent sections of the current paper will substantiate these claims). Such dynamics, in addition to the realities in US rural areas, pose the question as to whether China's dual economic geography affords different opportunities to members of the LGBT+ group and conservative individuals. That is, the present paper seeks to examine

whether being a member of the LGBT+ group economically disadvantages individuals in rural areas while those in urban environments are able to lead productive lives as participants in China's labor force. As the following research questions guide such the present paper:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between economic growth and levels of acceptance of LGBT+ ideologies across China's cities and rural areas?

RQ2: To what extent do LGBT+ persons in China participate in the formal economy compared to liberal countries such as the US?

RQ3: Are there unique demographic factors among the Chinese population that contribute to the economic realities of LGBT+ persons in China's urban and rural areas?

2. Research Background

Economic participation is a basic human right enshrined in universal laws and regulations. Article 1 of the Declaration on the Right to Development in the universal human rights instruments of the United Nations states, "The right to development is an inalienable human right under which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realised" [7]. Ideally, that right should supersede all other beliefs as it operates at the basic level of human dignity but often has been evaluated against preceding cultural and ideological practices. The result has been a growing body of research seeking to justify why all humans deserve to participate in their countries' economies, which itself is an unfortunate reality.

For instance, research shows that excluding LGBT+ persons from production activities results in negative economic outcomes since it directly impacts human capital formation and utilisation [8]. Discrimination by sexual orientation in the workplace can force LGBT individuals to work in jobs below their skill level or face barriers to career advancement, which leads to a misallocation of human resources that translates to inefficiency that reduces overall productivity [8]. Research also shows that discrimination by sexual orientation translates to annual economic losses of US\$317 million to \$1.5 billion in countries such as Canada and \$1.2 to \$27 billion from employment in India [8]. It is also estimated that emerging economies recorded a \$320 increase in GDP per capita between 1990 and 2011 due to LGBT-friendly regulations [8], a figure that is consequential when viewed against the economic realities of poor countries. Overall, lower-income societies often discriminate against LGBT+ identities than do higher-income countries, as shown in Figure 1 below.

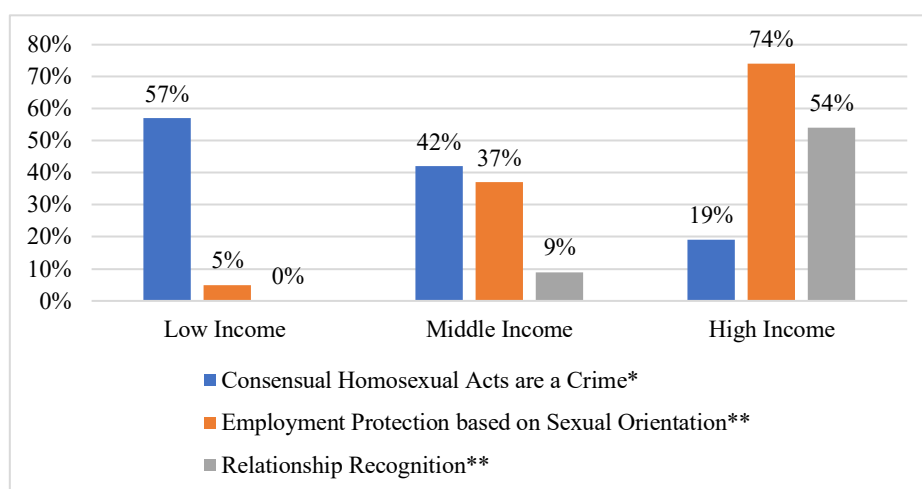


Figure 1: Higher-income societies are more accepting of LGBT+ ideologies than other societies [9]

Beyond quantifiable results, studies also show that countries with LGBT+ legal protections and an overall social tolerance for LGBT+ persons often demonstrate greater innovative capabilities, which suggests that creating LGBT-friendly environments may help spur creativity, knowledge development, and technological progress [10]. The mechanism through which LGBT+ acceptance translates to innovation has been linked to human capital accumulation and skills-matching—the same mechanisms that have been studied in relation to the negative impact of LGBT+ exclusion. LGBT+ inclusion increases national innovation capacities by creating environments that are open to new ideas and diversity of thought since societies that are accepting of LGB+ identities also often have a tolerance for non-conformity and unconventional thinking [10]. Such open and diverse intellectual climates are conducive to creative problem-solving and the development of novel technologies and approaches. At the same time, pro-LGBT+ policies help attract and retain talented individuals, particularly those who value inclusive environments, a finding that complements studies showing that people who express greater tolerance for sexual fluidity also tend to have positive attitudes towards science, technology, and innovation in general [10]. See Figure 2 below for a summary of the relationship between LGBT+ rights, human capital, and economic development.

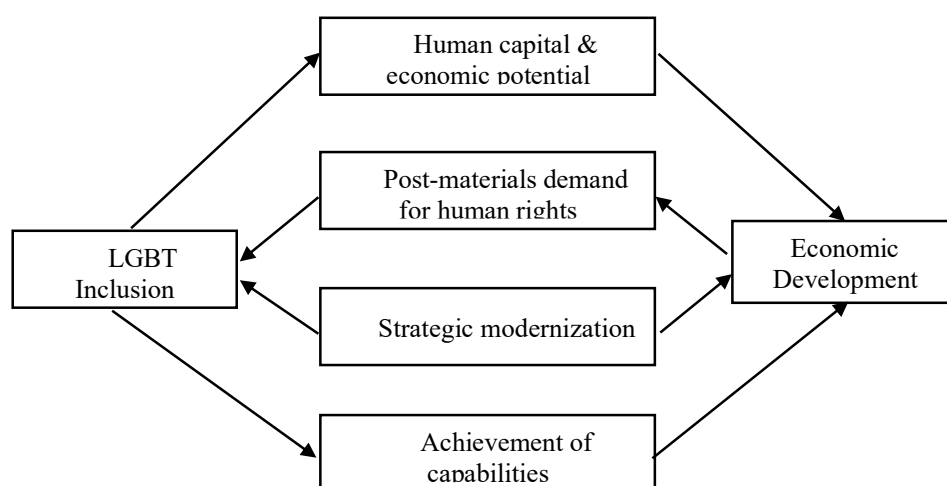


Figure 2: The link between economic development and LGBT+ inclusion in the labour market is mediated by human capital factors [9]

Still, the exclusion of LGBT+ individuals remains a reality even in liberal countries such as the US, causing concerns about the reality of this social group in conservative countries.

The economic exclusion of LGBT+ persons has been recorded in Western countries despite their relatively progressive cultures. As an example, studies show that gay men in the US often earn less on average than their heterosexual counterparts, even after controlling for factors such as education and experience, which indicates persistent discrimination in hiring, promotion, and compensation practices affecting the group [11]. Other studies have also shown that in OECD countries, gay men applying for jobs have nearly 40% lower odds of receiving a positive response from employers compared to heterosexual applicants with equivalent qualifications [12]. Further, Flage's study also revealed that for low-skilled jobs, gay men potentially have 50% lower odds of a positive employer response compared to heterosexual men, while lesbian women suffer 31% lower odds compared to heterosexual women [12]. The levels of discrimination in OECD countries are geographically defined, with studies conducted in Europe reporting significantly higher rates of discrimination against LGBT+ applicants compared to those in North America, supposedly due to reasons categorised into either taste-based or statistical discrimination. In taste-based discrimination, prejudice against LGBT+ persons is thought to stem from personal preferences or social norms, while in statistical

discrimination, prejudice follows when employers use group stereotypes to make judgments about individual applicants in the absence of complete information [12]. Worth noting is that China ranks low on indulgence and high on restraint in Hofstede's cultural indices, a stark contrast to progressive countries such as the US and those in the EU [13]. Briefly, Hofstede's cultural dimensions posit that culture acts as a type of "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" [14]. In Hofstede's theory, cultural traits are categorised under peculiarities that explain individuals' disposition to certain behaviours. For instance, the indulgence dimension explains a society's tendency to promote the gratification of basic and natural human desires that are directly related to enjoying life and having fun. In contrast, societies that rank high on restraint are characterised by controls on gratification and increased levels of regulation via strict social norms that govern individual behaviour [14]. China ranks low on indulgence and high on restraint and such a cultural disposition has a significant impact on the country's perception of LGBT+ identities, and previous sections have shown that negative perceptions persist, particularly in rural areas. High restraint translates to strict social norms that could increase discrimination towards persons subscribing to fringe ideologies, and such prejudice can negatively impact LGBT+ persons' ability to participate in the economy.

As noted in previous sections, China's dual urban-rural economic geography presents potential complications as it concerns labour distribution, and the country's high cultural restraint brings to the fore concerns about the extent to which minority groups such as LGBT+ persons are accorded the opportunity to participate in the country's labour market. That is especially true when one considers that economic exclusion of LGBT+ persons occurs even in progressive societies. Guided by the aforementioned research questions, the present paper sought to investigate those concerns with the findings presented in subsequent sections.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The LGBT+ in China

China is among the most populated countries, and it follows naturally that it will have a large number of LGBT+ persons regardless of levels of acceptance among the country's population. Statistics show that China had an estimated 30 million LGBT+ persons 10 years ago [15]. However, getting recent statistics on the same remains a complicated feat due to the topic's sensitivity in the country. Insufficient documentation of LGBT+ persons in China can partly be attributed to the country's regulatory environment and cultural elements. Same-sex relationships were decriminalised in China in 1997, and by 2001, the Chinese Society of Psychiatry had removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders [16]. Such developments marked a positive trend toward the acceptance and recognition of same-sex relationships in the country, and the early 2000s and 2010s were characterised by a relative openness for LGBT+ advocacy and community building in the country [16]. During that period, advocacy groups organised ideological events in the form of dances, community runs, and film screenings to foster visibility for LGBT identities and a sense of community [16]. Such activities, although avoiding adopting clear political activism, provided safe spaces for LGBT+ individuals to connect and express themselves, while online platforms and social media further facilitated greater connectivity and information sharing within the LGBT+ community. However, that growing safe space for LGBT+ visibility and accompanying advocacy has significantly narrowed in recent years following the suspension of LGBT-themed activities in 2021 due to what can be described as a complex legal landscape [16]. Although same-sex relationships were decriminalised in the country, there remains a distinct absence of comprehensive legal frameworks protecting LGBT+ individuals from discrimination or laws that recognise same-sex relationships [16]. That legal ambiguity predisposes LGBT+ persons to discrimination and unequal treatment in critical

areas such as formal employment [16]. The problem is further compounded by the conservative nature of China's cultural landscape that disenfranchises LGBT+ persons.

China's Confucian culture can be argued to create an environment that supports the discrimination of LGBT+ populations. Generally, traditional Confucianism did not condemn homosexuality as did the cultures in predominantly Christian societies in the West [17]. Traditional Confucianism judged same-sex relationships based on the extent to which they interfered with fulfilling familial and social duties, while Christianity generally condemned such relationships as being evil [17]. To that effect, China's cultural values mainly were concerned with the impact of same-sex relationships on reproduction and continuing the family line, and as long as men married and had children, the cultural environment largely tolerated same-sex relationships [15]. Unfortunately, increased globalisation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries exposed China to Western values that shaped Chinese citizens' perceptions of same-sex relationships. For instance, the medicalisation of homosexuality as a pathological condition in the West and its portrayal as a disease that causes HIV/AIDS tainted Chinese citizens' view of same-sex relationships by shifting their understanding from a behavioural framework to one of identity and deviance [15,17,18]. The establishment of communist rule between the late 1940s and the 1960s further enshrined attitudes that can be considered as being prejudicial towards LGBT+ persons since same-sex relationships were now seen as a "capitalist contamination" that required suppressing [17]. Recall previous sections of the present paper show that rural areas in the US consider same-sex relationships an urban ideology that conflicts with community values. Such a misconception became widely entrenched in China to the extent that even in the 1990s, Chinese citizens with higher education still regarded homosexuality as a capitalist contamination [17].

At the same time, since Confucianism emphasises social harmony and adherence to prescribed societal roles, same-sex relationships are considered non-conforming identities that are viewed as being disruptive to the social order expected of Confucian values [19]. Older people especially—due to their conservative upbringing—consider same-sex relationships "abnormal" and "disgusting" [20]. The result of such a complex cultural environment and ambiguous legal frameworks is persistent discrimination against LGBT+ persons in China that manifests both at the societal and economic levels. At the societal level, there is a generally low level of acceptance of LGBT+ ideologies, and at the economic level, inequality is observable at the geographic level. In fact, some authors have described China as the least accommodative as it concerns same-sex relationships (for example, see [20]). Disclosing one's sexuality—often termed 'coming out'—is such a daunting task that young LGBT+ persons often disclose their sexual orientation only to their close friends and rarely their family members in fear of social repercussions [19]. It is estimated that by the year 2014, only about 3-5% of Chinese gay persons had revealed their sexual orientation and that 85% of young LGBT+ persons report experiencing depressive feelings, even as 40% suffer suicidal thoughts due to the stigma associated with coming out in China—such rates are far higher than those recorded in statistics on China's young population [19,21]. At the workplace, LGBT+ persons fear coming out due to potential discrimination arising from the ambiguous laws surrounding the LGBT+ landscape [19]. Figure 3 below presents statistics on coming out in China as of the year 2014, showing that only 3-5% of gay individuals were 'completely out'.

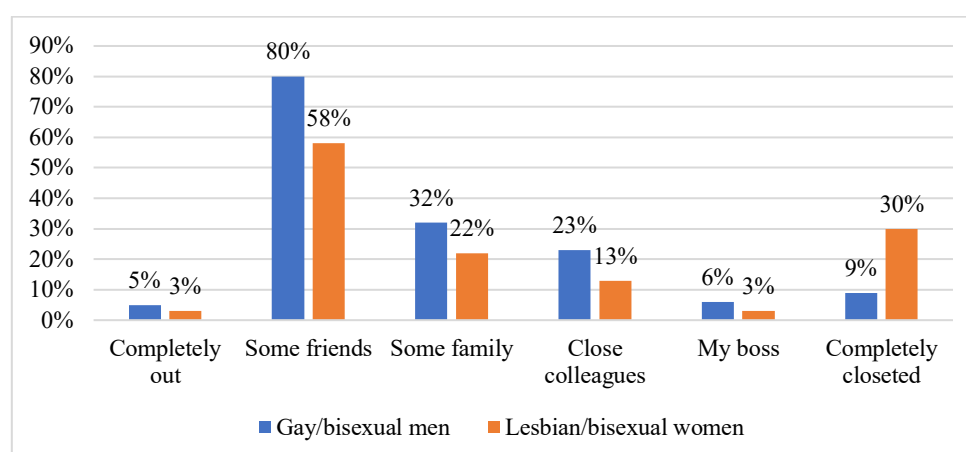


Figure 3: As of 2014, 30% of male gay persons in China remained closeted, while only 3-5% of all gay people were ‘completely out’. The majority of gay people only revealed their sexual orientation to close friends [21]

Overall, gay men suffer more discrimination than women, which translates to fewer men disclosing their sexual orientation and, subsequently, more men than women living in the shadows of society [20]. Such challenges are compounded by the dual-urban system mentioned in earlier sections of the present paper as it presents urban areas as primary areas of opportunity, posing questions as to the extent to which rural economic zones are accommodating of LGBT+ ideologies minding the complex cultural environment in China.

3.2. LGBT+ Identity and Economic Geography

It is well established that economic geography affects the extent to which unorthodox ideologies are accepted in a country. As shown in previous sections, countries such as the US have seen different levels of acceptance of LGBT+ persons based on spatial economic distribution. Rural areas in the US are conservative and less accepting of LGBT+ identities than urban areas, and such realities reflect the wider findings in a broad field of literature. Gay-friendly spaces exist in many countries, and they historically emerged in inner-city areas as environments that foster community and a sense of safety for LGBT+ people [22]. LGBT+ persons are attracted to urban areas since such places tend to encourage interactions between mainstream populations and people of different identities such as LGBT+ persons, and for that reason, they often create opportunities for greater social understanding and tolerance for LGBT+ ideologies [22]. Having observed the high levels of cultural acceptance in urban areas, researchers have since formulated a term to describe the phenomenon, calling it metronormativity. Metronormativity describes the assumption that LGBT+ persons migrate to urban areas to express their identities and find a sense of community due to those areas’ tolerance for same-sex relationships [5]. Further, researchers have observed the fusing of cultures across different countries in a way that has encouraged marginalised groups to identify with each other on a cultural basis. That phenomenon, having been observed in Chinese cities and termed cultural citizenship, fosters a “cultural belonging” in which individuals are “connected to practices of desire” and has been found to redefine political struggles by converting them into issues of class identity such that identity is viewed as the site upon which citizenship is defined [6]. Consequently, cities across the world continue to function as havens for LGBT+ people since they offer queer individuals the freedom, visibility, and resources needed to lead normal lives, and China’s urban areas are no exception. Today, Chinese cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Changsha are characterised by unique infrastructure tailored to the LGBT+ identity, such as gay bars and other queer spaces, and such locations provide

fertile ground for LGBT-specific discourses that include coming out, a concept that is a consequence of cultural citizenship since it has been co-opted from Western LGBT+ themes [6]. It is those gay bars and other economic facilities that are sympathetic to the LGBT+ identity that cement the link between LGBT+ rights, economic freedom, and economic geography.

Gay bars are a product of the safe spaces that cater to LGBT+ ideologies in urban areas and have provided enterprising gay entrepreneurs the opportunity to participate in the economy. Gay bars in large cities often are clustered in distinct LGBT-friendly districts and feature multiple specialised establishments that cater to different segments of the LGBT+ population [23]. In contrast, many small cities host single gay bars that act as cultural exchange hubs due to serving both LGBT+ and straight individuals [23]. The unifying feature between gay bars found in large cities and those in small cities is that their proprietors often are either gay individuals or persons sympathetic to the LGBT+ identity, particularly in conservative countries such as China. For instance, the first gay bars in China's urban areas were established by members of the LGBT+ community as a site for political mobilisation [6]. As noted in previous sections, the systematic exclusion of LGBT+ persons from the labour force is an ongoing concern even in liberal countries such as the US. As such, entrepreneurship continues to offer gay persons the opportunity to exercise their right to economic development, with business ownership especially benefitting fringe communities such as the LGBT+ groups in China [24]. Economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, known as the Four Modernizations triggered a rapid development of township and village private enterprises that marked the start of entrepreneurship in China and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the profile of Chinese entrepreneurs evolved alongside the country's economic and demographic transformations such as broader access to education [25]. Today, entrepreneurs in China often are younger and well-educated persons between the ages 18 and 34 years, of whom 32% hold bachelor's degrees and 27% certifications from community colleges or equivalent institutions [25]. In addition to those demographic characteristics, Chinese entrepreneurs have increasingly sought to internationalise their operations, and such efforts have exposed them to different cultures [25]. Recall, metronormativity, and cultural citizenship are consequences of exposure to foreign cultures. Considering that universities in China are considered relatively tolerant spaces for young LGBT+ people in China and that the concentration of educated youth in Chinese urban areas is responsible for a gradual positive shift in attitudes among younger generations concerning same-sex relationships [22], it follows that gay bars will naturally flourish in China's urban centres and, subsequently, provide opportunities for economic participation for gay entrepreneurs.

Critics argue that the development of business enclaves that cater to LGBT+ communities perpetuates the exclusion of LGBT+ individuals rather than improving their economic welfare. Notwithstanding the notion that dedicated gay neighborhoods are losing their relevance or necessity due to increased cultural homogeneity in urban areas, rising property values as a result of the systematic gentrification of previously gay-friendly neighborhoods have displaced lower-income LGBT+ residents, particularly those belonging to marginalised races such as people of colour [26]. The other challenge arising from gentrification is that it often caters primarily to white, affluent gay persons, leading to a skewed view of the LGBT+ community [26]. The myth of the rich gay person is rife across the world due to the media's portrayal of the gay identity as one of flashy connotations [6] and the aforementioned gentrification of gay neighborhoods [26]. However, researchers have found that LGBT+ people, particularly transgender populations and persons who traditionally are racially marginalised, experience disproportionate rates of poverty, homelessness, and financial instability compared to the general population [27]. The authors note, "The majority of LGBT/Q people are poor or working class, female, and people of colour, who struggle to get a job or hold onto one, to pay their rent and care for themselves and the people they love" [27], affirming submissions made in previous sections of the present paper concerning the economic exclusion of LGBT+ persons.

Already, and as previous sections have shown, LGBT+ individuals suffer financial insecurities due to discrimination in employment, housing, and education. Adding misrepresentation to the challenges they must contend with relegates them to what can be termed as invisibility even in urban areas that, theoretically, have been found to accommodate same-sex relationships. Still, the existence of economic activities tailored to the gay identity demonstrates that urban areas, more often than rural areas, guarantee gay people's rights to economic development.

Besides entrepreneurship, LGBT+ persons living in urban areas participate in China's economy via a sector of the economy dubbed the pink market. As previous sections of the present paper have shown, China's dual urban-rural system excels at separating and distributing economic activities spatially. Indeed, such geographic separation of economic activities leads to spatial economic inequalities that manifest as differences in income levels, employment opportunities, or infrastructure development [2]. However, spatial economic inequalities can also produce unintended positive outcomes, as seen in the emergence of pink markets in China's urban areas. Pink markets describe an emerging business model in which products and services are customised and/or marketed specifically to LGBT+ persons [28]. The development of pink markets in China reflects the broader context of rapid economic growth and social transformation in the country in recent decades. The integration of China into the global market, the fusing of cultures between Chinese citizens and those from other countries, and the increased visibility of LGBT+ individuals in China's urban areas have led to an increase in the number of businesses targeting the LGBT+ community and created a potentially lucrative consumer base [28]. As of 2017, the size of the Chinese pink economy was estimated at a third of the size of the US, indicating substantial growth and potential for further expansion—which itself suggests an increasing number of persons entering and participating in the sector [28]. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the best example of businesses participating in China's pink market is the growing number of nightclubs targeting an LGBT+ clientele [29]. As an example, Beijing's Gongti Xilu area in Chaoyang district can be considered a hub for gay-friendly establishments with venues such as Destination, which expanded from a small club in 2004 to a two-story complex dedicated to LGBT+ customers [29]. Such growths further affirm a growing demand for LGBT-oriented spaces, and estimates suggest that the LGBT+ population in Beijing could range from 5 to 10 percent of the city's population [29]. Other businesses participating in the pink economy include media, events, and services such as gay dating apps, whose customers often are found in China's urban centres [6].

4. Methodology

The research presented thus far suggests that rural areas are hostile to LGBT+ populations, while the inverse is true of urban areas. One can then conclude that urban areas offer LGBT+ persons opportunities to exercise their right to economic development more than rural areas. In addition to the desk research on the subject presented in the extensive literature review, a qualitative research approach was used to gather primary data for the study due to its ability to yield rich, contextual data. The aforementioned research questions guided the exercise (RQ1: Is there a relationship between economic growth and levels of acceptance of LGBT+ ideologies across China's cities and rural areas? RQ2: To what extent do LGBT+ persons in China participate in the formal economy compared to liberal countries such as the US? RQ3: Are there unique demographic factors among the Chinese population that contribute to the economic realities of LGBT+ persons in China's urban and rural areas?). Interviews were conducted with 4 participants, 2 residing in urban areas and 2 in rural areas, and selected by the researcher via convenient random sampling. To minimise bias, the researcher chose the participants from a pool of strangers and guaranteed equal representation by choosing 2 male and 2 female participants, with each pair comprising young and old persons between 20 to 50. Subjects were assigned letters (Subject A to D) to maintain their anonymity. Subject A was a 24-year-old gay man who grew up in rural Hebei Province. He migrated to Hong Kong at the age of 18

and has since resided in the city together with his relatives. This subject was identified via the researcher's networks from a past exercise. Subject B was a 30-year-old straight female who has lived in Hong Kong since childhood. Subjects C and D resided in Hebei Province, an agricultural zone with a large rural population. Subject C was a 48-year-old male engaged in rice farming, while subject D was a 33-year-old female working in the industrial sector.

The subjects were informed of their roles in the research and guaranteed anonymity, after which they consented to taking part in the study. Interviews were conducted via phone call for subjects C and D, while for subjects A and B, they were conducted in person. The questions gathered background information on the subjects, established their religious and ideological beliefs regarding same-sex relations, and measured their perception of urban and rural areas regarding LGBT+ persons' survival in either area—this question also sought to establish to what extent urban and rural areas supported LGBT+ persons' entrepreneurial efforts. The findings were presented thematically.

5. Findings and Discussion

The results of the interviews largely corroborated the extensive literature review presented in previous sections of the present paper. Subject A revealed that he grew up in Hebei Province but only felt 'at home' as a gay man in Hong Kong due to its accommodating climate. He confirmed the existence of a cultural climate that he described as somewhat 'hostile' towards LGBT+ individuals, especially men who traditionally were expected to act masculine and to lead the household (RQ1). Due to such overriding beliefs, subject A felt that employment or business opportunities in Hebei were limited for openly gay persons. Subsequently, he explained that Hong Kong offered him more opportunities to make a living even as a gay person and stated that he encouraged his gay friends to live in big cities. It is worth noting that countries such as Taiwan are more accepting of gay ideologies due to being more progressive than China despite overriding Confucian values [30]. Resultantly, Taiwan offers gay people economic opportunities just as do Chinese urban areas, further adding to RQ1 [31]. Subject B emphasised that she cared less for people's sexual orientation and was concerned more with their 'hearts' when it came to friendships and competence when it concerned work. Subjects C presented as a conservative individual who considered same-sex relationships an urban phenomenon. He categorically stated a lack of support for same-sex relationships as he found them unnatural and disturbing, especially male-male relationships. Asked if he would hire a gay man on his farm, his answer was a categorical 'no, no'. His conservative nature confirmed RQ3, which sought to find if demographic characteristics affected LGBT+ persons' economic realities. Subject D said she had seen gay people working in factories, although they kept their sexual orientation a secret. That response, combined with subject A's responses, answered RQ2, showing that LGBT+ persons in China participated in the formal economy only if they either migrated to urban areas or kept their sexual orientation a secret while working in rural areas. Asked about how she felt about the LGBT+ identity, Subject D maintained a neutral stance but hoped that none of her children would ever be gay, further contributing to RQ3.

These results and the reviewed literature affirm the impact of economic geography on the LGBT+ population, particularly their right to economic development. China's urban areas are more accommodating of LGBT+ persons than are rural areas and the dual urban-rural system has skewed development more towards urban areas. Consequently, LGBT+ persons such as subject A migrate to urban areas in search of job opportunities or pursuit of entrepreneurship. Eventually, they join the growing number of gay individuals contributing to China's pink economy in one way or another.

6. Conclusion

The present paper sought to examine the impact of economic geography on LGBT+ individuals' right to economic development. The research findings, supported by both an extensive literature review and qualitative interviews conducted on 4 subjects, demonstrate that urban areas in China offer significantly more economic opportunities to LGBT+ persons due to their more liberal cultural environments compared to rural regions. The emergence of a pink economy in Chinese urban centres has offered additional avenues for employment and overall economic participation to LGBT+ persons, with the continued growth of the sector guaranteeing future avenues for economic participation to gay individuals. China is a rapidly growing country, and its society has shown significant evolution since its integration into the global economy. The present paper demonstrates a need for policies that support or hasten the integration of LGBT+ individuals into the country's broader economic landscape pursuant to basic human rights and as a means to benefit from the economic impacts of inclusivity. Further research could look into effective strategies for increasing acceptance levels for the LGBT+ identity in China's conservative rural areas as a means to promote an equitable society for all Chinese citizens—regardless of ideology or identity—and a pathway towards an economic geography that reduces spatial economic inequalities.

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