

# ***Pressures on China's LGBT Community and the Role of the Media in Safeguarding the Rights of This Group***

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**Abstract:** Due to the different historical developments, there are significant differences between China and the West regarding culture and values. As a group that has always been sensitive, there is also a pronounced difference between how the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) group is treated in Chinese society and Western society. These differences include the aspects of social acceptance of the LGBT community, legal protections, as well as the pressures that they face from the family, workplace, and other levels. This research aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the status and treatment of the LGBT community in Chinese and Western societies, with a particular focus on the experiences of LGBT individuals in China. The study will investigate the challenges and discrimination faced by the LGBT community in China, including legal and social barriers to equality and inclusion. Additionally, the research will examine the ways in which LGBT individuals and activists in China are utilizing new media platforms to advocate for their rights and reduce stigma. Based on the findings, the study will propose recommendations for improving the social and legal protection of LGBT individuals in China, as well as strategies for increasing the visibility and representation of the LGBT community through media outreach and public education.

**Keywords:** LGBT community, media, legal protection, rights

## **1. Introduction**

LGBT community means lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender groups. With the evolution of globalization and the social concepts that have changed, the protection of the rights and social status of the LGBT community has become one of the hot topics in both China and the West. However, because of the different histories, cultures, and values of Chinese and Western countries, the acceptance and legal protection of the LGBT community are entirely different. Many Western cultures tend to emphasize the rights of individuals, and they prefer to pursue equality between individuals and the liberty of rights. Therefore, western countries have made more efforts to protect the rights of the LGBT community through legislation. Western countries have enacted a series of laws to protect the rights and interests of LGBT groups, including anti-discrimination laws and gender identity laws. In some Western countries, the social status, treatment, and rights of the LGBT community are protected by law, and it is against the law to discriminate against a person based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Today, 63 countries around the world have no-discrimination laws related to sexual orientation[1]. While in China, legal protection for the LGBT

community is not so well developed. There is no special legal protection for the LGBT community, and there are no specific ministries and government departments responsible for issues related to sexual orientation and gender. To some degree, it can be said that the LGBT community is still in a situation of relative invisibility at the political level in China [2]. At the social level, society has not yet reached a level of equal treatment for the LGBT community; the LGBT community usually faces unequal treatment and discrimination brought about by society and the workplace. At the same time, at the family level, the LGBT group in China often faces pressure from family members, such as their parents. This paper will analyze the different levels of pressure the LGBT community encounters and analyze the role of the media in LGBT rights advocacy, as well as provide references to strengthen the protection of the LGBT community.

## 2. Pressures on China's LGBT Community

First of all, the family is a small unit of society, and the LGBT community faces pressures exerted by the family. If a person's sexual orientation is homosexual or gender identity is different from the biological sex, the first pressure he needs to accept is the questioning from his family members, like his parents. The reason why the Chinese LGBT community is easy to disapprove from the family is that it can be traced back to ancient times. From a traditional perspective, Chinese culture attaches great importance to the concept of family and gender roles. Since ancient times, the traditional family structure and concept have occupied a significant position in Chinese culture. In ancient China, the family was the basic unit of production, and man and woman had their different duties of labor in the process of family production. Same-sex families have violated this traditional division of labor. Since ancient times, Confucianism has had a profound impact on Chinese values, Confucianism advocates filial piety and regards carrying on the family line as a vital part of filial piety. As an old saying goes, "There are many unfilial things, but having no offspring is the most serious"[3]. Therefore, most Chinese people, especially the older generation, usually regard marriage to a person of the opposite sex and carrying on the family line as a task that must be completed in life. Under the influence of such profound family concepts, if a Chinese child tells his parents his same-sex orientation or gender identity, the first reaction of most Chinese parents is usually maybe to choke and may consider the child's same-sex orientation a shame because it violates the prevailing concepts of the Chinese society since the ancient times, so Chinese parents usually express incomprehension, questioning, and opposition. This is a huge challenge for the Chinese LGBT community to face from their families.

At the social level, the social acceptance of the LGBT community in China has not reached a high level, and the LGBT community is discriminated against in many aspects of society, such as at school and in the workplace. In Chinese schools, LGBT students may be bullied by other students because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In the workplace, the LGBT worker may be treated unequally by colleagues or supervisors. There is a survey led by the UN Development Programme and Beijing LGBT Center, which is used to assess public discrimination and acceptance of the LGBT community. This survey included 10932 respondents from 31 Chinese provinces. The results showed that more than 10% of heterosexual participants rejected to stay close to the LGBT community[4]. Until 2001, homosexuality was medically defined as a sexual dysfunction and a mental illness[5]. Describing homosexuality as a kind of mental disorder was removed from the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorder when it was revised again in 2001[6]. This definition and perspective that pathologizes homosexuality and gender identity have also had a significant impact on Chinese society's perception of the LGBT community. Even though this definition is no longer used, some people may still consider homosexuality and even the LGBT community as an abnormal group, which may lead to a situation in which the interpersonal relationship of the LGBT group is not so good in society. One of the reasons why the LGBT community often suffers from unequal treatment and discrimination from society is that China has not yet enacted special laws to protect the rights of the

LGBT community. From the perspective of the social and political system, the reason for the lack of legal protection for the LGBT community in China is mainly related to the nature of the conservation of the system and concern with pursuing the political tradeoffs. China is now a socialist country, and this political system leads to the importance concern of national legislation, which may be relatively tend to give priority to maintaining national unity and social stability. The issue of LGBT rights has long been classified as a sensitive social issue, so when designing laws, legislators often ignore LGBT group's rights issues.

The pressures faced by the LGBT community not only come from direct contact at the interpersonal level of family and society. With the development of the media in recent decades, the LGBT community may also be subjected to pressures from the media, including discrimination and stigmatization. This pressure from the media may be direct or indirect. A direct source of pressure may be the discrimination and verbal attacks that LGBT people receive from Internet users because of their sexual orientation when they surf the Internet. In a way, this is a form of verbal and cyber violence against the LGBT community, and this violence may harm the psychology of LGBT people. In terms of non-direct pressure, this pressure comes from China's censorship of LGBT subjects. China's censorship and policies on homosexual themes have always been relatively strict. China's media and literary works. Publications such as television dramas, films, and novels, are regulated by relevant regulated by relevant regulations and censorship bodies. If there is any homosexual content in the movie or television, they will be asked to remove or modify it. Some online novels or literary works may face censorship if they involve homosexuality, and authors may be required to make changes to the spot or remove sensitive episodes and content before they can be published. Authors, film producers, or organizers wishing to make a film or television production or carry out an activity are required to register in advance with a special registration and evaluation committee. This prevents homosexual theme films from being legally released in public. Since the 1990s there have been several films with a homosexual theme. However, these are usually shown only in underground video stores and cinemas, such as *Dong Gong Xi Gong(East Palace, West Palace)* (1996) directed by Zhang Yuan, *Happy Together*(1997) from the Hong Kong director Wang Kai-wai and so on. [7]. Both discrimination on the Internet and China's strict restrictions on film, television, and literary works with homosexual themes reflect the fact that Chinese society has given more to the LGBT community in the form of a lack of understanding and suppression, rather than showing protection and support.

### 3. The Role of the Media in the LGBT Resistance Process

As the LGBT community is usually treated unequally or even discriminated against at the level of social acceptance, legal protection, and cyberspace, there has been a constant struggle for rights by China's LGBT community. These advocacies include the establishment of organizations, public events, cyber actions, etc., to promote social understanding and tolerance of sexual orientation and gender identity. With the development of the Internet and social media in the current era, the media environment has changed and improved to a certain extent, and the audience groups have become more diversified, these conditions provide a certain degree of space for the production and dissemination of films with LGBT themes.

Films, with a broader audience, play an essential role in the LGBT community's struggle for destigmatization. The Hong Kong movie *Farewell My Concubine*, shown in the 1990s, tells the story of two male Peking Opera performers. The relationship between the two main characters in terms of love can be seen in this movie. This movie has not only become a classic in the history of Chinese movies but also a representative work of Chinese movies with same-sex themes. The gay sex theme was also addressed in the Taiwanese TV series *Someday or One Day*, which aired in 2019; its plot was set in a high school student who was gay and committed suicide because of bullying. However, as mentioned earlier, China has a strict censorship system for film and television works with same-

sex themes, and many works with same-sex meanings are often adapted before being presented to the public. As a result, film creators who want to express content related to homosexuality usually cannot present it directly, but in a more subtle form, with the final understanding and interpretation left up to the audience. Although the clip was censored for broadcast in mainland China due to China's strict film and television censorship, the development and popularization of video platforms and social media have given Internet users more opportunities to access LGBT content[8], and the dissemination of this TV clip on video platforms has triggered some people's reflection on discriminatory acts against homosexuals and even bullying behaviors in a certain extent. The movie, *Love Life Light*, which was released in December 2023, has a plot about lesbian love, but it is limited to hints such as rainbow signs. Feedback from the movie comments and social media suggests that the audience does not have great resistance to the lesbian plot; a great number of comments say that it was well-designed. It can be seen that in recent years, as film and television, have a wider audience, the portrayal of LGBT people in TV or film has gradually given more people a preliminary understanding of the LGBT community, which has played a certain role in destigmatizing the LGBT community and reducing the discrimination against this kind of community.

LGBT organizations or individuals can be free from the constraints of professional journalists and use their ability to technologize journalistic acts to create content for LGBT people in the press and increase the visibility of LGBT people in the news and public field[9]. In March 2015, a junior at Sun Yat-sen University, Chen Quiyan — who goes by the pseudonym Qiu Bai, mailed an open letter of disclosure to the Guangdong Provincial Education Bureau after she discovered that a textbook in the school library classified homosexuality as a psychosexual disorder disease and pointed out ways to treat it. The related law states that the education bureau should respond within 15 days, but the Guangdong Provincial Education Bureau did not have a clear handle on this matter, so in August 2015, she launched a lawsuit in a Beijing court. However, Chen eventually chose to withdraw the case because her family relationship became strained when the university counselor told her parents about her sexual orientation without Chen's permission. After her parents knew Chen's sexual orientation, her parents took her to the hospital for medical treatment. Although the case was not really won, it has drawn the attention of the education sector and even the public to same-sex education, which, in a way, has been an achievement [10]. In addition to the mentioned case, there is also another case of Chinese sociologist and sexual rights activist Li Yinhe, who in 2015 informed the public on Weibo that her partner was a transgender who was female on a biological level but self-identified as male. As a sexual minority individual, Li Yinhe has repeatedly lobbied members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) to consider a proposal to legalize same-sex marriages in China, but all failed [11].

In addition to individual efforts, many organizations are also putting forth efforts. Social organizations play a significant role in the struggle for LGBT rights in China. Since China's laws and policies do not give the LGBT community much attention and legal rights, these sexual minority organizations are usually established by citizens. Established in 2008, PFLAG China, whose main members are family members like parents and friends of Chinese gays and lesbians, is a non-government organization (NGO), and its main purpose is to disseminate knowledge about sexual minorities, reduce inequality and discrimination against sexual minorities in China's society. Additionally, the organization also assists sexual minorities. In 2008, China's first folk organization, which comprised homosexuals and their relatives and friends, the Gay and Lesbian Friends and Relatives Association(now renamed True Self), was founded. In the ten years since the organization's founding, it has held several national family and friends forums, and as early as 2009, after the first national family and friends forum was held, Guangzhou Daily reported on the event, which had a large effect on China's sexual minorities and even on the social level. With the continuance of the forums in the following years, more and more sexual minorities clarified their sexual

orientation to their family members under the influence of the forums and the media reports, which also enabled family members and society to understand and respect this group more. It can be seen that since around the 21<sup>st</sup> century decade, with the popularization and development of the Internet and the media, the LGBT community, both organizations, and individuals, have begun to consciously use the media and the press to create media content through their activities and behaviors within the scope permitted by law, thus strengthening the community's attention to the LGBT community and the rights of the community.

With the coming of the Web 3.0 era, the creators of information are no longer limited to professional news producers, and the general public also has the opportunity and qualification to create and disseminate information at any time. In the background of the rapid popularization of We Media, Internet users have the opportunity to create information by themselves, so many LGBT people join the ranks of We Media, sharing their own experiences on the Internet, including but not limited to their family relationships, affective life, daily sharing, etc., these LGBT people fill the void in the official dissemination of LGBT content, and provide more non-LGBT people with the possibility to know about the LGBT community.

In March 2023, a user called Yingtang VIDEO posted a video of a rainbow mom, Peng, whose daughter is lesbian in Bilibili. When Peng's daughter told her mom about her sexual orientation, the mom initially expressed her incomprehension like most Chinese parents, but after a series of actions such as learning more about the LGBT community, including communicating with other parents of LGBT children together in the social media, she gradually understood and respected her daughter's choice of sexual orientation. After that, the rainbow mom also displayed a rainbow flag symbolizing the meaning of LGBT in the bookstore she runs to show her respect and support for this kind of community. As of January 2024, this video has over 2 million views and 50000 shares. This fits with the theory of common culture first proposed by Mark Orbe. His co-cultural theoretical framework concerns the relationships and attitudes of minority groups within larger dominant, and normative structures. Orbe used the term co-cultures to indicate some populations who, because of these factors, make them different from the masses. These factors include race, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, and sexual orientation, among other factors [12]. Therefore, these minorities work together to strategize and create intergroup communication within mainstream society, reducing mass misunderstandings and eliminating stereotypes [13]. As a Chinese mother, Peng, like most traditional Chinese mothers, may initially show disapproval and lack of understanding of her LGBT child's sexual orientation, and may even feel ashamed that her child's sexual orientation is different from what is currently mainstreamed. This perception characterizes most Chinese parents. Through the dissemination of the We Media platform, it effectively triggered group resonance and identity, and to a large extent triggered the empathy and discussion of other gay and lesbian parents, as well as caused more parents to reflect on the issue, and played a certain role in improving the relationship between some LGBT people and their families.

Although the development and application of media can play a positive role in giving voice to the LGBT community, advocating for their rights, and increasing their social acceptance, on the other hand, the popularization of media can lead to cyber violence and the security of Minority communities [14]. This means the LGBT community can be attacked because of the discourse aggregated by social media. In a survey targeting gay men conducted in Guangzhou in 2018, it was revealed that of the 777 gay men in the sample survey population, 128 had experienced cyber violence, accounting for 16.1% of the sample population[15]. the LGBT community already has to experience pressure from various aspects of society in real social life, including parents' lack of understanding, different views from people around them, and even violence from people around them. In cyberspace, if a person reveals his or her sexual orientation, he or she may receive understanding and respect from more inclusive people, but at the same time, he or she will also suffer from more serious questions and

misunderstandings, which may develop into cyber violence. Not only does this cyber violence not help to improve the status of the LGBT community in society, but it can also be psychologically unhealthy for the victims. Therefore, in the process of using the media to defend LGBT rights, it is important to avoid this situation as much as possible.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although China currently has no explicit laws to protect the rights of the LGBT community, such as marriage, this is determined by China's historical concepts and social system since ancient times. Due to the lack of legal protection, the LGBT community often faces more pressure than other non-LGBT communities in the course of social life and interactions, including family members, the workplace, the campus, and many other aspects. The arrival of the Internet era has shaped a broad space for LGBT groups to increase their visibility in society. Both organizations and individuals can make use of the Internet, including film, television and other film and television media, short-video platforms, social media, etc., and have a certain degree of freedom of expression to share their experiences and opinions so that more LGBT groups can find partners in cyberspace, and also so that more non-LGBT groups to understand the LGBT community. This plays a vital role in the protection of the rights of the LGBT community, and can raise society's attention to the LGBT community, thus generating the possibility of realizing legislation that protects the rights of the LGBT community and a shift in viewpoints. However, it is worth arousing public reflection that the media is also an invisible double-edged sword. While the media can raise society's attention to the LGBT field, negative comments on the internet can also result in a bad influence on LGBT internet users. Therefore, it is important to use the media well so that it can be used for better purposes.

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