***Abstract***

This article draws upon responses given by volunteers who work in the ‘Beijing LGBT Centre’ regarding perceptions of sexual-identity, and how Chinese culture affects hidden or open sexual identities of Chinese lesbian and gay people in this region. The insights gained from those working carefully to create social change offers an important and original contribution to the field of gay and lesbian studies in China. The findings indicate the volunteers at the Beijing LGBT Centre are frustrated by the lack of acceptance of non-heterosexual relationships among Chinese culture and society, and by the disregard of lesbian gay and bisexual (LGB) people by the Chinese government. The findings also illustrate stigmatisation of homosexuality in China is enacted in structural terms (such as in the lack of policy, legislation and positive endorsement by governmental and socio-political organisations), public expression (such as negative attitudes, beliefs or reactions towards LGB people) and internalised repression (through fear of stigmatisation, and subsequent abuse due to negative societal attitudes and discrimination). Influenced by the Chinese tradition of conforming to group values, the findings from this study show that volunteers at the Beijing LBGT Centre believe LGB people in China are generally hesitant to disclose their sexual identities, and reject the idea that there had been a collective shift in Chinese culture regarding increased acceptance of LGB people. It also finds volunteers at the LGBT Centre in Beijing blame Chinese culture for its lack of acceptance of non-heterosexual relationships, and state stigmatisation of homosexuality in China is due to deep-rooted cultural homophobia.

***Introduction***

Although many academics have studied lesbian and gay sexualities in China (see Engebretsen 2014; Engebretsen, Schroeder & Bao, 2015; Kam, 2012, 2014; Kong, 2016), non-academic interest regarding Chinese culture and its effect on hidden or open sexual identities of Chinese lesbian and gay people helps to further substantiate the need for more rigorous academic study in this area. According to a report in the IBTimes, Veksler (2011), states there are an estimated 30 million homosexual people in China, and the majority of them are not willing to be open about their sexual identity. Branigan (2009) in The Guardian UK online, also argues that Chinese LGBT people face additional oppression since they are frequently targeted by the Chinese government in the censorship of gay books and films, the forced closure of LGBT bars and culture festivals, and the variable intolerance of government and non-government organisations towards LGBT people and their rights. However, changes in the social, political, and legal status of LGBT people in China have meant Chinese authorities have eased their control over some aspects of gay life (Chu & MacLeod, 2010; Li, Holroyd, & Lau, 2010; Tu & Lee, 2015; Wei, 2007). For example, in 1997, homosexuality was implicitly decriminalised for gay men when the sodomy laws were removed from legislation underpinning criminal law, and in 2009, the first gay pride festival was held in Shanghai, which was followed by a seven-day film festival featuring LGBT-themed films (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

Regardless of some significant social change, previous research indicates that the nature of the relationship between the authorities and LGBT people in China remains problematic (Bartram, 2010; Hu & Wang, 2013; Wei, 2007). Research by Tu and Lee (2015) found LGBT people across China generally tend to conceal their sexuality due to the lack of legal protection, as well as family and social pressure, and a combination of these factors keeps most Chinese homosexual people in the closet. Individuals who participate in non-heteronormative and non-cisnormative identities/activities/behaviours are often punished by the justice system and pursued by the police leaving many LGBT people and their supporters liable to detention and arrest. For instance, in 2011, police raided a LGBT bar in Shanghai and detained at least sixty of its Chinese patrons overnight. Although there are no specific anti-homosexual laws in China, activism for LGBT rights has been slow to develop because of anti-gay societal sentiment and a lack of government support (Bartram, 2010; Wei, 2007). According to Rauhala (2009, p.1) this is known as the *‘Triple No Policy’* (no approval, no disapproval, no promotion) and was implemented by the Chinese government to create a stalemate situation whereby social activists and ordinary LGBT people are ’*caught in an invisible web of rules that dictate when and how you can and or can't be gay.*’

While non-governmental support has continued to affect the LGBT community, changing socio-economic contexts in China has redefined heterosexual identity (see Farrer, 1998, 2008; Pan & Huang, 2011; Parish, Laumann & Mojola, 2007), with increased agency for heterosexual people regarding morals and sexual, and reproductive life (Zhang, 2011). It has been argued this stems from economic market reforms in 1978 (see Farrer, 1998, 2008; Pan & Huang, 2011; Parish et al. 2007), and changing socio-economic contexts in China which has redefined individual agency towards sexual identity. However it has also been argued that it is only heterosexual people who have benefitted from this change and not homosexuals (Zhang, 2011). The dominance of collective values and evolving discourses and practices regarding sexual desires of heterosexual people has increased acceptance of premarital sex, extramarital sex and sex work as part of heteronormative life but homosexuality is still regarded as unacceptable by the majority (Zheng et al. 2011).

Hu and Wang (2013) argue that the problems underpinning hidden sexual identities stem from cultural values which fundamentally shape how Chinese LGBT people perceive themselves. Research identifying individual and social factors that support or obstruct open and hidden sexual identities is severely lacking in China where LGBT people are stigmatised and marginalised (Yu, Xiao & Xiang, 2011), and where the dynamic interaction between culture and identity is perceived by many to be relatively fixed in social terms (Hong et al. 2001), Building on previous research by Hu and Wang (2013) our research sought to study how Chinese culture affects LGBT identities, particularly when traditional cultural cues influence heteronormative behaviour and are perceived to be more immutable than individual desires and the recognition of non-heterosexual identities (Chiu et al.1997).

Specifically, our research presents an opportunity to analyse how Chinese culture affects sexual identities from the perception of volunteers active in The Beijing LGBT Centre, an organisation at the heart of social change. The Beijing LGBT Centre is a non-profit organisation focused on community support, social activism and promoting rights for LGBT people, consequently its volunteers are in daily contact with LGBT people across China. Since LGBT people in China are a relatively diffuse and hard-to-reach population (Chu & MacLeod, 2010; Li, Holroyd, & Lau, 2010; Tu & Lee, 2015; Wei, 2007) it was anticipated volunteers at the Centre (as key informants) could offer first-hand knowledge regarding how Chinese culture affects the sexual identities of LGBT people and offer insight into the experiences of LGBT people in this region (Bouanchaud, 2014; Colgan et al. 2007). It was also anticipated that interviews with volunteers working within the LGB community would present a unique perspective regarding LGB identities and attitudes in China and demonstrate the dynamic interaction LGB people in China have between culture and identity, particularly since research capturing the views of volunteers working in this context is lacking in the extant literature.

***Stigmatised Hidden Identities***

It has been argued that Chinese culture is emerging from its previously static and closed ethos toward a more dynamic refined paradigm, influenced by interactions with other cultures and unravelling its own multi-layered culture and cultural identities (Soderberg & Holden, 2002). Negotiated, compromised, embraced and transferred, Chinese culture in the 21st century is changing at a national level (Fang, 2011). Key international events such as the 2008 Olympic and Paralympic games shined a spotlight on China’s effort to promote its image as inclusive to all civilians and a strong advocate of human rights. Focusing on the symbolisation of identity and unity, and showcasing disabled identities previously not discussed in the media at length, China amended its disability legislation to Chinese disability legislation to attract attention to China’s effort to promote its image as a socially progressing state (Xiu, 2008; Williams, 2009).

Yet China was heavily criticised for its use of propaganda in the lead-up to the Paralympics in its repainting of the nation as ‘progressive in its increasing levels of civilization’ (Dauncey 2007, 495). Kim (2011) argues that this type of public rebranding is problematic since national events or celebrations do not have any correlation to the ongoing welfare of marginalised people previously oppressed by the state or treated as insignificant or peripheral because of identity difference. People who express identities considered to be different exhibit markedly different patterns of residence, neighbourhood and visibility in urban public space (Podmore, 2001). Research by Taylor (2007) indicates that ‘openness’ and ‘visibility’ for LGB people is a privilege, specifically related to social class and gender, and the fixing of sexual identities in place and the emergence of non-heterosexual identities are always undermined by internal contradictions.

Yet the emergence of LGBT identities in China is tied to transcultural practices which have prompted an intense desire of LGB people to be accepted for their identity within Chinese culture (Rofel, 1999). This desire for a sense of openness has been attributed to increased interactions between local and international networks and the globalisation of homosexual identity (Ho, 2010; Ho & Fung, 2016). The rise of homosexual identities in Chinese culture is also seen as a ‘betrayal of authentic Chinese traditions to the lure of global connections’ (Ho, 2010, p.3). This has resulted in an inconsistent sense of identity for Chinese LGB people who aspire to an identity that is open and expressive but at the same time feel a need to conform to more socially acceptable heterosexual ideals. Shaped by conventional cultural practices of inclusion and exclusion, traditional collectivist values remain important in Chinese society and dominate the actions of individuals in relation to the symbiotic relationship a person has to his or her family, culture and society (Tang et al. 2008). According to Quach et al. (2013) Chinese collectivist ideals underpin identity development in China, and provide a foundation to understand why Chinese LGB people fear stigmatisation when being open about their sexuality.

In Chinese culture, it is believed a stigmatised identity (and the resultant shame this brings) not only affects the stigmatised individual but also those associated with them such as family, kinship ties and social networks (Phillips et al. 2002; Yang & Pearson, 2002; Yang et al. 2007). Many Chinese people share an etiological belief that one person’s stigma can tarnish (by association) the moral life of families, and kinship ties, and as such stigma is strongly linked to humiliation and lower social status (Yang et al. 2007). In Chinese culture, shame and the ‘loss of face’, typically referring to the loss of an individual’s moral status or discredited moral values, (Yang et al. 2007) shapes the experience of stigma in physical-emotional terms rather than discursively. In this way, stigma acts as a mediator between Chinese culture and negative associations of identity, with shame and loss of face expressed in the social ‘position’ of an individual within society due to loss of respectability (Ryder et al. 2008). Thus, stigma effectively establishes heteronormative identities within Chinese culture and has a social impact on identity and associated behaviour (Neilands, Steward & Choi, 2008).

Chinese culture in this context is defined as a unique meaning and information system, shared by a group and transmitted across generations that allow the group to meet basic needs of survival, pursue happiness and well-being, and derive meaning from life (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008). In view of this definition, Chinese culture places strong emphasis on family values and has historically shaped the time-honoured need to uphold tradition. Public attitudes toward LGBT people in China are therefore mixed especially in relation to public recognition and acknowledgement of LGBT sexual identities (Cao, Wang, & Gao, 2010). Bouanchaud (2014) argues that this is due to everyday forms of societal neglect and indifference that inhibit many LGBT people from expressing their sexual freedom and sexual identity. However, Li (2015) argues it is more than just societal neglect and indifference, and states attitudes towards homosexuality in Chinese culture are based on an unspoken rule that homosexuality is not communicated or exhibited. Li (2015) also argues it is parameters of class, and gender roles founded on heteronormative traditions which support this unspoken rule. Hu and Wang (2013), state that the silencing of non-heterosexual sexuality in Chinese culture is based on cultural attitudes towards marriage and the endorsement of filial piety.

Chinese culture socialises individuals at an early age to believe that their sense of self identity is determined by their parents rather than by their internal traits (Quach et al. 2013). As Chinese culture interrelates with other cultures which foster self-independence and the acquisition of individual desires as a means of constructing a sense of self, it may be that some LGB individuals will be able to separate their sense of identity from the cultural expectations of identity. Yet research by Wei (2012) and Qian (2014) found it is essentially the notion of stable nuclear families (validated by China’s socialist Party-State), which also excludes and silences the expression of non-heterosexual identities. This idea is underpinned by traditional gender roles for men and women and upheld by traditional culture and practices, and the lack of public discourse about LGBT sexuality in contemporary Chinese society. It also excludes and silences non-heterosexual identities thereby contributing to the perceptions of persecution of open sexual identities by Chinese LGBT people.

Tu and Lee (2015) support this idea and also argue it is negative representations of LGBT people in all forms of Chinese media which specifically have an enormous impact on public perceptions of LGBT people. By following the stance of government authorities (by promoting the stability and unity of mainstream Chinese society) Chinese media generally denies the existence of the LGBT community, and or represents the community as abnormal. The representation of homosexuality as a synonym for abnormality or perversion in the media has created a multitude of negative stereotypes associated with LGBT people (Tu & Lee, 2015); accordingly homosexuality is portrayed as an emerging pathology even though the Chinese Society of Psychiatry removed the categorisation of homosexuality under mental illnesses from the ‘Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders’ in 2001 (Jin, 2003; Tu & Lee, 2015). Wu and Jia (2010) and Tu and Lee (2015) argue regardless of this declassification, negative or derogatory themes continue to dominate LGBT-related stories in Chinese media, and this stigma negatively shapes public perceptions of LGBT people who hide their sexual orientation in public and/or from their family (Chu & MacLeod, 2010; Feng, Wu, & Detels, 2010; Li, 2002, 2007).

Neilands et al. (2008) argue China’s ‘Family Planning Policy’ (1978, 1980), also known as the ‘one-child policy’, is one government regulation that has been instrumental in motivating Chinese LGB people to hide their sexual identity. Enforced at the provincial level, the family planning policy was originally imposed as a population control policy, and until 2013, it was strictly implemented and widely supported by the majority of Chinese people (Qian, 2014). Gerkin (2009) argues in a culture where family tradition and family values are highly respected, the pressure placed on Chinese people to marry is high, and because of legislation such as the family planning policy, Chinese LGBT people feel overly compelled to marry into heterosexual relationships (and hide their sexual orientation) since cultural, social, and familial necessities dictate the need for reproduction.  
 Consequently many LGBT people conduct open ‘false’ heterosexual relationships and frequently marry heterosexual partners, thereby hiding their homosexuality behind heterosexual relationships (Wang, 2001). This also includes relationships or marriage with other LGBT people of the opposite sex (known as Xinghun), as such the visibility of a heterosexual relationship or marriage is maintained. However by hiding behind a socially acceptable ‘traditional’ heterosexual relationship, many LGBT people are forced to engage in clandestine high-risk sexual behaviours with same-sex partners after marriage, endangering both their own and their partners’ physical and mental health (Wang, 2001). This practice also opposes the ‘Confucian values’ of morality and loyalty which underpin Chinese relationships (Yu et al. 2011). Similar to findings from research conducted in Western culture (Baams, Grossman, & Russell, 2015; Igartua, Gill & Montoro, 2003; King et al. 2008;) it has also been found that the stress of hiding a non-heterosexual sexuality is correlated to high levels of depression among Chinese LGBT people (Zheng et al. 2004), and for many Chinese LGBT people it can also initiate suicidal behaviours (Liu et al.1999).

Although private spaces exist where Chinese LGB people can be open about their sexuality, there is still considerable anxiety about the public openness of sexualities which are often considered sexually loose and promiscuous by mainstream Chinese society (Qian, 2014). Yu et al. (2011) argue this causes Chinese LGBT people to hide their sexual activities, which can have wider repercussions for heterosexual society regarding the reporting and identifying of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. The fear of judgment and shame compels the majority of LGBT people to conduct their homosexual relationships, in secret. The use of open public space and homosexual relationships in China has been extensively researched (see Brickell, 2000; Qian, 2016; Valentine, 1993) and studies indicate that norms and rules dictating the use of public space in China are deeply embedded in a wide range of social divisions based on class and social status, and class based notions of behaviour. The idea of conducting a homosexual relationship in public has been continuously stigmatized by middle-class people who perceive it to be an act only conducted by less educated and or lower class individuals (Qian, 2016). Research also indicates that Chinese LGBT individuals from lower or working class backgrounds suffer more than Chinese LGBT individuals from other classes (Ho, 2010). This is due to the overwhelming heteronormative cultural underpinning of Chinese culture, and as such, most working class LGBT people will not be open about their identity to parents or friends through fear of stigmatisation (Qian, 2016).

Hidden identities and relationships typically occur when an individual perceives a particular identifier may involve social stigmatisation or if the identifier is associated with illegal or subversive behaviour (Goldberg, Kinkler & Hines, 2011). Social stigmatisation in many cultures induces discrimination, maltreatment, ostracism, personal embarrassment and shame (Smart & Wegner, 2000) leading individuals to refuse to publicly acknowledge an aspect of the self which may be stigmatised in order to protect their privacy. Goffman (1963) perceived ‘concealable stigmas’ (those that are not clearly visible to others) allow an individual to exert control over the prejudice impressions he or she expects others to have. In many cultures certain kinds of stigma can have devastating consequences including social rejection and persecution. Qian (2014) argues many Chinese lesbian and gay people fear the public visibility of their homosexuality. As such, Chinese lesbian and gay people fear being tainted as unrespectable and having to carry the shame and stigma associated with a socially perceived negative sexuality such as homosexuality, and it is this fear which increases the likelihood a Chinese lesbian or gay person will hide their sexual identity and not be open about their lives (Qian, 2014).

Since Chinese culture is intrinsically underpinned by strong social ties and symbiotic relationships reinforcing an individual’s place within the social order, it is reasonable to determine being open or hidden about sexual identity can equate to positive reinforcement or negative violation of expected (and accepted) behavioural norms. It is within this framework that this study intended to explore how societal and cultural factors influence Chinese LGBT people’s hidden or open sexual identities. By analysing the perceptions of volunteers at the LGBT Centre in Beijing, who are working at the heart of an organisation to promote social change and to eradicate social and cultural discrimination against LGBT people in China, a deeper comprehension of the factors that influence hidden or open sexual identities of LGBT people in this region could be understood. Specifically, this study sought to discover the social and cultural factors which influence the negotiation of hidden and open sexual identities among LGBT people in China.

***Method***

Participants in this study were recruited from volunteers working in the Beijing LGBT Centre providing key roles within the organisation. As a volunteer within the organisation, participants work in a variety of roles and undertake different tasks within the Centre such as counselling and welfare responsibilities, media relations and projects, and social activism and promotion of human rights. Volunteers in the Beijing LGBT Centre liaise with members of the LGBT community in Beijing and other parts of China. Once initial contact had been made with the management team of the Centre and permission granted to conduct this study, participation in this research was openly encouraged by the management team of the Centre, and approximately 60 volunteers offered to take part. Whilst planning the research, consideration was given to conducting participant observation and this was discussed during initial contact with the Centre. However the management team of the Centre declined this approach and felt it inappropriate due to many patrons not being open or public about their sexual identity. All the volunteers working at the Centre were invited to take part in the research and a large number of volunteers initially indicated they would like to take part in this research. However, the final cohort of volunteers who participated in this study was smaller (due to changes in volunteer shifts and the redeployment of members to other LGBT Centres) and comprised 24 volunteers. Six volunteers were interviewed in the first wave of interviews before the Centre was restructured and they were deployed to other LGBT Centres across China, and 18 volunteers were interviewed in the second round of interviews. Although many volunteers at the Centre self-identify as heterosexual, (and as stated all Centre volunteers were invited to participate in the research) the participants in the study only comprised lesbian, gay and bisexual volunteers, and all the participants were open about their sexual orientation. The absence of heterosexual self-identified volunteers in the research was not intentional but was one of the consequences of changes in volunteer shifts and the redeployment of members to other LGBT Centres. The final sample comprised 11 males (self-identified as gay), 10 females (self-identified as lesbian), and three females (self-identified as bisexual). There were no transgender people who volunteered to take part in this study. The participants ranged from 25 to 35 years of age. All of the participants indicated that they were from middle class backgrounds and were employed in other types of paid work (not included in this research at the request of the participants).

Each of the volunteers agreed to be interviewed and one hour semi-structured interviews were conducted within a private space within the Beijing LGBT Centre. Each of the interviews were conducted in Chinese (Mandarin), audio-recorded and transcribed, and then translated back into English. The interviews and the translation were conducted by a member of the research team fluent in Mandarin and English. Each question used in the interviews was adapted from previous research undertaken by the research team. The questions were modified from two different studies (see Miles-Johnson, 2013a and 2013b) and were specifically tailored to analyse LGBT people’s self-perception, and LGBT people’s perceptions of the LGBT community. All the questions were firstly developed in English and then translated into Mandarin. To evaluate whether or not the questions were relevant and applicable within the Chinese context, the questions were sent to members of the Beijing LGBT Centre management team who provided feedback regarding whether or not the items were appropriate to the experiences of LGBT people in China.

***Data analysis***

Both researchers were very aware that the interpretation of the interviews could be affected by their relative social positioning and personal experience. Consequently, all of the interviews were conducted by the Chinese member of the team who lives in Beijing, and who has frequently visited the Beijing LGBT Centre. This raised questions about the researcher being a potential ‘insider’ in terms of the objectivity of the analysis, therefore both members of the research team were heavily involved in the data analysis as well as the interpretation of answers given by the participants. This allowed both an insider and outsider perspective during the analytical stage, and a balanced co-generation of narratives emerged from the interviews. Drawing upon each of the participant’s knowledge and experience of Chinese LGB life in Beijing, and the researchers’ shared knowledge and theoretical understanding of LGB life in China; the analyses were coded on the basis of the main themes that arose from the data. The research team were carefully reflexive of the assumptions made about the knowledge provided and carefully questioned any suppositions which could influence the interpretation of the data. The analysis went further than just pure description, and was concerned with making an argument that answered how Chinese culture affects sexual identities from the perception of volunteers active in The Beijing LGBT Centre. The analysis identified patterns of meaning which showed a relationship with the topic and the questions being asked. The research team carefully considered how each of the participants understood their reality in terms of the characteristics and the principles, and the assumptions that guide their process of experience. The analysis also considered the possibility that the individual experiences of each volunteer is being shared and repeated by other volunteers working at the LGBT Centre. Therefore the research team analysed all the individual responses of the participants to ascertain the central themes and rhetoric in the context of volunteer’s entire narrative. Then the team considered the themes emerging from the collective stories, collating and interpreting the main themes, and reanalysed the participant’s responses in relation to the context of volunteering within the Beijing LGB Centre, and LGB life in Chinese society.

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Both researchers were also conscious of power imbalances that often construct research processes, and were mindful of not making assumptions about the participant’s knowledge or their motivations to engage in the research. Once consent had been given, a great deal of care was taken by each of the researchers to describe the purpose of the research and the motivations for the project. McNamara (2009) notes that research collaborations should ideally benefit the participants as much as the researchers because qualitative research is multifaceted and multipurpose in nature. Therefore, to build an appropriate relationship with the volunteers at the Centre, which would be central to the success of the research endeavour, each of the researchers encouraged the volunteers to have a ‘voice’ and consistently supported the participants agency in the process. During the interviews the participants were asked as many open questions as possible. According to Bell (2011) this would allow for the unexpected to occur and to lessen the research team’s subjectivity in the research process. It was clear that this was a useful approach to take in terms of data collection since each of the participants were able to interpret the information discussed, negotiate the outcomes and contribute to the conversations stimulated by the process.

Since none of the volunteers participating in this study identified as transgender, the management team at the Centre requested that the questions should be framed in such a way so as not to elicit responses from the volunteers that could negate or possibly diminish the experience or perceptions of Chinese transgender people in relation to the same issues. The management team were also concerned that the questions would not educe negative responses from the LGB volunteers regarding transgender people. All of the participants gave informed consent to take part in the research and all of the participants were de-identified in the final transcripts. Although previous research indicates that many Chinese people are not necessarily comfortable talking about sexuality (Hu & Wang, 2013; Qian, 2014; Tu & Lee, 2015; Wu & Jia, 2010), each of the participants are volunteers at the LGBT Centre and are used to speaking openly about sexuality on a daily basis. As such it was anticipated each participant would be able to offer valuable insight into the perceptions of LGB people in China regarding the cultural factors influencing hidden or open sexual identities. When asked formally, each of the participants indicated at the start of the interviews that they were comfortable talking about sexuality, society and Chinese culture.

Participants were asked to talk about their perceptions of hidden and open sexual identities, and to describe the ‘lived experiences’ of LGB people in China in relation to cultural and societal expectations and norms and how this shapes sexual identity. In this context the ‘lived experience’ refers to first-hand accounts and impressions of living as a member of a minority group (Harper & Schneider, 2003). The interview questions asked the active members of the LGBT Centre about ‘perceptions of social rules, cultural norms and legal rules in China and how each of these influences LGB peoples’ openness about their sexual identity.’ Each participant was asked to ‘describe what you think or feel when you consider how Chinese society treats LGB people?’ and was asked ‘whether or not most LGB people comply with the expectations of Chinese society and hide their sexual identity or are most LGB people open about their lifestyle?’ Each participant was also asked ‘What do you think is the main reason why LGB people in China are hidden or open about their sexual identity?’

This study had several limitations. First, China is a country comprised of many regions, each of which has unique cultural characteristics (Neilands et al. 2008) but the sample in this study was not drawn from a nationwide sample of participants who volunteer in different LGBT Centres across China, it was drawn from one geographical area; Beijing, the capital city of China. As such, broad generalisations regarding the perceptions of hidden and open sexual identities by volunteers across China cannot be made; particularly since the perceptions of volunteers who work in LGBT Centres in smaller cities or rural areas may differ to those who work in the capital city. Second, the perceptions of hidden and open sexual identities may differ in areas where the nature of stigma, and the impact of traditional culture, may have a stronger or weaker influence on the structural, public and internal expressions of sexuality. Therefore, a more inclusive sample of LGBT volunteers across China would certainly be more generalisable as would future research examining perceptions of volunteers working in LGBT Centres in urban and rural areas. Third, the interview questions asked participants about the experiences and perceptions of the LGB community collectively and not about the different experiences or different perceptions of lesbians, gays and bisexuals as individual groups. Consequently, when responding to the questions, the participants referred to the experiences of LGB people as a combined community; in this way gay, lesbian and bisexual identities were treated synonymously. A more nuanced understanding of the experiences or perceptions of the issues faced by individual groups within the LGB community would therefore, offer further insight into the similarities and differences of LGB people’s experiences of life in Beijing. In addition, the research only engaged with Chinese cultural attitudes towards lesbian, gay and bisexual people, consequently there was no discussion about transgender people’s experiences or inclusion of transgender perceptions of the issues faced by the community within this context. The perceptions of the heterosexual self-identified volunteers working at the Centre may also have offered a different perspective on LGB people’s experiences of life in Beijing, however despite these limitations the findings of this research offer insight into the perceptions of LGB people volunteering within a Centre at the heart of social change regarding LGBT rights in China. The findings also illustrate how the ensuing anxiety Chinese culture and Chinese society has towards LGBT people affects non-heterosexual identities.

***Findings***

***Chinese Culture and Rejection of Homosexuality***

Each of the participants indicated that they felt that Chinese society and culture rejects LGB people and homosexuality as a sexual identity. As such, many of the participants felt disconnected from elements of mainstream Chinese culture. During the interviews, participants reinforced inter-group differences between themselves as LGB people and the rest of Chinese society. They expressed their sense of inter-group difference was repeatedly expressed by the participants through negative language and expression to signify that Chinese culture rejects homosexuality and does not treat LGB people in a positive way. For example, Participant M (male) said:

*‘LGB people are rejected or even prejudiced against by the larger community of China because of their sexuality. But tongzhi people[[1]](#footnote-1), share the same views on most things as other people and are also normal and like any other person in society, so they should be equal with others (non LGB people) in society.’*

This perception was also expressed by Participant C (male) who stated:

*‘LGB people share the same sexual orientation (homosexuality), LGB sexual identities are the minority ones in current society. We (LGB people) all hope our sexual identity can be accepted by Chinese society. We all consider our basic human rights in relation to our actual negative social status in society.’*

Most of the participants also said the rejection of LGB sexualities within Chinese culture and society meant that it was very important for Chinese LGB people to support each other. This was expressed emphatically by 11 of the participants. For example, Participant A (male) said:

*‘It is important for homosexual people to support each other; we can provide each other with the ways and means and ‘energy’ to face our lives, our families, and the social world in a positive and correct way.’*

Participant E (female) said:

*‘Sure, it is important for all homosexual people to support each other and belong within the community, we shouldn't be afraid of accepting our sexual orientation, for me, it is important because I ‘m a lesbian. This is who I am.’*

Participant F (male) stated:

‘*I think LGB people need to find other similar people who will not think they are abnormal, by being with other LGB people, they can have social status, whereas in normal society they have none.’*

And Participant R (female) who said:

*‘My tongzhi friends support me and I support them, but at times we are afraid to support one another, especially in public.’*

It was also notable that many of the LGB participants expressed negative perceptions about Chinese culture and Chinese society, and how traditional notions of heterosexuality (underpinning Chinese philosophies) reinforce Chinese LGB people’s sense of difference, and upholds the rejection of LGB people from the social order inherent in Chinese culture. For example, Participant E (female) stated:

*‘Concepts of Confucianism, which are quite conservative, within traditional culture, are the most important factors that exclude LGB people from society, and makes society prejudiced against people who are different or who do not live up to these concepts.’*

And Participant M (male) stated:

*‘Confucian ideas are everywhere, in everything we do and play a part in expectations of behaviour, it is a strong tradition, it is Chinese life.’*

By distinctly recognising the traditional Confucian values which underpin Chinese society and the traditional notions of heterosexuality reinforcing Chinese societal norms, the participants indicated that the value systems and ideologies of Chinese mainstream society do not support LGB sexualities. This idea is supported by Kam (2012) who argues that the impact of ‘public correctness’ politics and practices have forced Chinese homosexuals to perform a heteronormative identity in public, and at times, in private domains. According to Kam (2012), the public performance of heteronormativity is part of the sense of ‘good citizenship’ which underpins public discourses regarding behavior in China.

This argument was supported by Participant Q (female) who said:

‘*What people do in public is very often different to what people do in private; this is the two faces of Chinese identity for gay and lesbian people. It is because being seen as a good Chinese person under Confucian way is to be a family man or woman, heterosexual not gay or lesbian.’*

It was also supported by Participant V (male) who said:

*‘Not being seen as a good citizen in terms of public behavior has been ingrained in Chinese people, this means that gay and lesbian people are forced to uphold traditional heterosexual values in public.’*

By specifically identifying how Chinese culture and society recognises and supports heterosexuality and not LGB sexualities the participants stated they felt that LGB sexualities posed a threat to mainstream Chinese culture, and this perception of threat may influence prejudice towards LGB people. For example, Participant A (male) stated:

*‘Because of Confucian values and the impact it has on interactions that we have with heterosexual people, we (LGB people) threaten these values within this culture and it impacts on our sexual identity in a negative way.’*

***Hidden and Open Identities***

Almost all of the participants felt the majority of LGB people in China would not be open about their sexual identity and being guarded about sexuality and having a hidden sexual identity was more common for most LGB people than having an open sexual identity. For example Participant E (female) said:

*‘There will be some people who may reveal their sexual identity, but believe me, these are just a small portion of Chinese homosexuals. Things are still not changing or progressing, and most LGB people will hide their sexuality.’*

Similarly Participant D (female) stated:

*‘In my experience, the majority of LGB people in China will go on hiding.’*

Participant C (male) argued hidden identities would persist in Chinese culture due to social pressure. For example, he said:

*‘The deciding factors (whether to be hidden or open) about sexuality are not from LGB people, but social circumstances. This totally depends on the acceptance of homosexuality within Chinese society, and the social changes that LGB people make, and also the ‘rights movement’ and the changes we make to improve LGB rights.’*

Interestingly, Participants S, J and X all stated that they felt that it was only when gay and lesbian people came to the Centre that they were truly open and able to express their sexual identities and no longer hide their sexuality but this sense of openness only occurs whilst an individual is in the Centre itself. For example, Participant S said:

*‘We often see people come into the Centre who say that they can only be free when they are with us, they shake off the heterosexual identity and finally be who they are inside, but is does not last, they become hidden again when they leave.’*

And Participant X said:

*‘It is sad, gay and lesbian people become gay and lesbian people when they step through the front door of the Centre, and then heterosexual people when they step back on the street outside, it is not good to be living this way.’*

This raised questions about the reality of LBG people in Beijing and the real or imagined sense of an LGB community. ‘Community’ is an idea which is constructed around two main elements. The first element is based on temporal space and geographical location, as well as verbal and social interaction and as a notion that contains two dimensions (Harvey, 2000). Firstly, it is a concrete matter of temporal and geographical space, of verbal and social interaction, and a large number of relationships. In this sense, the idea of community is created in time and in physical locations by people choosing to gather together and share experience (Harvey, 2000). The second element implies a bond of fellowship that is shared outside actual settings; it is an imagined dimension, created either by nationalism or politics to indicate a necessary and positive element to the understanding of community (Anderson, 1983; Kelly et al. 2014). Although it was clear from the volunteers that many LGB in China are hidden they can relate to a wider imagined (and for some real) LGB community, which functions as a provision of social support and material resources, and can be drawn upon in different ways.

Many of the participants also stated that a LGB person’s need to hide their sexual identity is upheld by Chinese social norms, and as such, the hiding of sexual orientation becomes a normative behavioural practice for LGB people because it is more socially acceptable in Chinese culture. It was also clear from the participant’s responses inclusion (and acceptance) of LGB sexualities within Chinese society strongly impacts on a LGB person’s sexual identity. By establishing that the social relationship which many LGB people have with others in Chinese society is based on perceptions of inclusion or exclusion of LGB sexual identities, it was reasonable to determine having an included/accepted sexual identity would have a positive effect on Chinese LGB people. However, all of the participants stated inclusion or exclusion of LGB people in Chinese society (and therefore hidden or open sexual identities) is dependent on the levels of stigma attached to perceptions of homosexuality.

***Hidden and open identities and stigmatisation of homosexuality***

It has been argued in previous research (See Miles-Johnson, 2013a, 2013b, 2015a, 2015b) that to be successful in changing a negative evaluation of a particular group, contact with a member of a group in question (in this instance Chinese LGBT people) must be considered as an intergroup-encounter. This means LGBT people as members of their own group must continue to be aware of non-LGBT people as another group and vice-versa if intergroup perceptions are to change (Islam & Hewstone, 1993). However, each of the participants spoke about how the stigma of being labelled as homosexual in Chinese culture can lead to the rejection of LGB people from their family, friends and Chinese society, and the stigmatisation of homosexuality is still so prevalent in Chinese culture that LGB people are not open in their sexual identities, which means acknowledged or recognised intergroup-encounters are unlikely to take place. For example, Participant E (female) said:

*‘Being labelled as a homosexual can have a negative effect on a LGB person because for many people in China it is regarded as a stigmatised identity, which stops LGB people from being open about their sexual orientation, so nothing can change because no one is aware of a person’s sexuality and can learn from this.’*

When the participants were asked if LGB people in China see themselves as part of a unified LGB community, each of the participants expressed they thought it was important for LGB people to belong to a community but felt that many LGB people in China are hesitant to be part of a community through fear of stigmatisation. For example,Participant D (female) said:

*‘I think it is important to belong to a LGB community, it is important for homosexual people to protect our social rights. But there are many people feel afraid to belong because of stigma. In this situation, they usually have no idea what they should do.’*

And Participant B (female) said:

*‘I think it is important for all LGB people to belong to a LGB community but many LGB people in China are afraid of this and are afraid of being open about their sexuality.’*

All of the participants spoke about the influence of the family, and how (under the norms of Chinese culture) family and parental pressure affects the likelihood of LGB people to hide their sexual identity. This finding raises questions regarding the importance people in Chinese culture place on their inclusion and membership within their own group (their families) and conversely, what this means in terms of possible exclusion from their familial groups. It also raises questions regarding how much importance LGB people place on the familial influence shaping or influencing them to be open or hidden about their sexual identity. For example, Participant B (female) said:

*‘One of the most important factors affecting LGB people is the pressure put on them from family, I think. Chinese people have strong family values. If families can accept LGB people’s sexual orientation, then they will tend to be open about their sexual identity, if their families’ reject LGB sexual identities, then for LGB people, they will keep hiding.’*

And, Participant F (Male) said:

*‘Most parents think they have the responsibility to make sure that their children marry and have offspring, so this means that LGB people are not open about their sexual identity, not because they don’t want to, but most of time, they are afraid of hurting or causing shame to their parents and other family members.’*

Many of the participants also stated traditional notions of heterosexual marriage, reproduction, and the custom of continuing families, negatively influences most LGB people’s decisions to be open in their sexual identities. Negative assumptions about expected behaviour are reflective of intergroup anxiety (Stephen & Renfro, 2002), and this is typically caused by the anticipation of undesirable consequences which may occur due to unexpected behavioural outcomes (in this instance a Chinese LGB person being open about their sexual orientation). Undesirable consequences are usually expressed as embarrassment and harm, and are typically formed by negative evaluations (Stephen & Renfro, 2002). Many of the participants said intergroup anxiety and undesirable consequences are a common experience for Chinese LGB people when they reveal their sexual identities especially in relation to parental and familial concerns. For example, Participant D (female) said:

*‘The traditional views of Chinese people are people need to get married to the opposite sex, since homosexual people can’t fulfil the responsibility of providing offspring. Most parents will be very disappointed if they find out that their child is homosexual, and Chinese culture based on Confucian ideas which support ‘correct’ behaviour (to do what your parents want and not bring shame), means that many homosexual people in China won’t be open about their sexual orientation.’*

Previous research by Kam (2012) found that many Chinese lesbians felt continuing pressure to get married, with many Chinese lesbians stating that parents and colleagues scrutinised their private lives, thereby compelling these individuals to integrate into a heteronormative life. This idea was upheld by Participant P (female) who said:

*‘I am always being asked by people at work or in the street about my ‘husband’ and ‘children’ or being asked when I will be married or having a child. My parents ask me all the time on the telephone if I have ‘met a nice man from a good family’, for many years when I tell them that I am not interested in meeting a ‘nice man’ they did not listen. Now I tell them that I am looking but not found anyone suitable. I just tell them what they want to hear, I do not want to be like some lesbian women I know who marry men to keep their parents happy, I see these women and they are miserable.’*

The concerns about being perceived as homosexual because a non-heterosexual identity is often devalued in Chinese culture was a frequent theme which emerged throughout the analyses of the interview data. It was clear from the participants that the dominant heterosexist environment and culture in China influences many LGB people to endorse heterosexual self-presentation norms and the nondisclosure of LGB sexual identities. As previously stated, gender norms and gendered expectations of behaviour dominate Chinese culture underpinned by tradition. While talking about the influence of Chinese traditional culture on the likelihood of LGB people being hidden or open about their sexuality, Participant E (female) made an interesting point about the impact of gender and the ‘Family Planning Policy’ or the ‘One Child Policy’ and stated:

*‘The one child policy has greatly influenced LGB people regarding being open or hidden about identity, I mean If we had more brothers or sisters, it would be easier to be open about sexual identity and for parents to accept a child as homosexual because there would still be other children to fulfil the cultural and social responsibility of giving offspring. But now, many LGB people are the only child in their families, they not only have to face the shame and rejection of their parents, but there are also grandfathers and grandmothers, so, what they should do – they will hide.’*

Although all of the participants conveyed negative opinions regarding the main factors which influence LGB people in China to be hidden about their sexual identities, there were some positive attitudes expressed about the changes social movements such as the Beijing LGBT Centre was making regarding ‘openness’ of sexual identity. For example, Participant B (female) stated:

*‘Organisations such as this one are helping more and more people understand and accept LGB people and their sexual identities, therefore, there will be more LGB people tending to reveal their sexual orientation and be more open about it in the future.’*

This was also expressed by Participant A (male) who said:

*‘Although, LGB people in China are still treated badly, at least homosexuality is being talked about. Some heterosexual people are showing tolerance for LGB people, and also supporting movements such as the Beijing LGBT Centre to fight for LGB people’s human rights.’*

And by Participant G (female) who said:

*‘When the Centre first opened, and the sign went up on the door, local people questioned what it was for and what it was going to do. It was controversial, people talked about the Centre a lot. It created debate among people who may not have talked about such things before. Of course there was negative talk and people being angry and disapproving in their opinion but it was a step forward and began locally until the word spread that we are here.’*

Govier (1998) states meaningful communication helps form initial perceptions between groups and between members of a society regarding whether or not a group of people can be considered legitimate and trustworthy. Positive and meaningful communication between government bodies and members of the public therefore play an important part in public perceptions of minority groups such as the LGBT community (Miles-Johnson, 2015). However, although there were some positive comments about minor social changes altering some perceptions of LGBT people, all of the participants reported communications from the government and government agencies regarding LGB people and homosexuality were non-existent; and this absence of support does not help implement change. All of the participants thought the oppression of LGB identities and sexualities stems from the lack of regard by the Chinese government, and this disregard oppresses LGB people since they cannot be a community in eyes of the government if they do not exist. The participants also felt the lack of government support was based around negative perceptions of homosexuality founded on traditional Confucian ideals. Each of the participants also expressed that although they were happy to be part of a social movement such as the Beijing LGBT Centre they were also frustrated regarding the slow pace of social change, since much of their ideas and concepts regarding the recognition of LGB people and LGB rights had been formed by the experience of LGB people in the West.

***Hidden and Open Identities and the influence of Western culture***

All of the participants spoke about the influence of Western culture on Chinese attitudes and opinions regarding sexuality and hidden and open identities. Each of the participants expressed their frustration regarding the lack of ‘freedom of speech’ in Chinese culture and LGB issues, and how the conservatism of Chinese society restricts discussion on this topic yet in the West freedom of speech has allowed the LGB movement to progress. For example Participant A (male) said:

‘*We (LGB people) are still limited by tradition and the conservative mind-set of Chinese culture and society. In the Western world, books, movies, and being able to speak publicly about homosexuality is normal, these are ways of speaking, communicating information aren’t they? But in China, we cannot see this type of information or talk about this in public. We know the treatment of homosexuality has improved significantly in Western countries. Movies, books, research, and literature about homosexuality is popular in Western society, and we think these things will help guide Chinese LGB people and show us the way.’*

Some of the participants spoke about the lack of support from the Chinese government regarding LGB rights and made comparisons between China and the West about the types of programs and policies helping or hindering LGB people’s confidence to express their sexuality. For example, Participant A (male) said:

*‘Unlike many countries in the West, the Chinese government and the Chinese legal system have a very strange and vague attitude towards homosexuality. There is the problem of ‘no support, no reject, and no approval’ regarding homosexuality and this causes a problem for LGB people who have no idea about what to do and how express themselves, because there is little information available, so should they choose to be open or to hide their sexuality? most LGB people just don’t know.’*

And, Participant E (female) said:

*‘I think it is important to know LGB people are not supported by the government, there is no government support and there are many LGB people who feel really lonely because they have no belonging in Chinese society. In Chinese culture, LGB people usually have no idea what should they do or how they should or can act or who they can be, this is because of the government.’*

Two participants, Participant Q (female) and Participant T (male), compared the inaction of the Chinese government to proactive changes made by Western governments towards gay and lesbian people. For example, Participant Q (female) said:

*‘Many gay and lesbian people tell us at the Centre that they are frustrated by the lack of support from the Chinese government, especially when they see on the internet or travel overseas, and witness the support and freedom gay and lesbian people have in the West to live their lives, and be free and open about their sexuality.’*

The emergence of transnational LGBT networks, the influence of Western media (both illegally and legally sourced in China) the presence of Western online networks and websites, sources of imported media such as Western television programs and movies, and access to Western television programs via the Internet has meant many Chinese LGBT people are aware of the permissiveness of many Western cultures towards homosexuality (Sydell, 2008). Yet regardless of international links, the awareness of a global civil society and the knowledge of other liberal cultures, the findings indicated that notions of hidden or open sexual identities are strongly based around the participant’s perceived treatment and acceptance by the Chinese government and government agencies of non-heterosexual sexualities.

The majority of the volunteers reported they perceived any interpersonal treatment that LGB people will receive from government agencies will result in a negative experience or negative outcome if they are open about their sexuality. Many volunteers talked about their personal engagement with international and transnational organisations regarding LGB rights. It was clear that the volunteers at the Centre are aware of changes taking place around the world regarding LGB rights and are empowered by this. However, almost all of the volunteers said that the gay and lesbian people who came to the Centre seeking help were frustrated with the lack of freedom that Chinese gay and lesbian people have to express their sexuality. The volunteers indicated that knowledge of international LGB rights was not necessarily empowering for ordinary Chinese gay and lesbian people who still felt afraid to be open about their lifestyle and feel powerless to express their sexual identities. For example, Participant T (male) said:

*‘Tongzhi people know that they could be free to live a true life, they know that they could be open about their sexuality and maybe live with the person of their choice, Tongzhi people see this in other places around the world. We know that gay and lesbian people can be happy and supported by the government if it is allowed. We see this in the West. Many people who come to the Centre talk about the possibilities of sexual freedom under a different government but acknowledge that change may never happen. They are afraid to speak up and voice their frustration; they say that the government will punish them and their families. The volunteers, we speak of this a lot, we speak of what is happening in other parts of the world, especially in the West. We know that is happening. Most of us have travelled and seen the openness of gay and lesbian people in other parts of the world. We want this for ourselves, we want this freedom, it is our job to fight for this but the average gay and lesbian person cannot do this alone, there is too much fear.’*

Overall analysis of the findings indicated each of the participants felt negative perceptions of homosexuality would result in the rejection of LGB people. Each of the participants stated they thought that this rejection would influence general perceptions of LGB people regarding how they are viewed by others, thereby upholding perceptions of intergroup difference between LGB and non-LGB people. All of the participants argued they believed that negative perceptions of intergroup difference between LGB and heterosexual people, and the Chinese tradition of conforming to group values would continue to reinforce the practice of hidden sexual identities for LGB people.

***Discussion/Conclusion***

The findings in this research illustrate how the dynamic relationship LGB people have with culture norms impacts on the way LGB people in China express their identities. Recruiting exclusively from volunteers at the Beijing LGBT Centre, this study offers a unique perspective into the observations of volunteers working closely with the LGB community. The insights gained from those working carefully to create social change offers an important and original contribution to the field of LGB research regarding the identifying factors that affect attitudes of LGB people in China towards open or hidden sexual identities. Influenced strongly by the Chinese tradition of conforming to group values, the findings from this study show that volunteers at the Beijing LBGT Centre believe LGB people in China are generally hesitant to disclose their sexual identities.

Although this finding has been found in previous studies undertaken with members of the public (see Moutord, 2009; Chan and Parker, 2004; Chung and Wong, 2004; Hu & Wang, 2013; Parker, Gladstone, & Chee, 2001; Ryder, Bean, & Dion, 2000; Yang et al. 2007) it has not previously been explored from the perspective of volunteers working at an LGBT Centre. The volunteers indicated that they are intrinsically aware of the traditional cultural values and entrenched heterosexual social practices and customs which impact Chinese LGB people’s expressions of sexual identity. The volunteers spoke consistently of expected behavioural norms, which induce and dictate relationships for Chinese people; typically resulting in shame, stigma and prejudiced treatment should they openly express non-heterosexual orientations.

The volunteers also indicated many Chinese LGB people are aware of the existence of more permissive cultures which accept non-heterosexual sexualities and this has a profound influence on the desire of people working at the Beijing LGBT Centre to continue to fight for LGBT rights. Many volunteers talked about their personal engagement with information from international and transnational organisations, and discourse with other LGB groups regarding LGB rights. Yet regardless of progress by social movements and advocates for change, Chinese LGB people volunteering within the Beijing LGBT Centre perceive LGB people in general are still rejected, ignored, excluded and treated unfairly by mainstream Chinese society. They argue it is intrinsic cultural homophobia embedded in Chinese tradition and rigorous social norms (coupled with legislation which denies the progression of LGB rights) that is preventing many LGB people in Beijing from being open about their sexual identity.

This sense of intrinsic cultural homophobia starts with the family and is upheld by familial pressure to conform to heteronormative ideals and marriage (Rooth, 2014). Structured by parental obligations, marriage and the pressure placed on offspring to conform, a strong sense of placing family interests over and above self-identity displaces the personal interests of LGB individuals. Skeggs (1997) argues that respectability links individual empowerment with public recognition and that a person’s sense of respectability is often shaped by the family, the community and the workplace, and for some, a sense of entitlement. Certainly research indicates that this is true for many Chinese people (Liu, 2013) who fulfil societal and familial perceptions of respectability by hiding their sexual identity. Although non-heterosexual sexual identities are slowly emerging in Chinese culture the Western notion of coming out in the Chinese context may not be applicable (Kong, 2016) subsequently it is easier for many Chinese LGB people to hide behind a heterosexual identity than it is for them to be open about their homosexuality.

As previously stated, Taylor (2007) suggests that ‘openness’ and ‘visibility’ for LGB people is a privilege, specifically related to social class and gender. Although the participants were not asked formally about social class in relation to how it affects perceptions of sexual-identity, none of the participants spoke independently about class and its influence on the oppression of LGB identities in Beijing. Given that all of the participants self-identified as middle class and are open about their own sexuality, and are volunteers working in a Centre advocating for change for the entire LGBT community, this was surprising. It was also unexpected because previous research indicates that Chinese LGBT individuals from lower or working class backgrounds suffer more than Chinese LGBT individuals from other social classes. Coleman and Chou (2013) state that the working class in general are invisible in China and within the LGBT community there are also problems of visibility for working class people. The participants did however strongly argue that other forms of intersectionality such as traditional gender roles and normative expectations of heterosexual sexuality reinforce and underscore the marginalisation of LGB people in China.

Each of the volunteers also identified conservative beliefs regarding sexuality, and traditional norms concerning the continuation of family, which reinforced the importance and primacy of heterosexual relationships in Chinese society. Similar to findings by Phillips et al. (2002), Yang and Pearson (2002), and Yang et al. (2007), the study found volunteers at the Beijing LGBT Centre believe awareness of family honour (in relation to possible shame and stigma associated with homosexuality) prevents many Chinese LGB people from being open about their sexuality. According to Goldberg and Smith (2011) and Goldberg et al. (2011) LGBT people in the West tend to be denied, denigrated and stigmatised by heterosexist attitudes and uniquely contend with sexual orientation-related stigma placed upon them by mainstream heterosexual society. In the same way, this study found Chinese LGBT people suffer from the same type of heterosexist judgements which oppresses LGBT people into heterosexual marriages through fear of stigmatisation, an idea supported by Neilands et al. (2008), Phillips et al. (2002), Yang and Pearson (2002), and Yang et al. (2007).

This study also found the volunteers thought Chinese tradition places intense emphasis on lineage and family commitment (filial piety), marriage and the birth of children, and the Chinese cultural focus on traditional, social and familial practices (bound by Confucianism principles whereby individuals are defined within the context of their familial relationships) subsequently devalues and stigmatises any relationships not defined within this context. Many of the participants identified the tensions between Confucian family values and personal freedom, and were torn between filial duty and the desire to live a life based on an ‘open’ non heteronormative sexual identity.

The volunteers were also dissatisfied with the lack of recognition of LGB people by the Chinese government, particularly in terms of acknowledgment of LGB rights and the existence of LGB people. The volunteers felt the ‘no support, no reject, and no approval’ policy regarding homosexuality has a strong impact on the lack of communication between the Chinese government and LGB people, which contributes to the oppression of LGB identities and does not encourage a unified sense of community.

The findings from this study indicate that the volunteers at the Beijing LGBT Centre are frustrated by the lack of acceptance of non-heterosexual relationships in Chinese culture and society, and the stigmatisation of homosexuality in China is due to innate cultural homophobia presented or expressed in different forms of prejudice manifested in structural terms, public expression, and internal expression (Goffman, 1963; Corrigan, 2004; Corrigan et al. 2005). However the lack of acceptance of non-heterosexual relationships is not only a characteristic of Chinese culture, it is found in other cultures across the world. The limited development of public homosexuality and the framing of LGB identities, experiences, rhetoric and politics is an area that has been widely researched in previous studies (Kong, 2016). The struggle of the LGBT movement in China under government restrictions and opposition was consistently expressed by all the volunteers at the Centre. The findings in this study indicate the stigmatisation of homosexuality and the prejudice displayed toward LGB sexual identities is supported in the structural terms of Chinese society, specifically in the lack of policy, legislation and positive endorsement by governmental and socio-political organisations of LGB sexualities. It is also displayed in the public expression of Chinese societal values such as the negative attitudes, beliefs or reactions expressed towards LGB people from mainstream society.

It is also displayed in the internalised repression of LGB people (through the fear of stigmatisation and subsequent abuse LGB people believe they will experience due to negative cultural attitudes and discrimination towards LGB sexualities). Volunteers at the Beijing LGBT Centre stated this ‘cultural focus’ stigmatises LGB sexual identities and fuels misconceptions of LGB related sexuality in Chinese culture. The findings in this research show that the participants reject the idea that there has been a collective shift in Chinese culture regarding market reforms, changing social policies, and increased acceptance of LGB people, which contests existing literature regarding redefined collective and individual agency towards open expressions of sexual identity. The volunteers at the LGBT Centre in Beijing intensely blame Chinese culture for its lack of acceptance of non-heterosexual relationships, and state the stigmatisation of homosexuality in China is imbedded in Chinese society due to deep-rooted cultural homophobia.

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1. The word ‘tongzhi’ means ‘same will’ or ‘comrade’ in Chinese and it was first used in 1989 by the Chinese gay and lesbian rights movement as an alternative identity to ‘gay’ which was used predominantly in the West. The use of ‘tongzhi’ not only emphasised the ownership of the term by the movement but also underlined their cultural and political agenda. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)