PERCEPTION EVOLUTION: A STUDY OF SIX CHINESE INTERNATIONAL MALE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARD HOMOSEXUALITY

by

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies suggest that social context and culture significantly impact perceptions of homosexuality. Chinese international students studying in Canada have experienced both homophobic and homo-friendly social contexts and cultures. As a result, the evolution of their perceptions toward homosexuality is interesting to study and may suggest social and educational contexts that promote more positive perceptions of homosexuals. The current research is a narrative study investigating both heterosexual male (N=3) and gay male (N=3, including the researcher) students' perceptions of homosexuality with a focus on how their perceptions have evolved throughout their time in Canada. Both gay and heterosexual Chinese international students reported a significant evolution in their perceptions towards homosexuality since entering Canada. The evolution of participants' perceptions towards homosexuality started with an unclear and negative perception of gay identity (i.e., beliefs that gay relationships are not faithful and gay people need to hide their identify and live heterosexual lives). Through their Canadian experiences, gay students were validated in their homosexual identity. An optimistic perception came to shape that they were able to open their identity to others, believing meaningful connections are possible to be built through open interactions. Heterosexual students also began to transition their negative perception of homosexuality to start perceiving gay individuals as normal. This normalization of homosexuality was reinforced through their school education and entire social experience.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Autobiographic narrative

The first day I arrived in Canada, a country 8000 miles away from my home, China, I confirmed to myself that I made the right decision after I saw a dating website's advertisement showing two handsome men holding arms at Toronto subway station. As a gay man who was born and had spent 30 years in China, a nation assumed to have the largest gay population in the world but that was sociopolitically homophobic, each day in Canada shaped my perceptions about my own identity.

Born amid the wave of China's one child policy, I was blessed to receive all the love that parents possibly could give to a child. Unfortunately, my early school life was not as positive; the bullying brings traumatic memories. Skinny, quiet, not-into-boy's fightings and being good at academics were the traits that targeted me to those "bad boys." The hostility from big bullies gradually alienated me from the boys' play circle, but led me to quite fit into the girls' group. Unsurprisingly, playing with girls deteriorated the situation, accelerating bullying into a worse stage. Harmful slurs, such as jia nv (fake girl) and niang niang qiang (sissy boy) were often heard, so from a very early age, being different was engraved in my self-perception.

I never learned the word *tong xing lian*, homosexual in Mandarin, until my middle school years through watching Hong Kong movies. Quite commonly, in some of these comedy productions, an extreme flamboyant feminine character always drew laughs. The slurs from those movie productions, such as niang niang qiang (sissy boy), si ji lao (damn faggot), jia nv ren (fake woman), and si bian tai (damn pervert), tagged homosexuals with either humiliating feminine terms or connotations of abnormality. Even though I clearly draw a line between those slandered images and myself, the growing attraction to the same sex and some of my self-perceived feminine characteristics differed me from other 'normal' boys.

It was only through Hong Kong comedic movies that I learned about homosexuality. Homosexuality is not legitimately prosecuted in China but remains as a taboo. The government intentionally avoids any discussion about homosexuality, considering it as against the mainstream values of the socialist country. Consequently, Chinese media rarely address gay topics, except for some news reports related to homosexuals as a high-risk group for HIV.

Entering into my college years, around 2000, homosexuality discussions were still banned. The only chance people mentioned homosexuality was when my classmates gossiped and mocked a sissy boy from another department. Those gossipers unanimously agreed this guy was gay, because of his apparent feminine acting. They felt disgusted and even made up a malicious nickname, calling him "pervert Chen" (boy's family name). I was somehow frightened by their conversations, worrying one day that "pervert" word would be on me.

The negative influences about homosexuality formed my own perceptions about homosexuality in my early years – that gay men were always feminine. Reluctant to admit though, to some extent, I internalized these heteronormative stereotypes, with a sub-conscious manner, believing that being gay was against nature. The aftermath of my internalized homophobia was enormous. My self-esteem collapsed when someone said to me, "you are so gay." Self-denial trapped me in a very struggling stage that I tried to "correct" my feminine acting, from sitting position to dumbbell. However, my efforts to build a masculine image in order to fit into the majority turned out as a failure.

My college life brought struggles but also opened a brand new world when the Internet surfaced. A virtual world provided me the first chance to connect with other gay men. Hundreds of chat rooms categorized by themes, ages, location, etc. operated by portals appeared with tong zhi (homosexual) chat lines open to three to four hundred people simultaneously. Chatters were from every corner of the country and all walks of life. They were government staff, university

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students, white-collar professionals and factory workers, all thrilled by this unprecedented experience of connecting to each other. For safety concerns, but more out of the fear of exposure, I did not meet any of those men face-to-face; however, through online chatting, I first realized I was not alone and homosexuality was a huge hidden world.

A myriad of online information about homosexuality established the foundation of my understandings about homosexuality and gay relationships. In the early 2000s, a gay Internet novel, *Beijing Stories*, swept across China's gay online community. Regarded as 'must read' Chinese gay literature, *Beijing Story* had an enormous impact on my self-perception as a gay man. The novel, later adapted to an award-winning movie, *Lanyu*, narrated a romance between a businessman and a college student in Beijing, with accurate and delicate depictions of Chinese gay relationships. Having never experienced a gay relationship before, the romance in the novel, which was the first gay literature I ever read, reflected love as genuine and devoted as heterosexual romances. However, mirroring the depressive reality, the gay lovers in the novel were troubled with infidelity and marriage pressure. Since then, even though I had not experienced any relationship, *Beijing Story* impressed on me that two men were able to have a genuine love.

The relationships I had in later years reinforced common pessimistic stereotypes of gay relationships. All of my ex-boyfriends went into marriages, either marrying heterosexual girls or arranging a fake marriage with lesbians. In China, 80% of homosexuals enter into marriage, most of which are between a gay and heterosexual woman (Liang, 2009). The enormous pressures from every corner of the society undermine gay people building a stable, secure, and promising relationship. A closeted gay friend of mine expressed his negativity about gay love, saying he never believed in relationships, as they all ended with a break up. Long-term committed relationships were discussed on online blogs. Those cyber spaces, owned by gay couples, telling

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their happy partnered lives, were glimpses into possibilities at genuine love between two men.

Gay identity was not supported through any formalized or public organizations in school or out. Gay communities in North America and elsewhere generally celebrate pride, diversity, individuality, and sexuality. However in China, none of my friends nor I were ever involved in any LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Queer) organization or event. Although there is a surprisingly large gay population in China, the gay community is far from public compared to Western countries. On one hand, non-governmental organizations in China confronted an inactive attitude from Chinese government, particularly, those foreign funded organizations as they were assumed to be spreading Western values (Lubman, 2015).

Feared of identity exposure makes coming out a tremendous process in China. Some of my gay friends are out to their close friends but never to their parents. I came out to my parents two years ago when I was stormed by their pushes to marry. I came out to my dad during a lengthy phone call when he tried to educate me about marriage. My dad at first didn't understand what a homosexual was, and then I had to explain it in a very explicit way saying only males, instead of females, were able to stimulate my sexual eroticism. Ironically, my father was pleased to know that it was not a genital problem as he was suspicious for years about why I never showed any interest in girls. He deemed my homosexuality as a minor mental problem, which could be fixed.

I've revisited my coming out to my family in my mind hundreds of times. I had struggles on my sexual orientation identity, but the belief of "be true to myself" acquired from Western culture during my college years motivated me to come out. As a student in an English literature program, taught by American and British teachers, I had plenty of opportunities to understand Western culture. A great deal of Western cultural productions, from literature to movies, TV series, and dramas, were introduced in class teachings or as class assignments, in

themes of "be yourself", "freedom," or "follow your heart" as core values. Particularly, gay

characters often appeared in media productions and I started seeing a positive, 'nothing wrong'

image of gay people, such as in *Philadelphia, Will and Grace,* and *Queer as Folk*. The most

popular American episodes in China – *Friends*, which is worshiped by many Chinese as the best

English learning material – embedded a few gay characters, such as the lesbian wife of Ross.

Furthermore, the celebrated news of same-sex marriages from Western countries injected more

confidence about my own identity recognition. Continually influenced by Western culture, I

gradually developed awareness that nothing was wrong with my sexual orientation. I started

accepting my sexuality while wrestling with a heart wrenched guilty of owing my parents.

Suffocated family pressure ignited my long conceived plan of studying abroad; a plan of

fleeing to a place where gay people were accepted. Canada, a nation where same-sex marriage

was legalized for many years, as well as a place enjoying a reputation of high quality of

education, was an ideal place.

Canada didn't disappoint me. Since the first day of my arrival, the ads of same-sex

dating websites at the subway station was the first scene I experienced about the openness of gay

issues here. Later on, when I increasingly engaged myself with campus life and social life within

an LGBTQ community, my perceptions about gay identity significant evolved. The first year of

my university life validated my homosexual identity, through theory learning and a practical

experience, that homosexuality is a legitimate and normal existence with no shame or guilt. The

campus created an LGBTQ friendly environment for me to feel included. The first day of

walking around the campus after registration, I quickly spotted rainbow signs appearing on the

entrances of many buildings, with "positive space" written on them. After searching on university

website, I came to know this is a campus program named, "Positive Spaces", meaning all spaces

at university should be safe for all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity and

expression. The rainbow stickers are on almost every professor's office door at my department. Another surprise is a gender-free washroom, which was built in my faculty building. Those inclusive signs and facilities strengthened my confidence of expressing my sexual orientation and consolidated my determination of working on homosexuality research. Not only did my advisor show great support for my research interest, but also did my fellow students and other professors. At the campus orientation day, the school equity office set up their booth and handed out booklets with rainbow logos, giving the instructions on how to deal with sexual orientation and harassment.

The academic learning significantly broadened my gender knowledge, which laid a theoretical foundation to legitimate the existence of diversified sexualities. By reading a number of papers on sexual minorities, I gradually realized the complexity of sexuality, which produces a wide range of variations. Sexualities are far beyond what I had previously understood, expanding to include bisexual, two sexes, two-spirited, transsexual, cross dressing and more. Those variations of sexuality, long existing throughout human history, verified that diversity was the essence of the nature of human society and homosexuality was absolutely legitimate. Classroom discussions further convinced me of the normality of my sexual orientation. The multiple queer issues in education were addressed during class discussions, ranging from queering the reading texts of K-12 schools to the new sex education curriculum.

Engaging in a campus LGBTQ club was my very first look at LGBTQ community in Canada, an experience I never had in China. The LGBTQ group at my university was actively making connections to queer students via community events, social media, campaigns and celebrations. The first event in which I participated was a discussion around gender issues with over 50 participants. Everybody was relaxed and quite open to the topic, narrating their own stories of challenging gender norms.

The positive influences brought from my school life encouraged me to officially come out during a class presentation, which involved analyzing the motivations behind gays' coming out in China. Before that point, I did not openly admit I was gay to those in my program.

The Chinese international student community is impacted heavily by the local Christian culture at my university. I had discussions with my friends about the church's views towards homosexuality, which were negative and traditional; the Chinese Christians I spoke with all strongly believed homosexuality was a sin and connected with promiscuity. Since same-sex marriage is a very debated issue, the church invited a speaker, Christopher Yuan, a Chinese American, preaching his own story on how to convert from homosexual to holy sexual, that is to abandon homosexual behavior to serve God. Through a year of involvement in local Chinese community, I didn't disclose my sexual orientation; even though many of them might many have known through my persistent position on gay issues.

My oppression of my gay identity was not liberated until I joined the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in Toronto, where I started my journey to Toronto's LGBTQ community. I was quick to get involved with local LGBTQ activities in Toronto, which helped to contextualize my academic learning about diversity of sexual minorities. At MCC, I met not only gays and lesbians but also bisexuals, transsexuals, and cross dressers. One of my best friends, whom I met at MCC, defined himself as 'situational gay,' twice married before developing deep bonds with males. A cross dresser I talked to often accepted his male identity but enjoyed dressing like a female. A transsexual man completed his sex-reassigned surgery (woman to man) at the age of 70 when he finally decided he wanted to be a man. Those real stories provided a positive social experience for me and enlarged my understanding of normality – legitimizing homosexuality for me, but also furthering my awareness of other categories of difference.

The diversity of the queer community in Toronto dismantled my previous stereotypes

about gay masculinity and my internalized prejudice against myself. I gradually obtained a sense that gay persons are the same as any other group in terms of masculinity or femininity. I often saw two extremely well built bodies holding hands walking on Church Street as well as two feminized dressing guys hanging out together. In many cases, I was not able to assign either a feminine tag or a masculine tag from my observation. I started to recognize and accept the feminine side of myself and even to explore it more fully. Standing in front of my friends, I tried cross-dressing and make up, which was a bold, yet worthy, experience for me. I immediately realized that I was still male and the experience reified my masculinity.

Volunteering at non-profit LGBTQ organizations, parading at gay Pride, and hanging out with queer friends whom I made through events and activities helped develop a strong sense of community for me. I constantly joined programs at the 519 Centre and Asian Community Aids Service, going to the social party of young professionals initiated by OutBayStreet, and numerous random events on Church Street. I was honoured to give a speech on Gay China at the Toronto Rotary Club and Toronto Gay Businessmen Fraternity. All of these experiences helped me become increasingly aware that being queer was a strong and acceptable identity.

The long term committed relationships I witnessed in the LGBTQ community changed my previous perceptions that gay people could have public, loving relationships. The first service I attended at MCC struck me. At the service, a children chorus was singing on the stages and all the children were running to their gay fathers and mothers. That experience was the first time in my life that I witnessed same-sex families with children, and the happiness showing on their faces was no different from heterosexual families.

My experience of Canada is of an inclusive community for LGBTQ people. This community is vastly different from my experience in China. The process of coming to Canada supported my coming out as a gay man. My research interest stems from this experience.

Through this Master's project, I wanted to see how other Chinese male international students' perceptions of homosexuality changed as they moved to Canada.

1.2 Research purpose and questions

My narrative on the self-perception of gay identity illustrates an evolution in my understanding of homosexuality, from self-denial to self-validation, a progress deeply influenced by the Canadian social context. When people experience a transition between two different social and cultural contexts, they are likely to be influenced by new knowledge and new values. Chinese international students, transitioning from a homophobic culture to a homo-friendly social culture, are of particular interest in this regard.

My own perception evolution around gay identity leads me to explore the experiences of other gay Chinese international students. Numerous studies (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that have examined the identity development process suggested that social factors influence the development of the self-concept and positive self-esteem. Transitioning between two social contexts is not only experienced by gay Chinese international students, but also the heterosexual Chinese students, who constitute the majority of the campus population and overall hold a negative attitude toward homosexuality as found in some studies. For example, Huang *et al.* (2005) found that 37% of Chinese students believe homosexuality should be illegal and 35% would stop being friends with someone whom they discovered was a homosexual. When those Chinese students emigrated from China to Canada for further study, their negative perceptions about homosexuality might be brought to campus as well. Given the fact that Chinese students rank top among all international nationalities, that is over 80,000 Chinese students, and account for 30% of the total number of international students (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2012), their attitude toward homosexuality matters to school climate.

Sizable quantitative studies have concentrated on examining heterosexual students' perceptions or attitudes toward sexual minorities in an effort to better understand school culture and inclusive learning climates (e.g., Cao et al., 2010; Chonody, 2009; Dowling & Cummings, 2007; Hinrichs, 2002; Schellenberg & Hirt, 1999). Some quantitative studies (e.g., Lottes, 1994; Schellenberg, 1999) have revealed some important factors that influence heterosexual students' perceptions. Gender, religion, knowledge, and contact or expose to sexual minority diversity all make differences toward attitudes. However, due to a lack of qualitative studies, it still remains unclear how various factors influence Chinese international students' perceptions toward homosexuality. Academically, the current study will contribute to the empirical knowledge on students' perceptions about homosexuality through narratives of six Chinese male international male students' acculturation experiences.

Thus the current research is intended to contribute a qualitative perspective of both heterosexuals' and homosexuals' perceptions toward homosexuality. This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions about homosexuality before and after coming to Canada for three homosexual Chinese international students? How have their perceptions evolved throughout their time in Canada at a Canadian university?

2. What are the perceptions about homosexuality before and after coming to Canada for three heterosexual Chinese international students? How have their perceptions evolved throughout their time in Canada at a Canadian university?

1.3 Structure of project

The first chapter explains my research purpose and questions as related to my own experience as a Chinese international student. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the academic literature on the research topic, specifically related to scholarly works on gay identity

development and attitude. In addition, I present a social constructionist perspective on sexuality studies as a basis for my theoretical framework. The third chapter provides a detailed description of the research methods used in this study. The research findings are presented in Chapter 4. The final chapter concludes with my reflection on my learning throughout this process.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The perceptions of homosexuality explored in this study are generated from two different sexual orientation groups – homosexual (i.e., gay) and heterosexual. Since self-perception is distinct from the perception of others, the literature around the perception of homosexuality examined in this chapter is presented in two categories – gay self-perception literature and literature of heterosexuals' perceptions toward homosexuality.

2.1 Literature on gay self-perception

Self-perception is an ongoing process of viewing one's own identity. What is identity? Seidman (2002) stated identity is the way a person thinks about oneself and the self-image projected to the public. Rummers (1993) described identity as a label, being constructed both relationally and contextually while the act of identification is best viewed as inherently a procession. Weeks (2003b) focused on gender identity, identifying the concept is social constructed by particular historical and social contexts but equally acknowledging individual agency. After reviewing scholarly works on gay identity, I find gay identity formation studies have drawn significant attention. This category of studies provides scholars an approach to have a close examination on how gay persons acquire those identities, an indispensible process to develop self-perception.

2.1.1 Homosexual identity development study

Several scholars (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Dank, 1971; Lee, 1977; Minton & McDonald, 1984; Shafer, 1976; Troiden, 1977) expounded frameworks of homosexual identity development and illustrated several different models. Those models began with Shafer's (1976) relatively simple 3-stage model and evolved into the more sophisticated structures of Plummer (1975), Troiden (1977), and Cass (1979). Basically, the models differ from each other in numbers of stages in the development of acquiring gay identity, ranging from three phrases to six.

However, a striking similarity could be observed in most of the stage models (see Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1989; Lee, 1977; Martin, 1991; Minton & McDonald, 1984; and Troiden, 1989), that is, a common four sequential steps: (a) Awareness or Sensitization, (b) Internalization or Acceptance, (c) Disclosing, and (d) Synthesis or Integration. Cass' (1979, 1984) model is perhaps the most widely accepted and seminal of these models, describing each of these stages. Hence, although dated, I draw on Cass' work to support the results interpretation and analysis. Specifically, Cass identifies the following stages for identity formation:

(a) Identity confusion: A state in which the individual is uncertain about their identity.

(b) Identity comparison: A state in which the individual is actively comparing their thoughts and beliefs to others' perceptions.

(c) Identity tolerance: A state in which individuals begin to understand their identity with increased commitment to homosexual identity through engagement with a homosexual community.

(d) Identity acceptance: A state in which individuals accept their identity and share their identity with others (homosexual and heterosexual). Encourages a positive view of identity and increased network of homosexual friends.

(e) Identity pride: Characterized by feelings of pride toward their homosexual identity and takes pride in the homosexual community. Purposefully promotes equality for LGBT.

(f) Identity synthesis: Begins to bridge connections between different sub-cultures of homosexuals, recognizing seminaries over difference.

The models theorizers revealed those structures from their studies and also intended validate their theories through more empirical attempts. For example, after analyzing the data collected from a group of high school students, Cass (1984) identified those students' experience

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of homosexuality generally following the flow of her stage model, sequencing from self-suspecting, self-labeling, to self-defining as homosexual and involving gay sub-culture, ultimately stepping into a homosexual relationship. The individuals in this study also acknowledged homosexuality to be an aspect of their lives that could be distinguished on those characteristics proposed in her model.

Meanwhile, the stage model theories received academic challenges from many aspects. Some critiques, viewing these theories through social constructionist perspectives, criticized the absence of social influences in constructing homosexual identities. Cox and Gallois (1996) argued that social forces have a large impact on individuals, but stage development theories only focused upon individual psychological processes. They also pointed out the incompleteness of stage theory, acknowledging that group identification cannot be absent from the individual identity formation process. The importance of group identity also was noted by Horowitz (2001), stating " a major shortcoming of the stage models is they neglect to identify how the individual identity develops in relation to group identity," (p. 6) and further suggested "stage models may capture a general sequential experience, yet their linear nature is overly simplistic and denies the range and variety of homosexual experience" (p. 12).

In responding to the calling on group identity integration, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) composed a new homosexual identity formation model, which differs from the stage model by incorporating group inclusion and commitment into the structure, and stressing on the argument that interaction between individual and group mutually formulate the individual gay identity and group identity. Furthermore, the new model intends to "conceptualize the process as continuous and circular; every new relationship raises new issues about individual sexuality, and every new context requires renewed awareness of group oppression" (p. 522).

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2.1.2 Transcultural homosexual studies

Following the trend of globalization, transnational, transcultural, or diaspora homosexual experiences increasingly captured attention from academic researchers in recent years. In overview, two categories of literature, by the participants' status of residence, constitute the current scholarship in this area. The first type, focusing on cross border gay immigrants, explores their gay transnational experiences. The second type endeavors to understand the ethnic minority gay experiences living in multi-cultural Western countries. The participants in the latter type of research are mostly born and raised in the country where the study is conducted; However, certainly, under the big category of ethnic group, there are overlaps with cross-border immigrants.

Latino cross-border homosexuals are given the most attention, and specifically, Mexicans ranks as the longest chapter. A number of works (e.g., Carrillo, 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994) delve into looking at their life changing experiences, including the issue of gay Mexican identity, blending into the large local homosexual community to the intersection between gay and racial minority background. For instance, Thing's (2009)'s ethnographic research on 24 new immigrants, who were self-identified Mexican gay men living in Los Angeles, obtained a close observation on how cross-cultural influences relate to queer identity. The author concluded that those immigrants' queer identity were best understood as "hybrid constructions," which involved many social factors, such as class, ethnic background, immigrant status, and so on. Particularly, Thing (2009) asserted, the local transnational gay social network played an important role in the formation process of queer identity. The findings reveal that the participants, prior to immigration, were most salient in structuring their identities, seeing their sense of difference only from their heterosexual families and community members, "however, post-migration, their positionalities as gay Mexican working-class immigrants intersect in

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shaping their identities such that they claim different social identities and occupy different social spaces than do heterosexuals of all racial/ethnic backgrounds, as well as non-Latino and non-immigrant gay men" (p. 828).

Deason's (2006) research on Latino gay living in the Houston area is another piece showing how perceptions reflected differently under two varied social contexts. The respondents were asked to describe their understanding of how their gay and masculine identities were perceived in their home countries and in the United States. The respondents' definitions of what they considered to be gay and what they considered to be masculine in their culture and home countries were "associated with the perceived masculine/feminine persona," which "are taught from a very young age and anything less than this masculine persona is repressed" (p. 26). But in the United States, many respondents reflected their identity was much less perceived in the way of masculinity as their home countries when Americans did not care one's sexual orientation.

The specific social condition impacting on the construction of gay identity and perception is identified in Phillips' (2012) work as well. This ethnographic project investigated the experiences of Chinese, Malaysian and Indian ethnic gays living in Singapore, illustrating how gay identity was being re-conceptualized under the introduction of Internet technology and the subsequent transnational circulation of new ideologies. Phillip concluded the new social phenomenon, the Internet, allowed gay people in Singapore to have a public place to discuss a range of issues affecting their communities, and in doing so; they have started to fight for their rights in the physical world.

Asian gay diaspora studies, either focusing on new immigrants or ethnic Asian gays long time residing in non-origin country, in overview, are much fewer in number than other ethnic gay studies, even less in terms of understanding Chinese gays experiences. The scarcity of literature in this field also is noted in Dang's (2012) study, which is one of the very few studies

contributing to exploring experiences of Chinese American gay men. Dang interviewed 14 gay Chinese American men in the state of California, revealing the conflicts Chinese gay men faced with both the Chinese American community as well as the GLBT community. He further explained the difficulty in Chinese American community was in the shortage of sexuality knowledge and stigmas around homosexuality, while in the queer community, Chinese men were prejudiced against as less masculine and submissive.

A similar experience is echoed in Eguchi's (2010) self-exploration work, narrating his own gay immigrant experience from Japan to United States. Eguchi struggled to negotiate his multiple identities to fit into the gay Asian American identity. Specifically, he went through the racialized gender image of gay Asian American men, which conflicted with in his interactions with gay and bisexual men because this image did not fully represent who he was.

As matter as fact, similar to Eguchi's and Dang's studies, most of the scholarly works on Asian gay, largely center on the problems of racial stigma existing in gay community. The statistics surveyed by Wilson and Yoshikawa (2004), showed that 45 % of the gay Asian men they interviewed in New York City reported recently experiencing with racism, while only 16 % reported recent experiences with homophobia. In another study conducted by Dang and Hu (2005), after analyzing the data from gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in New York City, the authors found that 82% of the participants experienced racism specifically in the gay community. The predominant topic discussed among Asian gay men was racism instead of homophobia (Poon, 2006). Not only Asian men, but Black and Latino men also experienced racial discrimination from White gay men in America (Be´rube´, 2001; Choi et al., 2011).

Some literature proceeds to identify the causes of the racial discrimination against Asian gays. Several studies (e.g., Ayres, 1999; Cho, 1998; Han, 2008) identify the origin of this

discrimination as the perceived feminine characteristics of Asian gay men by other races, particularly the White men. As Han's (2008) study suggests, perceived feminine characteristics of Asian gay are unable to live up to the gay masculine norm. Thus gay White men can claim their masculinity by simply comparing themselves to supposedly feminine gay Asian males. It's very common to hear Asian gay guys frustrated about the messages from White gays male that they are naturally submissive bottoms and willing to be sexual partners to any White gay (Han, 2008). The stigmatized status composed by White gay men obstructs the self-esteem of Asian gay identity.

As evidenced from studies on transcultural factors influencing homosexual identity, there are several factors and social influences that shape an individual's ability to identify as gay. Different cultural views enable or limit one's sexual expression and identity formation. Furthermore, cultural views endorse stereotypes of gay identity. While some research has been conducted on how cultural views shape identity formation in Latino and Mexican immigrants to the United States, far fewer studies have examined Asian populations. Of studies on Asian populations (e.g., Ayres, 1999; Cho, 1998; Han, 2008), the emphasis has been placed on racial stereotypes among the LGBT community rather than on identity formation of Asian homosexuals. Accordingly, my study provides data on how gay Chinese males develop their homosexual identities by moving to Canada.

2.1.3 Transcultural gay student studies

Echoing the bleak situation of Asian gay literature, "limited research has been conducted in general on the experiences of Asian/American GLB students and their identity formation processes (Narui, 2011, p. 1215), and several studies (e.g., Brown et al., 2004; Kodama & Rasmussen, 2004) on Asian American and gay students suggest there's a need to further exploring the identity formation process of Asian American queer students.

Narui's (2011) study on college experiences of nine Asian/American gay, lesbian, and bisexual students shed some lights on this area. The author argued that the previous identity formation models can not fully explained the way Asian/American GLB students learn their identity. They navigated multiple discourses and managed different discursive expectations/norms in order to discover how to be an Asian/American GLB individual within society.

The study conducted by Patrick (2014), investigating the experiences of seven queer international students at one Canadian university, is the one piece closest to my research topic. Patrick was dedicated to revealing, "how the structures in place in a specific university within the Canadian political and cultural context affect what it may be like for these students to experience this double minority of international and queer student in their study abroad journeys" (p. 3). The participants were from six different countries, some of which was identified as very homophobic cultured societies, including Jamaica, Guyana, and Qatar. The study yielded very positive findings that all of participants perceived Canada as a more accepting cultural and political environment. Meanwhile, a number of changes related to their queer identities. Specifically, those students experienced changes in self-labeling, self-understanding of homosexuality, no longer being forced to act straight, and their future romantic and career prospects. Although Chinese international students were not included in this study, the findings about self-perception of queer international students give a close look to my current study topic.

2.2 Literature on heterosexual perceptions toward homosexuality

There are numerous studies since the 1970s focusing on heterosexuals' attitude and perceptions toward sexual minorities in the context of Western countries. Many of those studies examined correlates of intolerance toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and established the intolerance scales to assess it. Those studies (e.g., Hansen, 1982; Herek, 1984)

generally found females hold more positive views than male toward gay males. Many studies (e.g., Cuenot & Fugita, 1982; Herek, 1988) also indicate that heterosexual males have more negative perception toward gay men than toward lesbians and heterosexual females feel in more negative way toward lesbians than toward gay men. Additionally, further studies suggested that those who have religious beliefs tend to have more negative attitudes toward homosexuality (e.g., Cameron & Ross, 1981).

2.2.1 Studies on students' attitudes toward homosexuality

Since the 1980s, campus climate studies have been conducted among universities and colleges. Campus climate surveys, described by Hinrich (2002), "where a university officer completes the research in an attempt to document the extent of intolerance on campus" (p. 62), contributed a big portion to queer study in education. There are quite a number of universities in North America involved in this type of study.

Meanwhile, the studies about heterosexual students' attitudes toward LGBT were undertaken on campus. For example, Schellenberg and Hirt's (1999) research on Canadian university students' attitude on LGBT is one of those studies. They examined attitudes toward homosexuals among a broad selection of undergraduates (101 men, 98 women). Most of the sample was from working or middle-class families of European descent. The results showed that attitudes toward gay men were more negative than attitudes toward lesbians. The variable – Faculty of respondents contributed significant impact on attitude. Arts or Social Science Faculty students showed more positive attitudes toward gay men. Gender also played a significant role in impacting attitude. Female students were more positive than male students. The third difference rested on number of years spent in college. Higher grades students held friendlier attitudes to sexual minorities than lower grades. Those findings also were similar to Lottes and Kuriloff's (1994) results, which were taken from a longitudinal study.

Many of the studies go further to discuss what factors contribute to the attitude change. Both Schellenberg's (1999) and Lottes' (1994) quantitative studies imply that "an increase in acceptance of homosexuality is part of a larger set of changes in attitude that take place over the course of a college education" (Schellenberg, 1999, p. 149). The knowledge about sexual minorities was implied here as an important factor to influence attitudes. Some studies (Fontaine, 1998; Sears, 1992) continue to examine the relationship between current knowledge about homosexuality and attitudes toward queer individuals. The findings revealed that more knowledge a person learned about sexual minorities produced more positive attitudes or perceptions toward this group.

Dowling's (2007) study on teacher candidates' perceptions about sexual minority youth established a hypothesis on the relation between homosexual knowledge and perception, successfully showing that there was a significant negative correlation between knowledge and negative perception, i.e., the more knowledge teacher candidates had about homosexuality and related issues, the lower their scores were on the Index of Homophobia. In other words, the quantity and quality of knowledge about sexual minority imposed a great difference on people's attitudes and perceptions on homosexuality. However, the word "knowledge" needed be defined and specified. In Dowling's (2007) study, which is a quantitative research, queer knowledge was presented as a group of true/false questions. For example, "Homosexuality is a phase which children outgrow" or "According to the APA, homosexuality is an illness." A high score represented greater accurate knowledge about homosexuality.

Hurtado (2001) also found strong positive correlations among students who enrolled in women's or ethnic studies course and their awareness and acceptance of diverse others. Gurin *et al.* (2002) discovered that enrollment in a diversity course was a strong determinant of a range of

democratic outcomes (e.g., perspective taking, compatibility of difference, racial/cultural engagement), although these effects varied among different racial groups.

Intervention studies

The importance of queer knowledge in formulating perceptions about homosexuality informed some researchers to extend their research arena to intervention studies. Examining performance or effects of curriculum or training programs offered by college is one type of intervention study. Worthen (2011) studied a university Ally Training Program by developing a measuring scale based on previous research. After surveying 804 undergraduate students enrolled in sociology classes, the analysis was conducted on comparing 3 groups' results: Ally program "unfamiliar group," "aware group," and "participants group". Findings showed that higher levels of support for LGBT individuals among aware group and participants group than unfamiliar group.

Another important factor contributing to producing positive attitudes toward sexual minorities is contact with sexual minorities. Several studies (e.g., Lance, 1987) suggested that the positive attitude toward sexual minorities is more likely possessed by a person who is exposed to a wide and diverse group of people. Herek & Capitanio's (1996) research suggested that contact with gay people could be the best predictor of positive attitudes toward homosexuals. Moreover, people with higher levels of education were the most likely to have such contact (Herek & Capitanio, 1996). There are number of studies (e.g., Myers & Kardia, 1997) also indicating that there is a correlation between campus diverse contact and students' positive attitudes toward sexual minorities.

Another type of intervention study incorporated the contact or exposure hypothesis into their study. An example is Chonody's (2009) survey on a human sexuality course offered by a US university. Chonody incorporated an additional exposure intervention - Three instructors

included a gay and lesbian peer panel or guest speakers – into huthe man sexuality course. Furthermore, 17 selected intervention articles were used for reading and discussing materials on the class. The purpose of this study was to determine whether an information-plus-exposure intervention would have an influence on heterosexual students' attitudes toward gays and lesbians. Different from Worthen's (2011) pro-test surveying measure, Chonody conducted both pre-test and post-test on 211 students, who were 45% Social Work students and 55% were from other disciplines (e.g., education, humanities, and human sciences). The test scores at post-test were significantly lower than pre-test (higher score means higher negative attitude toward sexual minorities). Males scored significantly higher than females at pre-test, but decreased sharply at post-test. The study proved that information plus exposure is effective to influence heterosexual students' attitudes toward sexual minorities.

Kwon (2012) also used the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) to compare the effects of a speaker panel presentation versus a control condition in altering attitudes among 186 heterosexual university students. The study also adopted a pre-test and a post-test. The result demonstrated the intervention of a LGBTQ speaker panel presentation in psychology classes was effective in producing change in positive attitudes in heterosexual individuals toward LGB individuals.

These studies provide valuable insights on student perceptions on homosexuality, but the detailed experience on impacting their perceptions or what influenced and how influenced their perceptions were not answered due to their quantitative nature. Therefore, qualitative research is needed to fill in the blank.

A part of Jurgen's (2004) study is the limited number of qualitative studies that could be found. Mixed methods, which combined written survey and focus group, was used in this research. Focus group is one of these limited numbers of qualitative studies. The purpose of using

mixed method in this study was to ensure data were accurate and valid as possible for describing and understanding heterosexual student attitudes on campus. The respondents were 72 third and fourth year college students (61 women and 11 men), who were enrolled in undergraduate courses at a large urban university and self-classified as heterosexual. When the results were combined, the researcher found the data gained from two methods were identical. Focus group data were analyzed using constant comparative methodology. Data demonstrated that students' beliefs and attitudes might fall into three distinct areas: (1) Personal Beliefs About Societal Roles, Rights, and Protections; (2) Faith-Based, Religious, and Punitive Beliefs; and (3) Knowledge, Comprehension, and Perceptions of Gay Male and Lesbian Identity and Lifestyle Issues. The second and the third distinct areas are correspondent to many quantitative studies' results stated in the previous part and provide more detailed themes. However, focus groups discussion, for validating the quantitative survey data, was conducted after the written survey. The discussed items in the focus groups were simply repeated from the written survey. Most of the findings still looked like the quantitative results. For example, the researcher asked the focus groups whether gay males *contribute in a positive and unique way to society,* it says "Most respondents (68%) were neutral ('People contribute differently, but I think sexual orientation has nothing to do with a person's personality or what they have to offer,' 'your sexual orientation should not determine who you are or what you stand for'), or unsure ('every- one contributes something, but I'm not sure if [for gay males] it's a positive contribution or not')" (p. 61). There was no further explanation on detailed perceptions or reason behind these responses. The supplementary qualitative part in this study limits the depth and quality of outcome.

Worthen's (2011) study on ally program evaluation also included a qualitative part, which analyzed 66 students' reaction papers turned in after completing the ally training program for extra credit. Worthen found perception changes occurred that acknowledged a variety of

important learning points, including awareness of LGBTQ campus issues, origins of LGBTQ prejudice, and the similarities of LGBTQ individuals with heterosexuals. Moreover, the factors contributed to how contextualized learning was identified, e.g., acknowledgment of heterosexual privilege, size/location of hometown, and conservative religious background.

Broadening the search to qualitative studies on students' perceptions or attitude development on diversities, a large body of research could be found. Some findings are quite enlightening for queer issue. Several studies (Astin, 1993b; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) concluded four sources of influence at college to impact on students' perception development on diversity: (a) pre-enrollment characteristics of students, (b) organizational and environmental characteristics of the institution attended, (c) students' academic experiences, and (d) students' nonacademic experiences.

Overall, the studies on college and university climate on LGBTQ individuals suggest positive trends and efforts towards greater acceptance. While data are still emerging, there is initial evidence to suggest that efforts to enhance LGBTQ visibility and inclusion are initially effective. Additional data on this topic is required as the larger social context (i.e., provincial, national, and international) grows towards greater understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ individuals.

2.2.2 Studies on Chinese students' perceptions toward homosexuality

Empirical studies on homosexuality are very limited in the Chinese academic literature. Among this limited literature, most studies use lens from medical or psychological perspectives, such as HIV control or mental health. Fortunately, in recent years, some studies surveyed Chinese college students' tolerance attitude toward homosexual people. Those studies, though dearth in quantity, shed the light on China's homosexuality academic research.

Higgins (2002) found that most Chinese students held a deep negative attitude toward homosexuality; the basic attitude was 'homosexuality should not be allowed'. Huang's (2005) findings were even more provocative that 37% of students said homosexuality should be illegal and 35% would stop being a friend to someone they discovered was homosexual. The similar finding to the western countries' studies were found on Chinese students also, that is, male students expressed more negative attitudes than female students.

Cao (2010) surveyed 500 Chinese university students and concluded with some very interesting findings. Many of which do not correspond to general findings yielded from studies conducted in North American campuses. First, no significant difference was found in the perceptions and attitudes about homosexuality between the female and male students. The researcher indicated that the "sex neutralization" tendency prevailing among youth in Chinese youth may result in assimilated perceptions and attitudes about homosexuals between two genders. Second, science students held more positive perceptions and attitudes toward homosexuality than those who majored in Liberal Arts. And third, gender and family factors (e.g., single/dual parents, only child/have siblings) did not significantly influence students' perceptions and attitudes. Some of the findings in this study echoed with other countries' studies. This study concluded that adequate knowledge about homosexuality is helpful for Chinese university students in adopting much more tolerant attitudes toward homosexuality as the study revealed that there was a significant correlation between knowledge about homosexuals and positive attitude toward homosexual. However, it also suggests that additional efforts are required to combat larger societal perceptions towards homosexuals. Further research is needed in this area, specifically with consideration for intervention activities that shift negative perceptions towards more positive perceptions.

2.3 Theoretical foundation

The current research analysis will adopt the perspectives of social constructionism, a theory that "offers a culturist or social nurture argument (as against nature argument) for human relations" (Beasley, 2005, p. 137). Social constructionists believe people construct their understandings during the process of interactions with surroundings, including history background, social and culture context etc. Acknowledging the important role of external factors play in nurturing human's understanding about a particular object or issue conforms with my research assumption that perceptions of homosexuality vary under different social contexts and are influenced by various external factors during the transcultural process.

Essentialism VS Social constructionism

Cartwright (1968) explains essentialism is the view that, for any specific entity (such as an animal, a group of people, a physical object, a concept), there is a set of attributes, which are necessary to its identity and function. Those characteristics make them who they are with a natural, stable, and formidable existence. The quantitative research is largely based on essentialism, as the research subject is believed to be measurable. Through empirical examination, a truth will come to explain a phenomenon.

From the very beginning, essentialism has been criticized for ignoring the diversity and fluidity of nature, and intent to categorize by some particular inherited attributes while filtering away the external social or cultural impacts. For instance, people have widely accepted a stereotype that males are much better than females in problem solving skills but less competent in verbal communication skills. From an essentialist perspective, the disparities result from inherited biological or mental differences between men and women. Hyde's (2005) study, however, found gender didn't play a role after examining 124 meta-analyses. Interesting enough, Hyde mixed up males and females into two groups. The first group was told a gender bias would be considered in the test and the second group was not. The result of the first group showed

males had better performances, while no gender difference was found in the second group. Hyde concluded that self-stereotyping was enormous in contributing to the stereotypes of gender difference.

Self-stereotyping is the consequence of historical and social oppression from male dominance, which is a socio-historical norm. Berger and Luckmann (1991) argued that the reality is that people's subjective experiences about their daily life are constructed by the social context with where they interacted, instead of the natural world. Schwandt (2003) also noted, social knowledge and truth are created rather than discovered by the human mind; and the concepts are constructed when they interact with the real world. The social constructionist Burr (1995) suggested human identity is not formed from inside of a person but from the social realm.

In other words, social constructionism emphasizes the importance of social interactions in the progress of constructing concept or reality, distinguished by different social and cultural norms. The truth is not discovered by us but constructed by our understandings or knowledge about this world and that understanding is limited by location, history, culture and social factors. This approach allows researchers to explore the external influencers on developing a concept so that researchers are able to explain the disparities displayed under separate social contexts on the same phenomenon.

Social constructionism in sexuality and gender studies

Rejecting fixed content to identity but not totally escaping from some notions of a stable essence to sexuality, social constructionism, an approach between essentialism and postmodernism, remains a very important research method in sexuality and gender studies.

As Jackson (1998) stated, gender and sexuality, within this framework, are not simply a set of identity differences, but of hierarchical social divisions analogous to class and founded upon concrete material oppression. Social constructionists view sexuality as not completely

innate but actually constructed by society, that is to say, "sexuality may have varying social significance in different cultures and historical periods" (Beasley, 2005, p. 137). Under particular social and historical contexts, sexuality is constructed with particular meaning, and the same sexual act has varied denotations under different socio-historical contexts.

McIntosh (1968) is recognized as the pioneering social constructionist theorizer in sexuality studies. She challenged the conventional idea of categorizing homosexuals as a group of people who are born with innate homosexual sexuality, asserting homosexuality is a label assigned with the purpose of playing a specific social role. McIntosh came to this conclusion through analyzing the origin of homosexuality in the UK. She found homosexuality is a relatively new term to England, where this category came to being after the 1600s while the homosexual behaviour has always been there. McIntosh explained the wide spread of homosexuality then was regarded as a social threat, so a stigmatized category was demanded to keep the rest of society pure. By resisting the fixity of homosexuality, that is to say, one group has and other groups have not, McIntosh created fluidity to the sexuality theory, because variability and instability are able to find if homosexuality is a production of social role-playing. The new interpretation of homosexuality through a social constructionism perspective proceeds to resolving the prevailing stereotype toward homosexuality, such as effeminate acting, gay hobbies, fragile feelings, or the heteronormative presumption in gay relationships.

Jeffrey Weeks (1990), a significant social constructionist writer in gender and sexuality studies, further developed the argument that homosexuality is a social role playing into deeper understanding – sexual and sexuality is the socio-historical production, stressing the social and cultural changes in attitudes toward homosexuality.

In an earliest book, *Coming out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (1990), Weeks refused the essentialists' argument that sexuality is innate

and biological core can explain human behaviour. Corresponding with McIntosh's argument, Weeks argued the homosexual identity, was invented and developed via medical and psychological perspectives by a few sexologists, and further analyzed the social economic motives behind the decriminalization of male homosexuality in England in the 1960s. Weeks' next book, *Sex, Politics and Society* (2014), analyzing sexuality intertwined with social class, demonstrated a strong view that social factors have significant impact on sexuality.

Social constructionism makes it possible to analyze the external influences in developing perceptions of homosexuality, either the self-perceptions of gay men or straights' perceptions toward gay men. More significantly, social construction toward perception development is more evident and profound when contrasting two largely different social contexts. The analysis chapter presents the research results through the lens of social constructionism.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Qualitative methods are used in this study to examine the changes in perceptions towards homosexuality by Chinese international students (homosexual and heterosexual). Following Mack and colleagues (2005), I agree that "the strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue"(Mack et al., 2005, p. 225). In current study, I aim to understand perceptions of homosexuality from those who have experienced two different social contexts – China and Canada.

This study received ethical clearance from the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board (see Appendix A for clearance letter). All participants signed a consent form prior to participating in the study. The names of participants appearing in this paper are pseudonyms for privacy concerns.

Recruitment

Purposeful snowball sampling is the main approach used to recruit participants for this research. For the gay Chinese international students, I began with Luo, whom I met at the Sunday service of a church, which had a high gay population. He caught my attention during the service, as there weren't many Asians there. At the social time after the service, I got the opportunity to have an initial conversation with Luo; he was a gay Chinese international student. Luo showed interest in my study and I asked him if he wanted to be a participant. Luo led me to another international Chinese gay student, Yang. Both of these participants were given a letter of information and signed a consent form (see Appendix B).

Three straight Chinese international students, Fang, Zhang, and Li, were referred from my fellow students within my department. These participants were given a letter of information and signed a consent form (see Appendix B) prior to participating in the study.

Participants

The participants are five Chinese international students either currently studying full time in Canadian universities/colleges or who have graduated in the past 3 years. Two males are self-identified homosexual males (i.e., having emotional, romantic or sexual attractions to members of the same sex, American Psychology Association, 2008). Chinese international students only refer to those individuals who have grown up and studied in Mainland China before coming to Canada to pursue post secondary education.

Gay participants

Luo came to Canada immediately after completing his high school education in China. He attended a large size university in one of the biggest Canadian cities to learn economics. Luo now is working at one of the largest Canadian banks. Born and raised in a small city of Eastern China, Luo has strong family ties. The traditional concept of extending family line creates severe pressure on him, particularly, in the difficult situation when his dad happens to be the only son of his grandparents and he is the only child of his parents. Therefore, Luo has not yet come out to any of his family members except his niece. His parents believe Canada can provide a much better education, so they sent him to Canada to obtain an undergraduate degree. In Canada, Luo came out to his closest friends and even some of his co-workers. Luo believes that he might return to China after working a few years in Canada because of his strong family connections.

Yang was born and grew up in one of the biggest cities in Southern China. As the only child in a single parent family, Yang identifies himself as an independent decision maker. Unlike the traditional Chinese family, Yang describes his divorced parents as open-minded, and he's delighted to have a relatively free family environment. Yang completed his undergraduate study at a university in China. Before he continued studying in Canada, Yang worked in China for a few years. Motivated by the Canadian LGBTQ friendly social culture and the dream of

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experiencing the world, Yang left China to attend a medium-sized university in Canada, which is located in one of the most populated cities in the country. After successfully completing a master's degree, Yang was employed by a local company. He is open about his sexuality to his closest friends in school and his parents. Luckily, his friends and parents accept his identity even though his parents went through a short of period of struggle. Yang has not yet come out to his co-workers because he thinks it's necessary to set up a boundary between private life and work.

Straight participants

Fang is currently enrolled in a 2-year diploma program of a medium-sized college located in one of the biggest cities in Canada. Spending most of his life living in a big city in West China, Fang had a wide range of hobbies and interests, particularly in movies and sports. Speaking of the personality, Fang said, ostensibly, he's a well- behaved student with a mild temper in the eyes of parents and teachers, but there is also a strong rebellious character in his personality.

Having completed undergraduate and master degrees in a big populated city in China, Li intended to go abroad to continue his education. After he spent two years at a small town achieving another master's degree, Li chose to move and work in a big Canadian city after graduation. Li described himself as a soft tempered person, never having polarized views toward any group of people.

At the time of the interview, Zhang was a second year Ph.D student at a medium sized university. Before enrolling in a Canadian university, Zhang had completed his undergraduate and master's degrees in China. Continuing working on psychology studies in Canada, Zhang had ample opportunities to understand homosexuality issues during his academic journey.

Data collection: Interviews

In-depth interview was the primary data collection method in this research. Kvale (2011) indicates, "in-depth, qualitative interviews are excellent tools to use in planning and evaluating extension programs because they use an open-ended, discovery-oriented method, which allows the interviewer to deeply explore the respondent's feelings and perspectives on a subject" (p. 15). The in-depth exploration through conversations in my study was the best way of collecting the details of what participants experienced, including their resulting perceptions toward homosexuality.

Interviews were conducted in a face-to-face semi-structured style. Face-to-face interviewing is appropriate where depth of meaning is important and the research is primarily focused on gaining insight and understanding (Gillham, 2000). Mason (2002) described semi-structured interviews as a relatively flexible and interactive approach to interviewing, generally intended to generate interviewees' accounts of their own perspectives, perceptions, experiences, understandings, interpretations, and interactions. This style of interview increases the comparability of responses, ensures that each participant addresses the same general topics, and reduces the researcher's bias when conducting the interviews (Cohen et al., 2007).

The interviews were 2 hours in duration and occurred at locations convenient to participants. The interview questions focused on participants' perception development in China and Canada. The interview questions are provided in Appendix C.

Data analysis

The first step of data analysis was to transcribe the audio recordings verbatim. Out of confidentiality concerns, each audio recording and Microsoft Word file was labeled with a pseudonym instead of the real name of the participant. The sensitive personal information in the verbatim files were filtered and replaced. For example, only the first letter of the name of the city

appears to indicate the location information. Furthermore, each file is password encrypted. The transcripts were sent via e mail to the participants for correcting and reviewing and no further feedback was received, indicating their approval of the content.

Since two separate groups of participants were involved in this research, my coding work also consisted of two parts. I read each group's transcript first in order to have an overview and impression about their perception development progress. Owing to the small sample in each group of my participants, from 2 to 3 people, I didn't seek assistance from coding software; instead, I was using a color-coding method to code manually initially. Next, I inductively coded the transcripts from specific codes to general themes about participants' perspectives toward homosexuality. Patton (2002) says, "A good place to begin inductive analysis is to inventory and define key phrases, terms, and practices that are special to the people in the setting studied and finding what indigenous categories the studied people create to make sense of their world" (p. 454). Co-occurring codes or codes with similar meanings were collapsed. Codes were clustered into themes. The results are presented in the following chapter by theme. In order to enhance validity, I compared the emerging categories by looking back into the codes, as well as attempting to analyze the connections between different categories.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this chapter, I present the results of my study by reporting on the perceptions of gay and heterosexual (straight) international Chinese students towards homosexuality. Each of these perspectives – gay and straight – is discussed in turn through theme descriptions. Direct participant quotations are used to highlight theme descriptions. The themes derived from gay participants included: (a) blurred, (b) self-identified, (c) futureless, (d) identity validation. (e) coming out, (f) positive outlook. The themes derived from heterosexual participants included: (a) blurred, (b) heterosexualized understanding, (c) funny, (d) normalization.

4.1 Gay self-perceptions

The participants in this study began by describing their perceptions of homosexuality based on their past experiences in China. Homosexuality has a long history in China. It has thrived in some dynasties and provides the materials for Chinese literatures, such as *Hong Lou Meng (Red Chamber Dream)*. However, in contemporary China, homosexuality has become taboo, rarely discussed either in public or in private. Chinese international students, most aged 20 to 30, were born and grew up in a post cultural revolution era, a critical turning point amid economic and cultural growth. This Chinese youth generation embarked on adopting new concepts and ideas from Western globalization while old traditions continue to linger. Neither gay participants nor heterosexual respondents were able to state their perceptions of homosexuality in their early years because any discussion around sexuality was culturally taboo in China.

Starting at the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, students of middle school age began to be introduced to media productions and information brought by the Internet, where they acquired knowledge of sexuality, including homosexuality.

4.1.1 Early perceptions in China: Blurred but self-assured

For Luo and Yang, they came to understand homosexually through natural experiences. These experiences were later troubled, leading Luo and Yang to question their sexuality and ultimately move to Canada, where homosexuality is not as taboo. Luo came to sense his same-sex attraction during elementary school after occasional sexual behaviors occurred with his elder male cousin. "It just happened very naturally," Luo said, "after that, I couldn't help peering at the naked male swimmers every time when I passed a river in my city." Yang realized as well his same sex attraction during his middle school years, when he developed a crush on his best male friend. Both emphasized the natural way of their homosexual experience; even though they sensed the difference of their sexual orientation from others, Luo and Yang considered themselves normal and felt nothing wrong. Luo stated:

> I never thought I was abnormal. Though there's a homosexual attraction in my heart and I could feel it, but I never showed it to others, so nobody gave me pressure. I know some boys were dancing ballet and bullied by others in primary school because of their quite obvious feminine characters, but I am not like that, so I didn't have that internal struggle.

Luo and Yang didn't experience a self-struggle or self-denial period, a stage included in stage theory explaining the homosexual identity formulation process. The lack of a self-struggle might be in part due to their self-asserted masculinity, which created a safe association to other "normal boys" (Luo). Luo described his distance from stereotyped feminine boys in order to claim normalcy: "I've no clue how other people think sissy boys, but I intentionally avoided them because they are easily identified as gay and I was afraid of others thinking I am gay too." Even though both Luo and Yang developed an intimate relationship with a same-sex person, either in physical or in an affectionate way, neither of them identified as homosexual early on. Yang

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explained,

> I never claimed myself as homosexual and actually no clear picture in my mind about
>
> what is homosexuality…I just enjoy looking at boys more than girls…I think might
>
> because in my sub-consciousness, I don't want to admit and I don't want to be different.

Both of the participants underscored their self-assurance and normativity, justifying their same-sex attraction, but never claiming themselves as homosexuals. They had a strong desire "not to be different" (Yang). In fact, Luo didn't quite realize his difference from the majority until "one day, my cousin warned me we should stop doing that," and before this, "I never thought there was right or wrong."

4.1.2 Self-identified but futureless

Constrained by a dearth of information on homosexuality, the identity perceptions of Luo and Yang was not yet shaped in their early years. The situation was not much improved until the Internet quickly surged into the life of China's younger generation in approximately 2000. The self-perceptions of Luo and Yang were dramatically built up through various online and offline activities, such as BBS interactions, group chatting, and meeting (face-to-face) online friends. According to Jiang (2005), an estimated 300 to 400 homosexual websites sprang up in China between 2000 and 2010. Those websites range from portal gay websites, such as PYBK.com, aibai.net, to local gay websites, for example, GZTZ.com, a network serving the gay population residing in Guangdong province. In addition, even some non gay-themed websites, including a few nationwide web portal giants, such as Sina.com and Sohu.com, offered spaces for gay users to post threads on BBS and to chitchat through their chat line service. Wei (2007) concluded that the Internet, in particular, played a crucial role in the propagation of homosexual identity among gay men in China, especially for the young generation who were most likely to access the Internet. The experiences of the participants in this research also witnessed the vital

role of the Internet in their self-perception development.

The participants first identified themselves as "tong xing lian" or "tong zhi," Mandarin terms for homosexual, when browsing gay-themed websites. Yang found he resonated to the content on the websites, where he defined "homosexuality as the affection between boys." As to Luo, he had not confirmed or accepted the term homosexuality until the moment he was introduced to the Internet. The description of the causes of homosexuality on the Internet helped Luo make sense of his experiences:

> I was told various causes leading to homosexuality. Some gay were born in this way and some acquired afterwards. I think I belong to latter one. The sexual contact with my elder cousin in my early age led me to homosexuality because I never felt same-sex attraction before that event, but I never thought this was wrong and abnormal. Actually, it's quite normal.

"Tong xing lian" is an equivalent term of homosexuality in Mandarin, a literal translation from the English word homosexuality, without degraded or glorified implications. In China, a more often used term, tong zhi, is particularly favoured in the Chinese gay community. Wei (2007) illustrated the widely accepted prevalence of "tong zhi" in his study, stating: "When I talked about the tong zhi identity with Kenneth, a white American gay man living in Chengdu and Taipei for many years, he was surprised by the fact that Chinese gay men he met, regardless of their geographic locations, social status, educational level, and marriage status, all called themselves tong zhi."

Tong zhi was first appropriated by Hong Kong gay activists in 1989 and quickly adopted by the entire Greater China regions (Wei, 2007). "Tong" in Mandarin refers to "same, common, or homogenous" and "zhi" refers to ambition or goal. "Tong zhi" is a group of people who share common goal and march together to achieve, a term, closely related to the meaning of the word

"comrade," widely adopted by the Chinese communist party as a prefix to greet party members. The equivalent expression implying both same sex orientation and common cause to fight renders a glorified denotation on homosexuality.

A vibrant online gay community provided an important space for same-sex desires, which had been oppressed for years in China. Luo was encouraged when he realized, " I am not alone, there are many gays around just like me." Through continuous online communication via web chatting and social media groups, such as QQ, Luo stepped up to meet his virtual gay acquaintances in real life. Unfortunately, the offline meetings were barely moving forward to his expectation:

> I don't know why I wanted to meet others, maybe for sex? Or want to have a boyfriend or just out of curiosity, I have no idea actually. It's hard to make meaningful connections. Some of them only look for sex. If someone is not good looking, I just ran away. If not much to talk, we'll never contact again. The meaningful connection, something like making friends in school, could not be established.

Meaningful connections was hard for Luo to forge due to the harsh situation that homosexuality was still taboo with his family, friends, coworkers, and larger Chinese society. Although the Chinese tradition of being same, being neutral and being collectivist are taught and encouraged by school, parents, mass media, and the entire social culture, the bullies of girly ballet boys Luo witnessed at a young age taught him a real lesson about the cost of being different.

Facing this gloomy reality, Luo was quite clear on his attitude to girly boys, saying "I tried to avoid those girly boys, because they are easily distinguishable as gay, I'm afraid others might think I'm gay too if I hang out with them." The easiest way to hide is to get married with a heterosexual woman. The fact that 80% of gay males eventually married heterosexual women and many raised up children diminished the expectation of long term same sex committed

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relationships (Liang, 2009).

The post-80s generation in China that Luo, Yang, and I are part of involves a single child generation, burdened with the responsibility of carrying on the family name. Living in a transition era, moving from polarized collectivism slowly toward individualism today, 80's generation gay men in China have been trapped in a tortured dilemma. Lack of Confucian filial piety, failure to endorsing parents' will, and being childless were among the most sinful disobediences, which chained Chinese gay men from escaping the path of heterosexual normativity. The force of filial piety drove Luo to make a heart-wrenching decision to get married and have a baby after returning to China, even if he declared that Canada in many aspects improved his perceptions on his own identity. He defended, "I cannot be so selfish, I have to take considerations of my parents, my grandparents and other family members," given the circumstance that he's the only boy of his generation among his family.

Further, Luo expressed frustration with the gay community, perceiving that "gays are not faithful to their relationship and there is not much love in this community." He recounted the following experience:

> I met a guy through the Internet and got to know his boyfriend later as well. Actually, I was not sure that guy had a boyfriend or not. His boyfriend suspected I had an affair with the guy. After while, this guy suddenly told me he dumped his boyfriend.

Unlike Luo, Yang had insisted on the position of rejecting the traditional idea of marrying woman since his college years. American TV shows played on the Internet profoundly shaped Yang's "to be myself" life attitude. *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, which he watched often, constantly touched his heart and inspired him to move on. Especially, some of the episodes that featured gay guests telling their life experiences legitimated his position of being himself. Yang described the following experience:

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They invited Ricky Martin. I still remember Ricky said it feel so good to come out and

he would come out earlier if he knew it felt so good. There are also some episodes

interviewing other gay guests. Many gay thought their identities were evil when they

were kids and maybe they are the only gays in the world, but later realized they are not

and they are very brave.

Encouraged by imported Western media productions and believing that his mom is not a

typical conservative Chinese parent, Yang decided to come out. Successfully enough, after

battling a short period of internal conflicts by reading the references on homosexuality collected

from the Internet, Yang's mom eventually accepted her son's sexual orientation. However, the

success of coming out didn't alleviate his hopelessness about China's societal beliefs about

homosexuality. Yang was saddened by the miserable fate that the majority of gay men had to

hide their identity and accept marrying a woman. This feeling convinced him that he needed to

leave China and move to a Western country.

4.1.3 Identity Validation in Canada

The Internet assisted the Chinese gay students' self-identification and helped their

identity development proceed to the next stage, identity tolerance. The identity tolerance stage

involves "individual seeking out the company of homosexuals in order to fulfill social, sexual,

and emotional needs" (Cass, 1984). Unfortunately, the identity tolerance stage undergone in

China developed into a negative path due to the harsh living climate for gay people. Cass (1984)

explained that two paths could occur during this stage:

> One taken by those who perceive a homosexual self-identity as desirable and the other
>
> by those who do not. Within each of these streams, the quality of the contact with other
>
> homosexuals becomes an important factor that leads to different forms of behavior,
>
> depending on whether the contact is perceived as positive or negative. (p. 151)

Failure to establish "meaningful connections" undermines personal confidence in building up homosexual relations. Positive connections with homosexuals are key to advancing identity perception to next two levels – identity acceptance and identity pride, which demand extensive positive interactions with the gay community. Cass (1984, p. 151) noted that, "increased contact with the homosexual subculture encourages a more positive view of homosexuality and the gradual development of a network of homosexual friends." The fifth stage in gay identity formation involves:

> Feelings of pride towards one's homosexual identity and fierce loyalty to homosexuals as a group, who are seen as important and creditable while heterosexuals have become discredited and devalued. Anger about society's stigmatization of homosexuals leads to disclosure and purposeful confrontation with nonhomosexuals in order to promote the validity and equality of homosexuals. (Cass, 1984, p. 152)

The unfulfilled steps in China resumed when Chinese gay students came to live in Canada, where gay people enjoy a much higher visibility and acceptance. The positive experiences in connecting with the gay community and non-gay groups significantly validated the gay identities of Luo and Yang.

As soon as the Chinese gay students arrived in Canada, they immediately noted an LGBTQ friendly atmosphere. The same-sex dating site ad as I glanced at the Toronto subway showed the first friendly sign, followed by a number of relevant diversity signs and facilities I observed on my campus. Luo also felt welcomed when he found the posters of various LGBTQ clubs and events at his university, realizing "this is a huge difference from China. Here are so many social clubs, organizations, events for us." Actively participating in LGBTQ events and some volunteering work, Luo grasped a strong sense of validation of his self-perception:

In the training for my volunteering work, a campus LGBT youth line non-profit, that's the first time I got such a strong feeling that homosexuality is so normal and no wrong in the slightest way. I was told a lot of scientific research statistics in the handout; for example, homosexual population is very stable, taking up about 3% in whole population, without significant increase or decrease in any time. Homosexuals are always there and reasonably exist.

Yang also experienced identity validation through his participation in campus LGBTQ events. After noticing an LGBTQ students' club webpage on his university's official website, Yang decided to show up. Surprisingly, he found that "every one felt so relaxing, open, and normal, nothing special, just like any other social event." Yang's surprise reminds me of mine at a social event sponsored by my department of the university. When a fellow student in my program introduced her same-sex wife to other students and professors, nobody showed either a surprising face or a supportive face, except me, because I was shocked and touched by my observation that being gay is treated exactly the same as anyone else.

University could be a crucial stage in identity development of gay students, a period when many gay students self-identify and come out to others (D'Augelli, 1994). Rhodes (1994) stressed the importance of developing community in college, where meeting other gay people could form an alliance to resist the dominant heterosexual culture and shape gay subculture. A positive campus climate, including faculty members, students, student clubs, and student government, weighs in the development of gay students' identity. The interviewed gay students and my own experience suggest that campus support, such as LGBTQ campus groups, positive space programs, gender- neutral facilities, and an equity office, matter in identity validation. It could be a stronghold against homophobic interruptions from other sources.

The inclusive campus environment mirrors the overall picture of whole Canadian

society's mainstream attitude toward homosexuality. In addition to their studying at institutions, gay students observed more positive signs from all corners of life, which considerably furthered their identity validation. Luo told of his Gay Pride impression:

> The city has Gay Pride every year. I remember last year, after the Pride, local newspaper titled Toronto as the best gay friendly city in the world. When you read that, you felt what an inclusive city it is. And many companies, such as those banks, I think TD is the best example. They have many ads themed sexual diversity.

> While many people today in North America question Gay Pride by asking "is this something we still need?" (Edger, 2012), for those international students from a less gay friendly country, where Pride is not allowed, this gay carnival is likely the most extravagant event showing them identity validation from both gay communities and non-gay groups.

> The workplace is another important venue having profound impact on gay self-perceptions. Yang's observation on his workplace again provides a sense of validation to his identity:

> In my company, nobody cares about others' personal life. I have a colleague, I think he is gay too as his flamboyant personality, but no one treated him differently and he is very excellent in his working. The Canadian Constitution entitles everyone should be treated equally, regardless of one's race, gender, age or sexual orientation.

The overall mainstream attitude in working institutions toward sexual minorities was inclusive from Yang's perspective, but the discrimination against gay still happens in some ways. Luo overheard a negative conversation from his co-workers:

> I worked at a warehouse before. It's a physical work. Two of my coworkers … talked about another worker and said that guy was gay. They said 'what a fuck' and felt it's unbelievable and unacceptable.

The media coverage on gay issues also impacted Yang's and Luo's identity validation process. Sharply different than China, North American media has extensive coverage on gay-themed contents, ranging from news reports to movies, TV episodes, and music. Yang constantly learned coming out stories of celebrities from TV news and shows. He was very proud of knowing from news reports that Kathleen Wynne was an out lesbian politician and premier of Ontario. Yang considered this validation to his sexuality too because "it's impossible for her to be elected as the premier unless the public accept her sexual orientation."

4.1.4 Coming out: A consequence of validation

The symbolic characteristic of the fourth stage in Cass' (1984) identity development model is gay disclosure to others, particularly friends and relatives. After validating their gay identity through all kinds of external information and experiences, Yang and Luo took the next step and disclosed their homosexuality to others.

Luo was completely closeted before coming to Canada — none of his family members or friends knew of his sexual orientation; however, the validation progress achieved in Canada inspired him to tell his true identity to his niece in China. Meanwhile, Luo chose not to hide from his friends in Canada, although, he didn't necessarily tell his friends with words; instead, his behaviors in many ways naturally disclosed his sexual orientation to others:

I was helping to unpack roses for my straight friends' business last Valentine's Day. I took my dating mate together to help them and bought a rose for him, then everybody knows. Sometimes, some friends ask me what I do, and I told them I am volunteering in a gay non-profit organization. Actually, I don't need to tell them directly, they would immediately know.

Before coming to Canada, Yang was only out to his mom in China. Identity validation progressed in Canada, which motivated Yang to reveal his sexual orientation to more people,

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including his close friends and classmates, but not yet to his colleagues, because "it's not necessary to do so…I don't have much personal contacts with colleagues and we are completely working relations."

Coming out is a process of negotiation, a selective discourse. Yang's and Luo's decisions about revealing their sexual orientation were based on relationships formed within those discourses (Mitsu, 2011). Yang's decision of closeting his sexual orientation at his workplace is the result of selective evaluation. In relation to the identity development model, Luo and Yang are both currently at stage four, identity acceptance, and possibly heading to the next stage, identity pride, which "leads to disclosure and purposeful confrontation with non-homosexuals in order to promote the validity and equality of homosexuals" (Cass, 1987, p152).

5.1.5 Optimistic about future

A final theme that emerged from Yang's and Luo's experiences was a change in their outlook towards gay relationships. Contemporary research reveals that gay males and lesbians are capable of forming long-term relationships, but it will be very difficult to form these relationships in a society where there is a lack of social sanctioning and support (Dailey, 1979; Tuller, 1978). The gay students in this research, including myself, all experienced a frustration about the prospect of positive and healthy gay relationships in China, while a shift occurred in Canada.

The open social environment in Canada gave Luo many opportunities to make queer friends through various social events and enabled him to establish "meaningful friendships" with opportunities to develop loving relationships. His perceptions about the queer community slowly changed from previous negative perceptions to a positive outlook:

Knowing some friends from events, then added them on Facebook and you will know more of those groups, such as ACAS (Asian Community Aids Service). I know some friends over there organizing events; I saw some very nice events going on there. We

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sometimes went to a friend's home having dinner together or playing games. Those are

very healthy and meaningful connections, quite different from China.

Adequate social supports in Canada, ranging from the public level, such as legal protection of

same-sex marriage and other anti-discrimination measures, to personal supports from friends and

family, help to avoid the tragedies happening in China, where most gay can not live open lives.

As evident from the experiences of Yang, Luo, and me, there are several positive supports for gay

identity formation in Canada and studying in Canada facilitated for a more healthy and positive

outlook on gay relationships.

4.2 Heterosexual perceptions toward homosexuality

4.2.1 Early perceptions: Blurred and weird

When asked about the first perceptions of homosexuality, Zhang, Fang, and Li

(heterosexual participants) reacted quite similarly to Luo and Yang. All of the participants agreed

that, before entering university, homosexuality seemed not a real existence in their life because

no one in their family, school, or any other social occasions ever addressed the topic. Zhang, a

student studying in a psychology program, never heard about homosexuality until he went to

graduate school. In chatting with classmates, he was told controversies around a well-known

Chinese sociologist Li Yinhe, who was one of the pioneering researchers working on

homosexuality issues in China and persistently proposing a same-sex marriage bill to China's

national congress. Zhang was honest about his negative perceptions about homosexuality, and

described "how this weird sexual orientation formulated," stating:

I think this group of people was completely nothing to do with my life. The normal

people would not be attracted to same sex. I thought they were type of people, wearing

bizarre clothes, no decent jobs, or mentally oppressed for some reason and need to find

an outlet…Anyway, homosexuals had nothing associated with well educated.

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Zhang was not able to articulate how he adopted this negative early perception of homosexuality, which links homosexuality to a degraded class of people; however, the roots of this perception might stem from the attitudes of the authorities in China and through their propaganda since the 1950s. Zhang Beichuan, a Chinese scholar specializing in sexuality research, noted, "in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, *tong xing lian* (homosexuality) was rarely mentioned in society, and when it was, it was treated as an immoral issue – whenever the government talked about the ugly phenomena of society, it referred to three things: prostitution, drug addiction, and *tong xing lian*." (Chou, 2000, p. 99).

In the 1990s, the governmental attitude toward homosexuality was not as harsh as previously, lessening its association with immoral criminal acts; however, the AIDS epidemic and related media coverage brought another negative perception of homosexuality to Chinese society – a medical perspective combined with sex immorality. Fang described his impression of the AIDS epidemic:

> Honestly speaking, I rarely heard anything about homosexual, if there were some, for certain, it's about HIV, because media often reported homosexuals are high-risk group. Consequently, once speaking of homosexuality, AIDS is the first word that popped up. I didn't know any gay people in my life so what I know about gay must be from the media.

Despite the stigmatized media reports, Fang said he never had that strong resentment toward homosexuals. A gay-themed Hong Kong movie, *Happy Together (Chun Guang Zha Xie),* in which Leslie Chang, Fang's favorite actor, starred in was Fang's first impression about homosexuality. Due to the blurred memory in his early age, Fang couldn't tell much about the details of his first impression, except for the idea that it was a "weird feeling when seeing two men's love making scene."

Li heard of homosexuality for the first time in his middle school years, when classmates

began teasing him, "you are so gay." Li explained this was a kind of joke often made between close friends, yet nothing malicious or hurtful. But apparently, the word gay incited his curiosity and brought him to his elder sister, who happened to be "a very popular mature girl in school, liberal in mind and like to try new things." His older sister told him that someone in her class was bisexual and they had been together for a year before telling anyone. Li was shocked by his older sister's experience but as well as stressing he has "no resentment with homosexuality." In reflecting on his sister's actions, Li stated, "I know she's not gay, she's been married for many years, she was just playing cool by trying new things."

4.2.2 Hetersexualized understanding and a joking attitude

Awareness of homosexuality from my interviews with the straight students proceeded to a critical stage when they went to university in China, as this is where they finally encountered gay or assumed gay students. Fang witnessed two girls kissing at the cafeteria. He described his feeling and observation on how other students reacted:

One of the girls is quite pretty, looks very feminine, but another one is in short hair, looks like a boy. We all felt weird and many saying it's so disgusting. I didn't feel disgusted but very disappointed that a beautiful girl not be with a boy. More or less, it's not quite comfortable to see two girls kissing in public.

Li, after witnessing two girls showing intimacy on campus and after observing a feminine boy, commented:

This Lala (short name for Lesbian) couple studied in my department. Two girls holding hands while walking are nothing abnormal, but these two girls are different. One of the girls dresses in very unisex way, without wearing a skirt or any girl's ornament, with short hair…that boy is from other department, acting very femininely, causing a lot of gossips around him. Though we never saw he hanged out with anyone, but all of us

assumed he was gay.

The traditional ideology of gender roles often correlated to the stigma toward homosexuality (Beneke 1997; Pharr 1997). The heteronormativity allows straight people to build up their perceptions of homosexuality through binary understandings. The conventional gender roles in heterosexual relationships is borrowed to frame homosexual relationships, in which one of the people in a gay male couple or lesbian couple must play the masculine role while the other plays a more feminine role. By witnessing a lesbian couple, both Fang and Li verified their preoccupied binary relationship model through their judgment, assigning the binary sexual roles to two girls according to the masculine or feminine features in their appearance. Fang described his image of a gay couple during the interview, stating: "I think I can tell immediately. If it's a lesbian couple, one must be masculine, with short hair while the other one is like a normal girl with soft voice. If it's a gay couple, one is feminine acting."

Due to the deviance from traditional heterosexual norms, homosexuals, particularly non-straight acting gay men, become the target of teasing and mocking. Li and his roommates often laughed at that "sissy boy," defending, "after all, to us, that kind of girly gestures is very funny." Interestingly, the mocking of gays eventually permeates campus youth culture as Fang noted:

> When I was in the university, I could hear 'gao ji' (搞基 play gay) everywhere. Gao ji is a very popular word. I had no idea what it means when I first time heard of it. Someone later told me it means two male are close friends. It's so popular…we call meeting a friend is 'mian ji' (面基，meeting a gay friend). Two close male friends are also called 'hao ji you' (好基友 good gay buddies).

Evident from this description is the prevalence of 'gay' and 'straight' language on university campuses. In the case of Chinese universities, these words are used to not only label but also

mock and tease. Fang's, Zhang's, and Li's honest accounts of their university experience and perceptions toward homosexuality further confirm the heteronormative culture evident in Chinese universities during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

4.2.3 Normalization

Homosexual contacts

All of the heterosexual participants reported their previous negative and heterosexualized perceptions of homosexuality changed in Canada. "It's unbelievable that there are so many gays in Canada," Fang exclaimed, from his friend's landlord to his language school classmate and even gym goers he met. Through his observations and interactions, Fang noted a variation and diversity displayed in gay relationships, challenging his understanding and perceptions derived from his experiences in China. He was astonished to see two muscular gay men together in the gym and explained his observations on their sexual orientation: "They are holding hands while walking out of school gym, two very muscled men, very masculine. I didn't think in Canada, two straight men are likely to holding their hands in public." Befriending his language school classmate, a lesbian girl, also helped Fang normalize his perception on same-sex orientation:

> She's a very handsome looking girl, I mean if you see her from a female perspective. I thought first it was a he. But she always talked about beautiful girls with me and later on she told me she was gay. Her personality is adorable, very open-minded and loves to share. We often hang out. I think gays are normal people too, in terms of personality, socials, hobbies and etc., we are all the same animals.

Similar to Fang, Li experienced a normalization process in his perceptions towards homosexuality. A story told by Li's girlfriend, who befriended a gay classmate from Mainland China in her school program, struck Li's awareness. Being out to the friends and married to a

Canadian, this Chinese gay injected a different understanding to Li's perceptions about gay relationships. Li found this gay couple didn't fall into his previous heterosexualized image of gay couples based on his experience in China, realizing "they seem quite normal except for age difference." More essentially, Li adopted a genetic argument from the story to explain gay is not a choice, a rationale to normalize homosexuality in his perception:

> I think gay is born to be gay, decided by gene. This gay guy actually had a girlfriend in the university before, but broke up because he felt there was always something wrong. My girlfriend told me gay was born to be gay and nothing can be changed. I didn't research on it, but I think it's quite reasonable. Just shifting to a gay position, gay might think it's weird to be with opposite sex.

Li confessed that the conversation with his girlfriend about this gay friend was his first serious discussion about gay issues.

Social influences

The supportive social culture in Canadian society helped to educate newcomers, Li, Zhang, and Fang, transitioning from their comparably homophobic cultures to an inclusive culture. The social influences, ranging from social events, workplace culture, and media exposure all generated a normalization perception toward homosexuality. Gay Pride struck Fang heavily as a massive support for homosexuality profoundly impacting his perception:

> The Gay Pride blew me out. I learned this event from the daughter of my landlord. She told me there was a very big parade in that month. I didn't know it was Gay Pride until I went to the streets…everybody was so happy…I saw many same-sex couples in parade and I could tell the joy and happiness from their faces…and thousands of people were clapping, chanting, and showing support for them. That's not something joking attitude we had in China if people saw gay people, it's a true inclusive and supportive attitude.

In China, Fang was one to make gay jokes when he and his classmates mocked each other. Though he claimed he never was a part of those who hated homosexuals, he did confess that he thought homosexuality was "different and weird." His experience in Canada converted his "weird" perception about homosexuality into a "normal" perception. He believed that Gay Pride "normalized" this perception and later strengthened it through interactions with gay friends.

As a powerful source of social influence, media exposure in Canada promoted the perceptions of the interviewees with its large amount of gay-themed content. From lengthy gay marriage news reports to popular TV episodes with gay characters, the media productions reinforced the normalization of perception. Li talked about the information he received from media:

> I saw the news on TV arguing the same-sex marriage, saying some states have legalized and some not yet…they are talking about equality and I agree that gay marriage should be legalized in terms of equality. I watched *Friends* before, remembering the ex-wife of Ross is lesbian, right? I thought it couldn't show on TV if gay is not widely accepted in America.

Fang also often saw the TV news discussing U.S. gay marriage, which interested him to further searching on the Internet. A YouTube video (YouTube is banned in China), an open class of Harvard University, revealed to him the rationale behind the arguments on pro- or anti-gay marriage, help him make up his own mind on this issue. He stated:

> Some students in the video took the Biblical view to oppose gay marriage and their view was challenged by many, arguing the law is for everyone and everyone now has one's own belief…why the law should make for specific groups of religious people. Some said the purpose of marriage is giving birth of child…so the couple should not marry if they lack fertility. I agree the view that it's a basic human right and should be for everyone.

A popular American TV show, *What Would You Do*, featured a few episodes on experimenting social attitude on gay, also reinforced his position on the gay issue:

> A man proposes to his boyfriend in a restaurant but verbally bashed by someone sitting next to him. Then a lot of people asked that rude diner to shut up saying it's none of his business. I agree with that. Here is really different from China. I'm sure no one would upset by that man if this happened in China.

Evident from these anecdotes, the social climate and media in Canada supported both gay and heterosexual Chinese international students' perspectives towards homosexuality.

School education

The data in the current research has revealed that campus climate is a critical influence on the self-perceptions of gay students. Based on this research, campus climate also serves to strengthen heterosexual students' perceptions of homosexuality. Campus factors, including faculty members, LGBTQ programs, academic courses, and conferences played an important role in formulating Zhang, Li, and Fang's positive awareness of homosexuality. Zhang reported that his perception toward homosexuality shifted from negativity toward positivity at an academic conference he attended shortly after enrolling in his Ph.D. program:

> There is an annual conference about my research interest in the United States. One big session of that conference is about LGBT research. Many teachers, students, and researchers attended that session. At that moment, it seems that homosexuality is quite normal because they have a platform here to communicate…it's fully recognized by this academic institution.

Owing to his academic research field, Zhang had more opportunities than others to touch on this topic. One of the professors in his department specialized on sexuality research and often was invited to give seminars, which Zhang attended. He remembered video clips played about how

sexual reaction varied among people with different sexual orientations. The lecture again proved to Zhang that "various sexual orientations are normal in their existences and he's glad seeing some people, like researchers help counter the stereotypes." Meanwhile, some scholarly work that he read further reinforced his perceptions on homosexuality as normal, believing "it is not a choice, either genetic decided or forming in early childhood." Zhang barely ever read anything on LGBT scholarly writings in China even though he completed a master's degree in China on the same subject.

The inclusive education dynamics allowed queer topics to be incorporated into the curriculum at Canadian universities. For those students who are not particularly majoring in social sciences, they still have chances to learn about issues from various discussions and events throughout campus.

The analysis of straight students' perception development reveals that normalization toward homosexuality is an evolutionary process, which was instigated by students' experiences in Canada. Contacts with homosexuals significantly affected straight students' perceptions about homosexuality. In particular, their perceptions were shaped gradually as a result of witnessing diversity within gay populations, personal interactions with gay people, information they received at school, media, and other cultural aspects.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This project investigates the perception development of Chinese international students in Canada toward homosexuality; both gay students and straight students are included. Although international students gradually form into a large number of groups on Canadian campuses (CBIE, 2012), little attention in academic research is given to their perceptions of sexual minorities (Renn, 2010). Focusing on Chinese international students in Canada, now the largest group among foreign students here (CIBE, 2012), helps to understand the evolution of their attitudes toward homosexuality as they transition between two very different cultures. The findings of the research will help educators better understand their perception development in order to provide insights on eliminating prejudices against sexual minorities from this group of students.

Both gay and straight Chinese international students reported a significant evolution in their perceptions toward homosexuality since entering Canada. By exploring their perception formulation process, it is evident that, under disparate social contexts, the perception of homosexuality is constructed in correspondence with current social cultural influences. The shifts in their perception were consistent, in that they changed from a negative or ambiguous perception of homosexuality to a more positive and accepting perception. The two guiding research questions for this study further isolated the perception evolution of homosexual and heterosexual participants.

Revisiting research questions

1. What are the perceptions about homosexuality before and after coming to Canada for homosexual Chinese international students? How have their perceptions evolved throughout their time in Canada?

Male Chinese gay students in the current study started with an unclear subconscious

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self-perception toward homosexuality. They self-claimed a normativity–"I am normal but different from others," and then justified it through material gathered from the Internet. While both participants knew that they were 'different' from heterosexual men, they both described feeling 'normal' in relation to traditional gay stereotypes. For example, Luo believed that he was perceived as normal because he was 'straight-acting.' He contrasted his identity to more feminine boys, suggesting that they received negative attention for being gay whereas he still fit into typical gender and sexuality norms. In a similar way, Yang assumed his identity as normal because he did not know enough about homosexuality to fully identify as gay. The experiences of these two participants differed slightly from my own. In my experience, I realized my homosexuality from an early age and went through a period of personal identification struggles, realizing that I was different from 'normal' straight boys. Overall, the initial identification as homosexual from all three participants suggests at minimum an awareness of gay stereotypes, which in some cases can lead to internalized homophobia and identity challenges.

In particular, the homophobic Chinese social environment stifled participant identity validation through family and social supports, which were indispensable links to the next stage of identity development according to stage theory (Cass, 1979). Although gay students self-claimed a legitimate identity, the miserable future they predicted with respect to relationships and social acceptance composed their negative perceptions. They perceived gay relationships as not faithful and felt that gay needs to hide in every way, even having to marry a heterosexual woman. Fortunately, their Canadian experience switched this negativity to positivity.

In Canada, all of the homosexual participants found evidence to reinforce their gay identities, normalizing them within an accepting culture. This identity validation progress was supported by campus, media, and social supports, which helped the gay participants in this study to establish a positive perception of homosexuality and themselves. In particular, all three

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participants immediately recognized positive gay communities and supports on their university campuses and in their communities. Through campaigns such as Positive Space and queer-friendly groups, participants were able to connect with other gay individuals to validate their identities. In Canada, the participants acquired a perception that being gay was absolutely as normal as heterosexual identity, and they can have a normal life. In all cases, they felt secure to come out to select individuals and began to understand that homosexuality was social acceptable. Further, in terms of their understanding about relationships and the gay community, participants started believing that it is possible to build up meaningful connections through open interactions. They are optimistic about future life.

Based on Cass' (1982) identity stage theory, it is evident that while the participants were able to begin their homosexual identity formation in China, they could not proceed to the 'identity tolerance stage' due to the negative social context for homosexuality in China. In coming to Canada, all of these participants were able to move into the identity tolerance stage and are working in the 'identity acceptance' stage.

2. What are the perceptions about homosexuality before and after coming to Canada for heterosexual Chinese international students? How have their perceptions evolved throughout their time in Canada?

The perception evolution experienced by heterosexual participants was similar to homosexual participants as a result of moving to Canada. These participants initially expressed a blurry perception toward homosexuality, feeling that homosexuality was a little "weird." One participants also associated sexual orientation with social class and morality, thinking homosexuals were "abnormal, less educated and belong to an immoral lower class." This perspective might stem from the attitudes of the authorities in China and through their propaganda since 1950s. Homosexuality has long been seen as against mainstream socialist

values and treated as immoral. Health issues combined with sex immorality further support this perception, in particular the media coverage of HIV epidemic associating homosexuals as a high risk affected group.

As the Internet introduced gay culture to youth populations in China, gay awareness has increased but negativity still dominated heterosexual perceptions. Hence participants in this study still asserted a dominant negative perception towards homosexuals during their time in China. In addition, the heterosexual participants borrowed the conventional gender roles in heterosexual relationships to understand homosexuals, assigning the binary sexual roles to gay relationship according to the masculine or feminine features in their appearance. The homosexuals, particularly non-straight acting gay people, became the target of teasing and mocking as "gay men are effeminate, while lesbians masculine in behavior and look very funny" (Li).

Under the influence of the inclusive social culture in Canada, the high visibility of gay people enabled more interactions heterosexual and homosexual individuals. As a result, the participants in this study started to perceive gay individuals as 'normal.' The straight participants, Fang and Li, experienced a normalization process through contact with homosexuals, converting the previous heterosexualized and mocking attitudes to a "they seem quite normal" perception. In particular, their perceptions were shaped gradually as a result of witnessing diversity within gay populations. Another straight participant, Zhang, normalized his perceptions toward homosexuality via his academic learning and school experiences in Canada, where homosexuality was incorporated into a legitimate academic learning, which validated homosexuality identity. Furthermore, community social influences and events, such as Gay Pride and massive media coverage on gay issues, reinforced a normalized perception of homosexuality for heterosexual people.

What have I learned?

My perception development shares a similar path to that of the gay students interviewed in this study. The understanding of masculinity and femininity, a core issue around homosexuality, however, is a valuable part I explored a little further than the other gay students. This gay stereotype internalized by both gay and straight people undermines the identity recognition. The paper writing process provided an opportunity to examine my previous internalized stereotypes of gay masculinity. My Canadian experience profoundly shaped my perceptions of sexual diversity, including the sub-diversities under each category of sexuality. The diversity of sexual orientation I have observed in Canada validates the legitimacy of my sexual orientation. In the same way, learning about the fluidity of masculinity/femininity, and socially constructed masculinity, justified the co-existing status of my femininity and masculinity. I went through a "self-denial, understand it, accept it then put it away" process. The breakthrough in my understanding of masculinity/femininity took place as I carried out the current project.

One aspect of perception development in Canada, which gay students never experienced in China, is the influence of religion on the LGBT community here. Perhaps because I lived in a relatively conservative town, my experience of religion in Canada has been very negative. Perhaps because the two gay participants in my research live in a metropolitan city, their experience of religion was less negative.

The perception advancement achieved by heterosexual students proved that external social context is playing a vital role in conquering negative perceptions about homosexuality. The social context is constituted by all kinds of specific contexts, such as the school context, employment context, media context, and so on. As to education, the study indicates that external intervention is necessary and effective. The academic seminars, LGBTQ-themed programs, and LGBTQ facilities are playing their educational roles for the students. Particularly for the students

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who study in smaller towns—instead of large cities, where exposure to diversity is much more likely—school education on sexual orientation equity is essential in forming a positive campus climate.

Finally, the most positive experience from my research is discovering and expressing my own true identity, unapologetically. The current study suggests that homosexual contact is a decisive factor in influencing straight perception. Anti-homophobic progress could not be reached under low visibility of queer people. As a queer researcher, showing my identity in an unapologetical manner is, I believe, the least I can do to combat homophobia. And for those queer people who are entrenched in internal and external oppressions, hopefully, my study can deliver a positive message, that there is another way of looking at your identity and it is possible for your voice to be heard.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICS CLEARANCE LETTER

March 09, 2015

Mr. Bing Bai
Master's Student
Faculty of Education
Queen's University
Duncan McArthur Hall
511 Union Street West
Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-764-15; Romeo # 6014622
Title: "GEDUC-764-15 Perception evolution: Homosexual and heterosexual Chinese international students'
perceptions of homosexuality"

Dear Mr. Bai:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GEDUC-764-15 Perception evolution: Homosexual and heterosexual Chinese international students' perceptions of homosexuality" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c: Dr. Chris DeLuca, Faculty Supervisor
      Dr. Chris DeLuca, Chair, Unit REB
      Ms. Jamie Kincaid, c/o Graduate Studies and Bureau of Research

Perception evolution: Homosexual and heterosexual Chinese international students' perceptions of homosexuality

This research is being conducted by *Bing Bai* (Master of Education candidate) under the supervision of *Dr. Christopher DeLuca* in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen's policies.

What is this study about? I am interested in understanding your perspectives towards homosexuality and how these perspectives evolve since coming to Canada. Specifically, I will be interviewing you about your perceptions when you were in China and also after coming to Canada. This study will explore the perceptions of both gay males and heterosexual males about homosexuality. All of participants are from Mainland China and received post secondary education in China. Taking part in this study will give you the opportunity to share your experiences.

What will this study require? If you agree to participate in this research, I will interview you about your views towards homosexuality as a Chinese international student. This interview will require maximum 1 hour and be audio-recorded. It will take place in a public location of your choosing. The interview may be conducted in English and/or Mandarin, depending on your preference. After the interview, a transcript of the interview will be created. A copy of the transcript will be sent to you by email and you will be asked to verify that your interview was accurately transcribed.

Is participation voluntary? Your participation is completely voluntary and choosing not to participate will not result in any adverse consequences. There are no known physical, psychological, economic, or social risks associated with this study. Further, you are free to choose, without reason or consequence, to refuse to answer any questions. You may withdraw from the study during the interview or at anytime in data collection period with no negative consequences. If you withdraw from the study, you may choose to have your data removed. If you need help, you can contact the following LGBT supporting hotline: 519 Center: 416-392-6874;LGBT National Help Center: 1-888-843-4564.

What will happen to your responses? The interview recording will be transcribed and then the recording will be destroyed. All electronic files will be encrypted. Your transcript sent by E-mail for your verification will be encrypted too. Paper and audio data will be secured in a locked cabinet. I will maintain copies of the transcripts for a minimum of 5 years and may use the data (with names removed) in subsequent research. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent possible. None of the data will contain your name or the identity of your place of work. To protect your identity a pseudonym will replace your name on all data files and in any

dissemination of findings. This research may result in publications of various types, including journal articles or other professional publications.

If you have concerns: Any questions about study participation or a request to withdraw from the study may be directed to me, Bing Bai, at bing.bai@queensu.ca or my supervisor at [613-533-6000 x 77675; cdeluca@queensu.ca]. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at (613) 533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen's policies.

Please sign one copy of this Letter of Information/Consent Form and return to the

researcher.

Retain a second copy for your records.

I have read the statements above and have had any questions answered. I am 18 years of age or

older. I freely consent to participate in this study. I agree to have my interview audio recorded.

Participant's Name   Participant's Signature: Date:

_____   _____   _____

E-mail address :

_____

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) What was your view of homosexuality before you came to Canada?

2) What factors influenced that view?

3) What is your view of homosexuality now that you are in Canada?

4) What factors have influenced that view?

5) How do you see your views differing from before and after you came to Canada?