

**Sexuality and Migration: A Study of the Lives and Wellbeing of the LGBQ Hong Kong  
Diasporic Youth in British Columbia**

Patricia Li

Department of Asian Studies Crossings, University of Columbia

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Dr. Benjamin Cheung

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Growing up in a Hong Kong/Chinese family as a young queer person, both within and outside of Canada, can be a considerable challenge for some due to the prevalence of both external and internal sources of pressure and stigma. Specifically, the perception of homosexuality as a taboo subject and a violation of social norms that is common in Chinese societies can be tremendously harmful to the psychological wellbeing and development of the queer youth. Despite the overall increasingly accepting and supportive societal attitudes toward homosexuality in both Hong Kong/China and Canada, especially with the protection of human rights and the promotion of diversity in schools in British Columbia, there is still plenty of evidence suggesting the occurrence of both overt and covert forms of discrimination against sexual minorities across the two cultures.

Chinese society has long been under the powerful influence of the heteronormative agenda, which assumes that any romantic or sexual relationship is fundamentally and exclusively defined by attraction and partnership between two people of the opposite sex (i.e., a man and a woman), thereby perceiving heterosexuality as the human norm or default. In Hong Kong culture, although people generally show much acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community and support for their rights (except same-sex marriage) (Yeo & Chu, 2018), most of society still tends to refrain from bringing up and discussing relevant topics in public discourse. In relation to the circumstances of the Hong Kong queer youth (both local citizens and migrants), this perception of homosexuality as a somewhat taboo subject is particularly common in family and school settings, where primary socialization takes place continuously and children learn about the conventional expectations and values of society. Hence, to avoid exposing young people to

potentially controversial and age-inappropriate messages, in-depth conversations surrounding the notion of sexuality—including useful discussions about safer sex guidelines, knowledge of reproductive organs, and the different types of sexual orientation—are extremely rare, while the very few that do happen tend to be centered on the heterosexual narrative. In addition, due to the fact that “[t]he majority of the higher ranked high schools in Hong Kong have religious affiliation to various branches of Christianity” (Suen, 2015, p.727), religious messages about the sinful nature of homosexual practices and God’s condemnation of gay people are frequently disseminated both during class time and religious assemblies. Combined with a lack of comprehensive sex/sexuality education in most schools, the education system in Hong Kong consistently fails to create an inclusive learning environment for sexual minority students. A direct consequence of such phenomena on the LGBQ youth is evident in the process of self-identity construction, which is obstructed by a perceived need to reject or conceal all aspects of their queer identities and desires out of social desirability concerns (Suen, 2015). In a social atmosphere where such values as obedience and respect for authority are constantly emphasized, upon directly hearing from parents and teachers about the “wrongness” or “abnormality” of being non-heterosexual, or inferring similar conclusions based on their purposeful avoidance of related topics, children and adolescents may be prompted to internalize these opinions and apply them to the way they come to understand their own selves. Rather than being told to be their true selves with pride, young LGBQ people are constantly under immense pressure to somehow force themselves to become heterosexual/“normal”, or at least to present themselves and behave according to the societal expectations of a typical heterosexual person, which causes them to struggle with embracing and freely expressing their sexual identities. This “internalized homophobia” is proven to correlate with poor mental health and wellbeing as well as a negative

global self-concept among LGB individuals, which serves to hinder the formation and sustainment of interpersonal relationships through the manifestation of depressive symptoms in the long run (Frost & Meyer, 2009). Upon turning 18 and starting university or work, when these young adults suddenly have more freedom in self-expression and exploring their interests, they may find it difficult to confidently live as their authentic selves as a consequence of all the invalidation that they were faced with throughout their childhood and teenage years. As such, because of the prevalent sexual orientation discrimination and stigmatization in a majority of family and educational settings, it is suggestive that mainstream Chinese/Hong Kong culture is not exactly the most welcoming and affirming social environment for the LGBQ youth to grow up and be socialized in.

On the other hand, given Canada's overall reputation of being more politically liberal, supportive of diversity, and protective of individual rights/autonomy compared to Hong Kong, it is a widespread belief among Hong Kongers that the country's social atmosphere and government policies/legislation would be more suited to the needs and wellbeing of the LGBQ population on the whole. Specifically, for the youth who are still in the process of making sense of the social world and themselves, they would be able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of sexuality as well as their own sexual identity in an environment that upholds the values of fairness and diversity. It is important to note that in the *British Columbia Human Rights Code*, it is stated explicitly that all individuals in British Columbia, regardless of gender and sexual identity, are protected from sexual orientation discrimination and harassment in public spaces (British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General, 2016). People who have experienced a violation of their basic rights are encouraged to speak up at all times and request assistance from the BC Human Rights Clinic (or other relevant organizations) whenever

necessary, where optional legal aid is offered for those seeking to file a formal Human Rights complaint. The *Code* also lists a number of everyday examples of sexual orientation discrimination across various settings, such as when “[a] school board bans books from the classroom that show families with same-sex parents” (British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General, 2016, p.1), in order to help sexual minorities more accurately and definitively identify discriminatory acts performed against them. Being aware of where and how to find help, as well as the fact that the government is in support of their rights can be crucial to the wellbeing LGBTQ individuals, not only because of the actual social and legal protection granted to them (strengthened indirectly by the possible deterrence effect of legal consequences), but there is an inherent sense of psychological assurance or affirmation attached to the knowledge that one is respected and valued as a person regardless of sexual orientation, or any other component of one’s identity. Therefore, for example, despite facing strong opposition from friends or family members, the queer youth can still have the courage to stand firm in their beliefs and identities, which are supported by their own understandings of rightness and morality, instead of feeling pressured to earn other people’s respect or agreement by adjusting their own ideologies and conforming to heterosexual societal norms. Moreover, in relation to educational settings, the Government of British Columbia has been actively striving “to create and maintain conditions that foster success for all students and that promote fair and equitable treatment for all” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2008, p.4), by providing all students with the same learning opportunities and a safe, hostility-free socializing environment in classrooms, where they are also educated to respect their fellow peers and staff members. A Social Responsibility Rating Scale was designed to guide learning expectations for kindergarten to Grade 10 students, and to assess their level of performance regarding the extent to which they value fairness and defend

human rights (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2008). This way, rather than being forced to adopt a narrow, heteronormative, and perhaps religious outlook on sexuality as with the general situation in Hong Kong, young people in British Columbia are taught the importance of being open to diversity and respecting the individuality of every person. In turn, they are more likely to perceive conventional rules and expectations surrounding sexuality and gender as flexible social constructions that people have the freedom to challenge, as opposed to rigid absolute truths that people should obey. Furthermore, through cultivating a social environment in which children and adolescents feel safe and welcomed, they are encouraged to satisfy their curiosity about the notion of sexuality by raising questions and having open conversations with trustworthy, knowledgeable adults, as well as to be vocal about their uncertainties and anxieties. This is especially beneficial for many of the queer Hong Kong diasporic youth, as they are often forced to keep their sexual identity and all the relevant questions to themselves at home in fear of being judged or reprimanded by their conservative, homophobic parents. Hence, it is generally believed that young LGBTQ Hong Kong migrants in Canada would fare better than if they had chosen to stay in Hong Kong instead, due to the higher level of support and acceptance concerning their sexual orientation that they receive from society. To a certain extent, the positivity that they are exposed to at school and in other aspects of their everyday lives can even counter the existing negative attitudes and messages that they may be faced with at home as a result of their heritage cultural values.

Nevertheless, living in Canadian society as part of the LGBTQ youth is by no means a smooth sailing journey, and the situation is often exacerbated for the Hong Kong diaspora because of their multifaceted lives. According to Poon et al. (2011), despite the series of measures implemented to safeguard the rights and wellbeing of young sexual minorities in

British Columbia, they are still significantly more likely to be victims of sexual orientation discrimination and enacted stigma, including but not limited to acts of verbal (sexual) harassment, social exclusion, and physical assault, than their heterosexual schoolmates. Specifically, dual minority discrimination is fairly common for non-heterosexual Asian students, where they are treated unjustly and maliciously by their peers out of both racial and sexual prejudice. Given the impactful nature of victimization experiences for children and adolescents, incidences of physical, verbal, and social bullying can lead to a myriad of negative outcomes across the aspects of physical health, psychological development, and social relationships. Apart from the typical (but no less deserving of attention) self-esteem impairments, loneliness, social anxiety, and hindrance to academic performance, Poon et al. (2011) also notes the strong positive correlation between harassment/discrimination and problem substance use among the sexual minority Asian youth in British Columbia. On the bright side, research suggests that “[f]ostering positive school climates, engaging sexual minority youth in extracurricular activities, and reducing homophobic bullying in schools” (Poon et al, 2011, p.61) are effective strategies to decrease the likelihood of such negative consequences for LGBTQ students, all of which are in accordance with the “diversity in schools” framework implemented by the British Columbia Ministry of Education discussed previously. However, due to the existing pressure from their heritage culture and/or family members that they may already be facing outside of school, as well as their unique social background that is starkly different from that of mainstream Canadian culture, a more culturally sensitive approach is necessary for schools and health professionals to fully cater to the needs of the queer Hong Kong diaspora. This may involve communicating with individual students on a case-by-case basis, or even getting in touch with their parents/guardians to achieve home-school partnerships. In addition, the types of values and social attitudes that the

LGBQ diasporic youth are exposed to in their everyday lives depend considerably on their choice of acculturation strategies. For people who follow the “separation” or “marginalization” approach, where identification with mainstream Canadian culture is low, their circumstances tend to be more similar to the situation in Hong Kong, and they will inevitably more frequently come into contact with the traditional Chinese perspective of viewing homosexuality as unconventional and deviant. Conversely, for those who opt for the strategies of “integration” or “assimilation”, where identification with heritage Chinese/Hong Kong culture is relatively low, they will be able to benefit more from the diverse and inclusive social/education system promoted by mainstream Canadian society. Subsequently, with exposure to different microsystems and macrosystems, the personal values and interpretations of sexuality internalized by these individuals will be shaped in different ways as well, leading to different psychological and social outcomes.

In summary, it is difficult to give a definite, overarching conclusion about the wellbeing of the LGBQ Hong Kong diasporic youth in British Columbia, because of how divergent and complex their life trajectories and experiences usually are. Yet, it is evident that the way they learn about and understand the concept of sexuality, the amount of freedom they have in self-expression, as well as the forms of treatment that they receive in different occasions, are largely distinct from the circumstances that their heterosexual peers encounter in the same social environments, with a lot more stressors and challenges than most people could fathom. In spite of this, it is believed that with more government and societal effort in creating a safer and more inclusive society characterized by mutual respect, the negative outcomes faced by the young sexual minority population across the entirety of Canada can eventually be reduced and prevented.

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