

Should people defined as abnormal according to the traditional Chinese stereotypes be accepted as normal?

In many cultures, “normal” usually refers to behaviors or traits that conform to the norms and values of the dominant society. The abnormal may be a group of people who deviate from these norms, including individuals who are marked by cultural differences, minority gender identity, sexual orientation, special needs or mental health conditions. In the Chinese tradition, there is a certain collectivist streak that emphasizes the need for individual behavior to conform to group expectations. However, there is also a philosophical basis for acceptance of diversity in Confucianism's “benevolence”, Taoism's “nature”, and Buddhism's “equality of all beings”. Tolerance of groups considered “abnormal” by the mainstream has many potential positive effects on China's development. Such inclusion not only respects diversity, but also brings tangible benefits in terms of social cohesion, culture, education and the economy.

“Smart” is a subculture popular among young people in China from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, characterized by exaggerated hairstyles, heavy make-up, and confrontational attitudes towards mainstream aesthetics and culture. The documentary film “We Were Smart” shows, through the stories of several horse slayer youths growing up, their efforts to find self-identity in the midst of rapid urbanization. Most of these “Smart” youths come from remote areas and grew up in poor environments. Many drop out of school in their teens and head to the city to work, usually in assembly line jobs. Due to their low educational attainment and lack of family background, they face difficulties in employment and struggle to gain recognition in society. Influenced by outside culture, they distinguish themselves from others through exaggerated makeup and unusual hairstyles, hoping to attract attention and gain social recognition. However, this expression is often misunderstood as rebellious or boring, hence attracting more ridicule and discrimination.

Before watching the documentary, I often joked about the word “Smart” to describe my friend's exaggerated hair. However, I didn't realize that I was mocking a group of souls who were trying to change their lives and be seen by the public, and I owe them an apology. They wanted to express their different personalities with their hairstyles, but they were ridiculed by the society and it even affected their job search. The documentary “We Were Smart” deeply analyzes the survival of the marginalized groups in China's rapid development. 15 years ago, they were the most eye-catching group of people, wearing exaggerated hair and dominating the Internet; a few years later, they are forced to bow to reality. Are they really at fault? They did not break the law and discipline, they just used exaggerated hairstyles to show their individuality, to avoid being despised by the society and to differentiate themselves from the ordinary underclass. Their courage and resignation to fate deserve respect. They hope to win the attention of the society through their maverick behavior, but they are rejected for not conforming to the mainstream values. Their experiences reflect the barriers between urban and rural areas in China and the lack of social tolerance for individual expression. Nowadays, the culture has disappeared, but thousands of left-behind children and assembly-line migrant workers still exist. The rural-urban divide remains, and China needs to be more tolerant of such cultures, while increasing support for rural revitalization and educational inclusion. Perhaps these measures can change the status quo, but the youth of that generation of post-1990s “Smart” teenagers is gone with the fading of the culture. “Smart”, is an existence that needs to be understood and reflected upon.

Through the film, I realized the real thoughts and difficulties of this kind of people, and that social media's mockery of “abnormal” groups is really absurd. The movie shows the real life of “Smart” ,

and it triggers the society to reflect on whether the subculture group should be more tolerated and understood. They are not punks or aesthetic rebels, but a group of post-90s teenage migrant workers who were trapped in the “super factory” more than ten years ago, working in near abject poverty and lacking a sense of security. (Guangyu Qiu, 2020)

The KPMG group exposes the gap between urban and rural education and the imbalance in youth development, and caring for them can also lead to China's economic development. By providing more education and resource support, we can help these groups to have better career development opportunities and thus contribute more talents to the society. “This represents yet another instance in which the demands and efforts of marginalized subjects to fight for their right to self-expression have been suppressed by the mainstream society, and also represents the near-failure of the new generation of migrant workers in their efforts to break free from their existing predicament.” (Yi Chen, 2023) As mentioned in Module 2, labor market segmentation is also a major challenge in China today: there is a huge gap in employment opportunities between the east and west of the country, and between urban and rural areas, leading to a massive influx of unskilled laborers into the cities. The “Smart” youth are struggling to resist the cultural control of the adult world, but it is difficult to escape the contempt of the elite culture as a whole. (Yuexi Zhang, 2014) Young people from remote areas usually have a lower level of education and have a vague understanding of the world. The state should increase financial support for education in remote areas by building schools, providing teaching materials, and improving teaching facilities to ensure that children enjoy the same educational resources as those in cities. It should implement a policy of free education from primary to high school and provide financial subsidies to reduce the phenomenon of school dropouts due to poverty. Higher education and vocational education train highly skilled people to support high-tech industries and promote the transformation of industries from labor-intensive to knowledge-intensive. Investment in education not only enhances human capital, but also serves as a strategic guarantee for strengthening the competitiveness of the national economy.

From Module 8, we can learn that in addition to the “Smart” , there is another group of people who are controversial in China, and they are the LGBTQ+. This is because homosexual behavior is described as a public health hazard , and must be removed from a healthy Chinese polity. I believe that acceptance of homosexuality can help enhance diversity and inclusiveness in Chinese society and reduce prejudice and discrimination. Such openness promotes social harmony, enhances the sense of well-being and belonging among members of society, and promotes economic development. Acceptance of homosexuality not only reflects social inclusiveness, but also stimulates more diverse creativity. Homophobic and exclusionary behaviors exacerbate social conflicts and increase social instability. Such hostile attitudes towards homosexuals may lead to more discrimination and injustice, weakening social cohesion. The Open For Business 2022 City Ratings ranked 145 cities based on economic performance and inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. The authors say that, in general, wealthier cities tend to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ people. (Victoria Masterson, 2022) Countries that are inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community, such as Canada and Germany , are at the forefront of social justice, economic development and cultural innovation globally. The exclusion of homosexuality is not only a violation of basic human rights, but also inconsistent with international trends.

The rapid development and diversification of Chinese society has brought new challenges and opportunities. In the face of groups that are considered “abnormal” by traditional cultures, such as “Smart” and LGBTQ+ , society should reflect on its tolerance and acceptance. These groups are not only neglected members of society, but also an important force for social progress. Through their unique way of expression, the “Smart” group embodies the pursuit of individuality and sense of existence of the youth at the bottom of the hierarchy. The gap between urban and rural education and the imbalance in youth development exposed by them deserve deep reflection

and active improvement by society. By strengthening support for rural education and social resources, China can provide these young people with more opportunities to have their values recognized by society. The acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community, on the other hand, reflects society's respect for diversity and human rights. Inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community not only promotes social harmony and happiness, but also stimulates cultural and economic innovation. Statistics has shown that inclusive social policies can help enhance a country's competitiveness and global image. Therefore, in the process of modernization, Chinese society should be more open and inclusive, embracing diversity, eliminating prejudice, and providing every group of people with opportunities for fair development. This is not only a manifestation of social progress, but also the key to building a harmonious society and realizing sustainable development.

Sources

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