

Attitudes toward Same-Sex Sexual Behavior in China from 2010 to 2018

Research background

China is home to one of the world's largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) population (Xie and Peng 2018). Despite some progress in recent years, the LGBT community in China remains mostly invisible in society, and its members consistently report experiencing barriers in their lives (Wang et al. 2020). LGBT people in China face stigma, discrimination, and legal and social challenges that are not experienced by non-LGBT residents. Same-sex couples are unable to marry or adopt, and China provides no anti-discrimination protections for LGBT people, nor does it prohibit hate crimes based on sexual orientation or gender identity (Li 2007; Wang et al. 2019).

Research question

Against this backdrop, this project visualizes public attitudes toward same-sex sexual behavior in contemporary China. Specifically, this visualization answers one research question: How do attitudes toward homosexuality in China change over years?

Data

The Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) is a nationally representative survey, which was launched in 2003 and repeated annually or biannually. It was inspired by the General Social Survey in the United States. CGSS can be used to: (1) gather longitudinal data on social trends in mainland China, (2) monitor Chinese behaviors and attitudes toward social change, and (3) serve as a global resource for the cross-national comparative study.

Among CGSS's Survey questions, in the questionnaire of 2005, there was one question (Question number: e15b) asking: Do you agree that "Homosexuality is a personal behavior, others should not criticize"? The provided options are: Strongly disagree; Disagree; Neutral; Agree; Strongly agree. In the questionnaires of 2010-2018, there was one question (Question number: a40) asking: Do you think sexual behavior between same-sex is...? The provided options are: Always wrong; Mostly wrong; Cannot say right or wrong; Sometimes right; Always right. Though the question reduced homosexuality to the behavior level, and people who conduct same-sex sexual behavior do not have to be self-identified as gay, or lesbian, or homosexual, the general public in China often assumes that only homosexuals will conduct sexual behavior between the same sex. Thus, responses to these questions still can reflect attitudes toward homosexuality in China over years. This project will use responses to these questions to measure the public attitudes toward homosexuality in China.

Years	Sample sizes
2005	10372
2010	11783
2012	11765
2013	11438
2015	10968
2017	12582
2018	12787

Table 1: Sample sizes of CGSS in 2005, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018.

Results

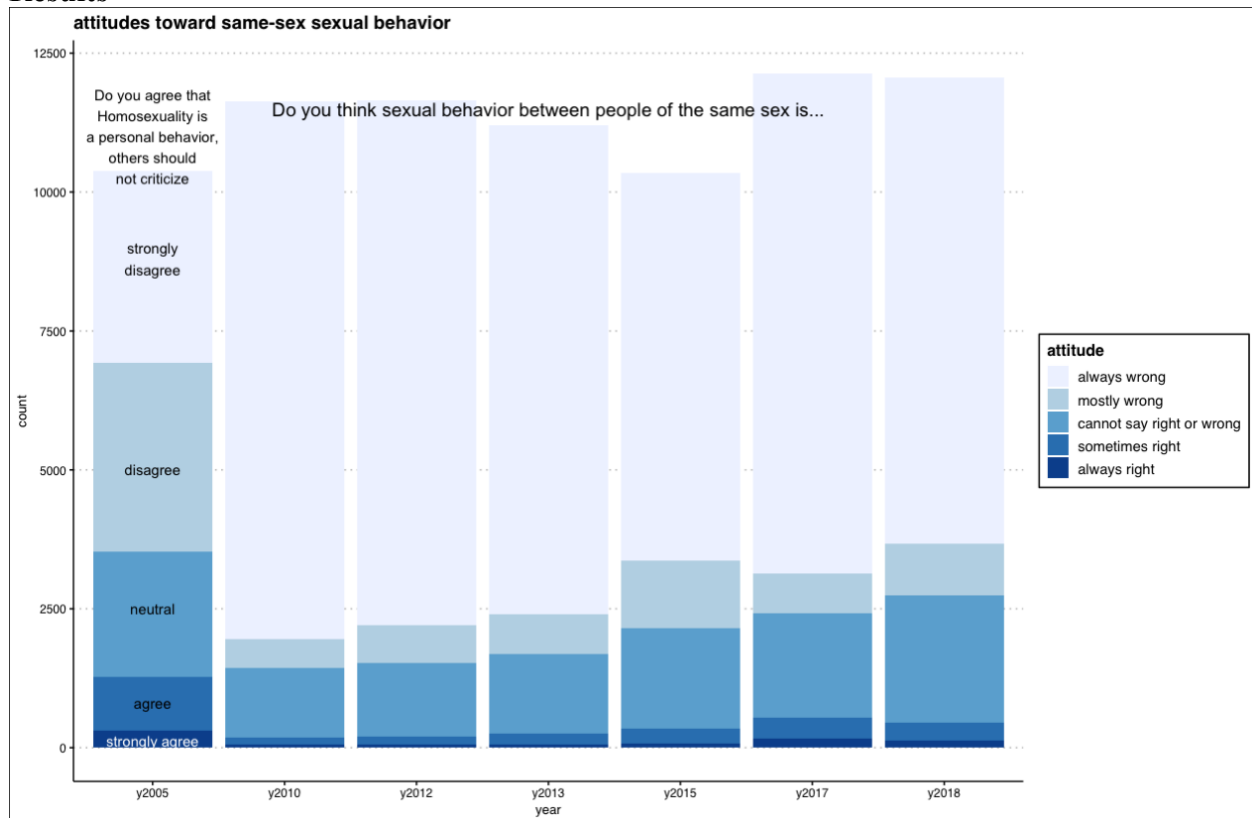


Figure 1: Descriptive distributions of responses, China General Social Survey 2005-2018

Figure 1 shows descriptive distributions of responses from 2005 to 2018. Sample sizes of 2005 and 2015 are less than those of other years. The distribution of responses in 2005 is significantly different from others. It can be inferred that question wordings caused results to be different from each other. The survey question of 2005 was phrased in a way asking whether others should criticize homosexuality, while the question of 2010-2018 directly asked about the attitude of people toward same-sex sexual behavior. The difference between responses of 2005 and responses of 2010-2018 is mostly due to different ways of phrasing survey questions rather than people's attitude toward homosexuality has changed dramatically in 5 years.

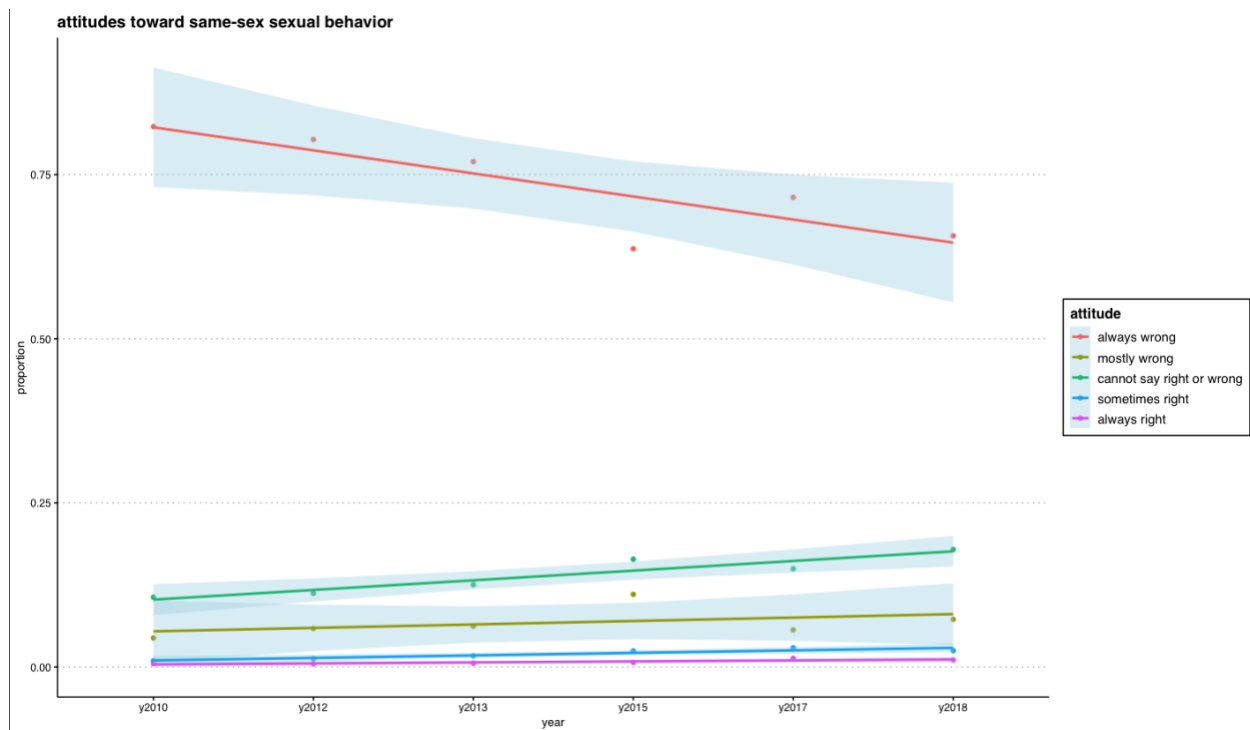


Figure 2: Proportions of attitudes toward same-sex sexual behavior, China General Social Survey 2010-2018

Given the result in figure 1, the data from 2005 was filtered to provide a better comparison over years. In 2010, up to 82% of people thought same-sex sexual behavior was always wrong, 4% of them chose mostly wrong, 11% chose cannot say right or wrong, only approximately 1% people chose sometimes right, and less than 1% people chose always right. Chinese has a culture of “moderation”: people tend not strongly disagree or agree on something. However, this rule fails when it comes to their attitudes toward homosexuality. The situation didn’t improve much over years. In 2013, people who chose always wrong dropped to 77%. In 2017 the percentage was 72% and in 2018 it was 66%.

From 2010 to 2018, it can be observed that there was a decline in people thinking of same-sex sexual behavior as always wrong, a rise in people who could not say same-sex sexual behavior was right or wrong and people thought same-sex sexual behavior was mostly wrong, and a teeny tiny rise in people thinking it as sometimes right or always right. People’s attitudes are changing, even though rather slowly, toward a more inclusive direction.

The data from 2015 is statistically significantly different from other years at a confidence level of 95%. The underlying reason why the proportion of people thinking of same-sex sexual behavior as always wrong was dramatically dropped in 2015 is unclear. Given the result in figure 1, it could be due to a smaller sample size in 2015.

Taken together, this visualization illustrates an entrenched intolerance toward same-sex sexual behavior among the Chinese public over the past decade. Such public intolerance is one of the many constraints faced by lesbian and gay people in China today.

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