

The Constructed "Tolerance": Chengdu's Narrative, Social Distance, and Chinese Public Attitudes toward Sexual Minorities

A sociological analysis based on national social surveys (CSS / CGSS / the Jiayuan dating-platform waves), cross-national attitude data, and public records (2006–2026)

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ABSTRACT: "Chengdu is the most gay-tolerant city in China" is a city narrative that has circulated on both the Chinese and the English-language internet for nearly two decades. This paper sets the narrative against verifiable national surveys and shows that, on a uniformly calibrated dating-and-marriage survey (32 provinces, 83,250 valid responses), Chengdu men rank simultaneously last in China on the two hardest family-value dimensions: nearly half classify homosexuality as a "psychological perversion" (the highest rate nationwide) and 40% oppose same-sex marriage (a rate the report itself calls "far higher than any other region in China"). Zooming out to the whole country, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' CSS2023 puts public acceptance of gay people at only 20.3%, the lowest among all marginalized groups, below even former convicts; on the 2021 CSS, 74.5% of respondents do not accept gay people, while only 30.1% do not accept former convicts. The paper then does three things. First, it dismantles two common fallacies used to excuse Chengdu ("the sample is conservative" and "not supporting same-sex marriage does not mean intolerant"), showing that a constant cannot explain a difference and that marriage support and overall tolerance are strongly positively correlated at the group level. Second, it argues that three propositions must be strictly separated: the volume of same-sex-themed creative output, tolerance of queer narratives, and acceptance of real sexual minorities; the Russian case (the Chinese danmei novel *Heaven Official's Blessing* outselling *Harry Potter* in a country that criminalizes "homosexual propaganda") proves that creative prosperity is closer to a compensation for repression than to acceptance. Third, it distinguishes the state's neutrality (the definer, the independent variable) from the middle ground's neutrality (the receiver, the dependent variable), and analyzes how the Western world, through selective sampling, manufactured Chengdu as a "queer utopia" and

China as a "leftist utopia." The paper concludes that relative neutrality is not absolute neutrality, and that narrative-level "tolerance" cannot substitute for measurable indicators at the institutional and attitudinal level.

KEYWORDS: social distance; public attitudes toward sexual minorities; same-sex marriage support; dimensional separation; cultural hegemony; Orientalism; danmei consumption; queer utopia

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I. Introduction: The Problem

"Chengdu is very tolerant of gay people" and "Chengdu is the Gaydu (Gay Capital)" are among the most enduring city labels on the Chinese internet. The narrative is not an invention of the short-video era. It has been retold at every media transition since the Web 1.0 era: in 2006, "Uncovering China's First Gay Capital: Why Sichuan Has So Many Gay People" circulated across portals and forums; in 2009, a "Top Ten Chinese Cities with the Most Gay People" list placed Chengdu near the top; in 2012, the sociologist Wei Wei published **Going Public: The Formation and Transformation of a Gay Space in Contemporary Chengdu**, academicizing Chengdu as the archetypal Chinese gay space; and since then Weibo, Xiaohongshu, TikTok, and English-language travel guides (GayOut, Unveil China) have endlessly reproduced the label, with Sixth Tone's 2016 piece **Chengdu, the Questionable Queer Capital of China** exporting it to the English-speaking world.

A claim that has circulated for about twenty years and "feels like common sense" is not, however, a claim that has been tested. Its age is an advantage of spread, not of evidence. The core question of this paper is therefore: when a nationally comparable attitude survey directly conflicts with this folk narrative, how should we dismantle the conflict, identify the logical substitutions inside it, and locate the issue within a broader national social-distance coordinate and a cross-national comparison? This is not only a factual dispute about one city; it is a methodological exercise about what "tolerance" means, who gets to define "neutrality," and how narrative substitutes for measurable indicators.

II. The Misused Data: What the Dating-Platform Survey Really Shows

2.1 The hard numbers, stated plainly

In a nationally comparable survey of 32 provinces and 83,250 valid responses, published by the matchmaking platform Jiayuan with analysis by researchers affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Sciences (fifth wave, September 2015), **Chengdu men are explicitly named as "the population most unable to accept gay people in the country."** The concrete figures, quoted directly in the text rather than hidden in a table, are as follows:

1. Nearly half (about 50%) of Chengdu men classify homosexuality as "a twisted psychological perversion" — the highest rate nationwide;
2. 40% of Chengdu men explicitly oppose same-sex marriage, a rate the report describes as "far higher than any other region in China" (the national male average for opposition is 35%, and national male support is only 17%);

3. The report's overall verdict on Chengdu men is that they are "the population most unable to accept gay people in the country."

For scale: the most accepting Shandong men reach 35.6% in accepting same-sex marriage, and the most accepting Nanjing women reach 61.4% in calling homosexuality "a normal emotional choice." In other words, while other places are still debating "support or not," nearly half of Chengdu men have already classified homosexuality as a psychological perversion — a difference in the intensity of attitude, not merely in percentages.

2.2 A counter-example that must be addressed first: Guangzhou

In the same report, Guangzhou men's opposition on the broader "how do you view homosexuality" question approaches 70%, numerically higher than Chengdu. This does not overturn Chengdu's last-place ranking, because the two figures measure different questions: Guangzhou's high value appears on the broad "attitude toward the phenomenon" item, while Chengdu is explicitly ranked last on the harder "pathologization" and "same-sex marriage" items. The report's author attributes the Southwest's conservatism to "traditional customs and values being preserved relatively well." Depending on the question, the "most conservative" city has two names — Guangzhou and Chengdu — but Chengdu's last-place finish on the two hardest dimensions is written in black and white in the report.

2.3 The strongest rebuttal, and why it fails

The most serious objection to these figures — and, to be frank, the defense this author once made for Chengdu before retracting it — is the following: "This is a dating-platform survey. People who register on a dating platform and seriously fill out dating questionnaires are, by definition, more invested in traditional marriage and more conservative than the general population. So if Chengdu's opposition rate measures high in such a sample, isn't that just inflation from a conservative sample? How can it prove that Chengdu people are actually intolerant?"

Half of this objection is correct and should be conceded: **dating-platform users are indeed, on average, more traditional than the whole population, so the survey's absolute values are systematically inflated.** If anyone uses one of these percentages to assert "how many people in all of China are homophobic," that would indeed be distorted. But the argument smuggles in a change of subject: this paper never compared absolute values; it compared relative rankings. **All provinces' samples come from the same dating platform, the same sampling and statistical methodology.** The "conservative filter" is applied equally and uniformly to every province in the country.

A constant cannot explain a difference

Suppose the dating-platform effect raises every province's opposition rate by an equal 10 percentage points: Chengdu men go from 40% to 50%, the most accepting province goes from, say, 10% to 20%. Everyone receives the same +10 points, so who ranks first and who ranks last does not change by a single place. Chengdu is still at the bottom, and its gap from other provinces has not shrunk at all. "The sample is conservative" is a constant shared by all provinces; a constant that applies equally to everyone cannot, in logic, explain the difference of "why Chengdu specifically is last." You cannot use one identical ruler to prove that the shortest person it measured is actually not short.

Separating absolute values from relative rankings resolves the matter: absolute values answer "how conservative is this society overall" and are indeed inflated by the sample; relative rankings answer "where does Chengdu rank within a national, uniform standard" and are unaffected by the shared filter. This paper argues that Chengdu is last using the latter, from start to finish. The "conservative sample" objection not only fails to rescue Chengdu — precisely because it applies equally to all provinces, Chengdu's last-place finish under one common methodology can only be genuinely last.

2.4 What the survey does and does not prove

The survey does not prove the crude claim "Chengdu is homophobic." It proves a more precise, harder-to-rebut conclusion. On "marriage and family," the most traditional value dimension of Chinese society, the acceptance of Chengdu men ranks in the national bottom tier. This conservatism does not contradict the folk impression that "Chengdu's subculture is open" — but only on the condition that "subculture" is disaggregated: Chengdu is open in "the space for consuming danmei fantasy," not in "the space for accepting real gay people" (see Chapter V). The "Chengdu is tolerant" narrative wrongly substitutes "the high output and consumption traffic of same-sex-themed fiction" (a market phenomenon whose main subjects are straight women, directed at fictional texts) for "acceptance of real gay people." More creative output is not equal to higher tolerance, and the two concepts must be strictly separated. Russia has drawn this red line with data: **Heaven Official's Blessing** has sold over 500,000 copies of its first three volumes and topped fiction sales charts for two consecutive years, while same-sex marriage support in Russia is around 7% and the promotion of homosexuality is criminalized — creative prosperity and rights oppression reach their extremes simultaneously, in the same country, among the same readers.

III. Social Distance at the National Level: Gay People at the Bottom of the Acceptance Ladder

Chengdu is not an isolated case. When the lens is pulled back to the whole country, it becomes clear that the last-place position of Chengdu men is only the local projection of a larger structure: in the ranking of social distance that the Chinese public maintains toward various marginalized and disadvantaged groups, gay people sit stably at the very bottom of the acceptance ladder — even below former convicts.

3.1 CSS2023: the lowest acceptance among all marginalized groups

The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' "2023 China Social Survey" (CSS2023, published in the **2023 Research Report on the Modernization of Chinese Society**) shows marked differences in public acceptance of different marginalized groups: only **20.3%** of respondents accept gay people, versus 30.0% who accept people living with HIV/AIDS; acceptance is higher still for people of different religious faiths and for former convicts. In other words, on a single scale asking "can you accept this group entering your social life," gay people rank last among all the marginalized groups listed — **below former convicts**.

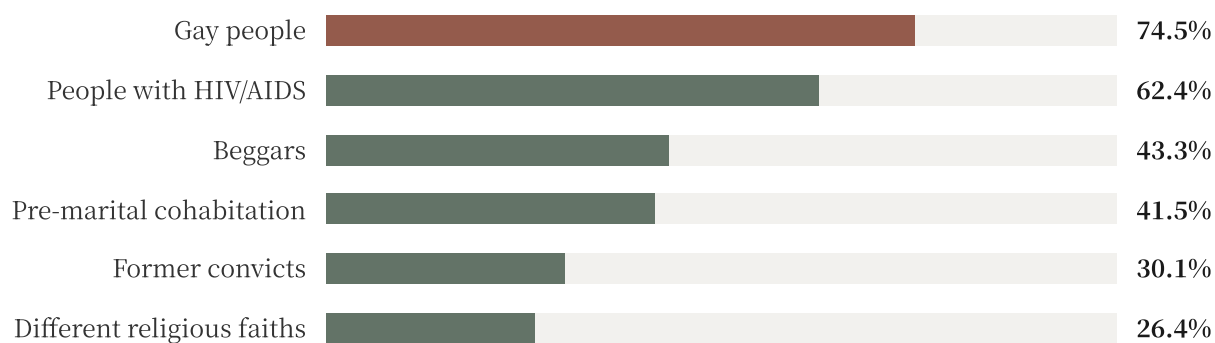
3.2 CSS2021: 74.5% do not accept gay people, more than double the rate for former convicts

The study "The Current Level of Social Tolerance in China" by Zou Yuchun, Li Wei, Ren Liying, and colleagues (based on the 2021 CSS, published in **Contemporary China Social Quality Report, Volume 3**, April 2023) provides a finer "rate of non-acceptance" ranking. The authors state explicitly: "The lowest acceptance is for gay people and people living with HIV/AIDS, while the relatively higher acceptance is for people of different religious faiths and for former convicts." The precise figures:

Table 1. Public "non-acceptance" rates toward different groups (CSS 2021, % who do not accept)

Group	Rate of non-acceptance
Gay people	74.5%
People living with HIV/AIDS	62.4%
Beggars	43.3%
People who cohabited before marriage	41.5%
Former convicts	30.1%
People of different religious faiths	26.4%

Figure 1. Public "non-acceptance" rates toward different groups (CSS 2021, % who do not accept)



Source: Zou Yuchun et al., "The Current Level of Social Tolerance in China," in **Contemporary China Social Quality Report, Vol. 3**, 2023 (CSS2021). The non-acceptance rate for gay people, 74.5%, is about 2.5 times the rate for former convicts (30.1%).

The shock of these figures lies in their control group. A group that has completed its prison sentence and is directly connected to "crime" is not accepted by 30.1% of the public; a group whose only difference is sexual orientation, and which harms no one, is not accepted by 74.5%. Social distance is not ordered by "whether one harms others" but by "whether one fits the mainstream moral imagination." This is the typical Chinese result of the Bogardus social-distance tradition: the exclusionary force of moral stigma is stronger than the wariness of a criminal record.

3.3 A decade of data: consistently at the bottom

Other surveys confirm the same placement across time and method. In a 2013 Pew-style cross-national poll covered by Chinese state media, 58% of respondents gave "completely unacceptable" a score of 1 (on a 5-point scale) for homosexuality, with only 8.3% giving a score of 5 (fully acceptable). On the CGSS2023 five-point acceptance scale (5,252 respondents), pre-marital cohabitation scored 2.15, gay people 1.60, and extramarital affairs 1.25 — gay people sit near the floor. Intergenerational data cited from CGSS show that about 70% of those born before 1970 regard same-sex behavior as "always wrong," a figure that falls to about 20% among the post-80s, post-90s, and post-00s cohorts. Finally, the UNDP's **Being LGBTI in China** (2017) found that only about 5.4% of respondents were fully out, more than seven in ten reported psychological distress, and 21% reported workplace discrimination. Acceptance has been low for more than a decade; the placement of gay people at the bottom of the acceptance ladder is a structural feature, not a statistical accident.

IV. Support and Tolerance: The Positive Correlation Is the Rule, Not the Exception

4.1 The objection, stated fully

"Opposing same-sex marriage does not mean I am not tolerant of gay people. I simply do not endorse the institution of 'marriage'; in daily life I can treat them perfectly equally. So how can a low marriage-support rate possibly imply low overall tolerance?" Applied to a single individual, this claim is not wholly unreasonable; such individuals genuinely exist. But once it is used to defend a region, it smuggles an extremely rare case into the position of a universal rule. To answer it, we must look at what the statistical regularities at the group level actually look like.

4.2 The rule: marriage support and overall acceptance almost always move together

Cross-national data paint a consistent picture: a society's same-sex marriage support rate and its overall social acceptance (neighborly acceptance, employment fairness, public tolerance) are highly aligned. Western and Northern Europe, where marriage support exceeds 70%, are simultaneously the regions with the world's highest queer acceptance; the former Soviet space and sub-Saharan Africa, where marriage support is under 10%, sit at the global bottom in overall acceptance. It is nearly impossible to find a region combining "global-bottom marriage support" with "global-leading overall acceptance." The default inference is therefore valid in the overwhelming majority of cases: low marriage support implies low overall tolerance, not an exceptional "conservative on marriage but wildly tolerant otherwise."

4.3 Within China: gaps between dimensions, but strongly aligned direction

The Williams Institute's May 2024 report, **Positive Attitudes Toward LGBTQ People in China** (nearly 3,000 valid responses), gives the precise distribution across dimensions:

Table 2. Attitude dimensions toward LGBTQ people in China (Williams Institute / UCLA, May 2024)

Attitude dimension	Agree	Note
LGBTQ students should be protected from campus bullying	68%	protective dimension, highest
Workplaces should treat LGBTQ employees fairly	62%	anti-discrimination dimension
Society should accept LGBTQ people	53%	overall acceptance
Support same-sex marriage	52%	institutional-rights dimension
Would attend a same-sex wedding	46%	personal participation
Would not mind an LGBTQ neighbor	46%	neighborly acceptance
Would not mind LGBTQ content in media	45%	public-visibility dimension, among the lowest

Two features matter. First, there are indeed gaps between dimensions — "protect students" (68%) outranks "marriage" (52%) — meaning attitudes are layered, not monolithic. Second, all dimensions fluctuate in the same direction; no dimension shows the divergence of "marriage support collapsing while everything else soars." The gaps explain hierarchy, not reversal of direction. The default inference of "Chengdu ranks last on the marriage dimension" is therefore that Chengdu's overall tolerance sits in the national middle-to-bottom tier — not that "Chengdu is actually very tolerant." Unless extreme counter-evidence appears, there is no reason to assume Chengdu is the exception outside the 99%.

4.4 The most powerful example: Li Yinhe's 2007 survey and "dimensional separation"

The sexuality-studies pioneer Li Yinhe's 2007 telephone survey of large and medium cities across China provides the most complete classic dataset on "dimensional separation." It shows how divergent public attitudes can be across different dimensions of the same issue:

Table 3. Li Yinhe's 2007 national survey: divergent attitudes across dimensions

Survey dimension	Data	Reading
Gay people should enjoy employment opportunities equal to heterosexuals	91% in favor	abstract civic-rights cognition, very high (US was 86% at the time)
Gay and straight people are equal as persons	about 80%	abstract value judgment, high
Should gay-themed film/TV be allowed to air publicly in China	about 55% for / 40%+ against	public-visibility dimension, evenly split
"How do you view homosexual behavior" (another survey)	20.8% "no problem" / 37.8% "completely wrong"	moral-evaluation dimension, negative verdicts hold the majority

This dataset exposes what is hidden by the sentence "the Chinese public is more tolerant than the West": the "high acceptance" of the Chinese public is concentrated in abstract, non-self-involving cognition of rights and personhood, because it demands no behavioral change and touches no one's life. Once the question descends to moral evaluation (is homosexuality wrong at all) or public visibility (can it be seen on screen), attitudes immediately divide or even reverse. High acceptance on one abstract dimension can never be extrapolated to tolerance on all dimensions. Back to Chengdu: the folk impression of "openness" corresponds to the 91% "employment rights" layer of Li Yinhe's data (abstract, unrelated to self, no real contact); the dating survey measures the 37.8% "completely wrong" layer (closest to the deepest recesses of

family and moral order). Both datasets are simultaneously true, but they are not about the same thing.

V. What Kind of "Tolerance" Is Chengdu's Anyway?

5.1 "Subculture" must be disaggregated

"Chengdu's subculture is very open" is itself a vague, even misleading formulation. If the umbrella of "subculture" also shelters same-sex content, and it is then called "highly tolerant," while same-sex marriage support ranks last nationwide — that is logically incoherent. "Subculture" is not a single measurable object; it can be split into at least three propositions with mutually independent subjects, and a hard rule must be established first: **"a lot of creative output" does not equal "a high tolerance of creative content," and neither equals "a high acceptance of real people."** The former is a fact of output and traffic; the latter two are judgments of social attitude. They cannot be conflated.

The hard rule, demonstrated: Russia's danmei sales and its homophobia broke records at the same time

Nothing demonstrates "more output does not equal higher tolerance" better than Russia. Russian Book Union data show that the Chinese danmei novel **Heaven Official's Blessing**, in its first three volumes, topped Russia's fiction sales chart for two consecutive years, with total sales surpassing J.K. Rowling's **Harry Potter** series; in the first half of 2024 it reached the top of Russia's overall bestseller list with 92 million rubles (about 7.56 million RMB) in revenue, the second-place title (34.3 million rubles) earning less than half as much. The first three volumes alone sold over 500,000 copies, and at the 36th Moscow International Book Fair's 2023 bestseller list it was the only Asian novel in the top ten. All of this happens in a country where national support for same-sex marriage is about 7%, the promotion of "non-traditional sexual relations" is restricted by explicit legislation, and the Supreme Court has designated the "international LGBT movement" an extremist organization. Market scale and rights situation move in completely opposite directions. If "danmei sells out" counts as evidence of high tolerance, then Russia is one of the most gay-tolerant countries on Earth — an absurd conclusion nobody would accept. Yet in the case of Chengdu, many people are repeating exactly that absurd inference.

5.2 Three propositions that must not be conflated

1. **(a) Output and consumption traffic of same-sex-themed (danmei) fiction** — production, heat, market size. Chengdu: high output and traffic. But this is a high of output and traffic; it says nothing at all about how tolerant society is of queer narratives, as the Russian example shows.
2. **(b) Tolerance of queer narratives** — public attitude toward same-sex-themed content itself. Chengdu: not necessarily high.

3. (c) **Acceptance of real gay people** — acceptance of real sexual-minority identity, relationships, and public visibility. Chengdu: national bottom tier.

The subjects of (b) and (c) are "public attitude"; the subject of (a) is "market output." Turning (a)'s "high output" into (b)'s or (c)'s "high tolerance" is substituting "how much was produced" for "how much was accepted" — the most hidden and most exploited conceptual substitution in the entire argument.

5.3 Logical closure: three options, only one path is open

Concerning the relation between "subcultural tolerance" and "tolerance of gay people," logic permits only three possibilities. **Option A (separation):** if "subculture" strictly refers to entertainment subcultures unrelated to homosexuality (hip-hop, street culture, anime), then high subcultural tolerance and low tolerance of gay people can coexist without contradiction — but this is tantamount to admitting that this "highly tolerant" subculture has nothing to do with the gay issue and provides no evidence for "Chengdu is gay-friendly"; it merely changes the subject. **Option B (correlation):** if "subculture" includes same-sex content, then by the rule of Chapter IV, high gay-related tolerance should imply high overall tolerance of gay people — but this is directly falsified by the dating survey, in which Chengdu men rank last on the same-sex marriage dimension. **Option C (compensation), the only remaining path:** low real-life tolerance of gay people and the boom of danmei fantasy consumption are not merely compatible, they can be mutually causal. The more the real space is compressed, the more emotion and desire must relocate into fictional texts. Chengdu can perfectly well be simultaneously "a national highland of danmei consumption" and "a national bottom tier of real gay acceptance," because the subject of the former is the public consuming fictional male-male romance, and the subject of the latter is real gay people — they are simply not the same population.

5.4 Why "consuming male-male romance" is not "accepting gay men"

This rupture has ample research support. The core readership of danmei is heterosexual women, who consume the aesthetic and emotional fantasy of "the romance of two ideal men." Research on Thai BL audiences shows that **78.6% of gay men believe BL narratives do not represent reality, while 69% of straight women viewers believe BL is realistic** — the "gay men" straight women read from fictional texts are precisely the most distorted version of real gay life. Scholars note that straight women, while consuming queer aesthetic texts, often "cut off the connection with the real lives of LGBTQ people." A straight woman can be obsessed with danmei and simultaneously cold or even hostile toward real gay men; the two are empirically compatible, and can even coexist in the same person.

5.5 The compensation mechanism and its theoretical anchors

The 2026 Sage-journal article **Pure Love and Shadow Desire** on Chinese BL erotica argues explicitly for the symbiosis of censorship and BL prosperity: the stricter the censorship, the more creation must exist under disguises such as "pure love" and "fated bonds," and the more readers' desire is amplified precisely in that forbidden shadow. In 2014, Jinjiang renamed its "danmei" section "pure love" to survive censorship, and it was in this game of censorship and disguise that the danmei market surpassed 10 billion RMB, growing over 15% annually. The conclusion is counter-intuitive but logically closed: **the boom of danmei culture is not evidence that society tolerates gay people; it is often a symptom that the real space for gay people has been compressed.** Two established theories corroborate this reading. Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" framework, applied to BL research (Pagliassotti, 2012), identifies danmei as a "female gaze" cultural space in which women watch and imagine male bodies and emotions — a reversal of the viewing structure, not a reversal of the power structure; it serves the viewing needs of straight women and has nothing to do with the real situation of gay men. Lisa Duggan's "homonormativity" and Jasbir Puar's "homonationalism," meanwhile, describe how queer identity is conscripted as a political and market tool; "rainbow capitalism" commodities queer identity into consumable signs, stripping away its political and existential meaning. Chengdu's danmei boom is the local version of female gaze plus rainbow capitalism: it consumes "male-male love symbols" stripped of real-world reference, and the more same-sex love is purified into a consumer product, the more it evades the seriousness of the real population's situation.

VI. Two Kinds of "Neutrality": How the State Defines, How the Middle Ground Accepts

6.1 Two levels, moving in opposite directions

To understand the real situation of Chinese sexual minorities, looking only at "whether films are banned" is far from enough. Two kinds of "neutrality" are constantly conflated: the state's "neutrality" and the people's (middle ground's) "neutrality." The former is a framework defined officially; the latter is an attitude shaped by that framework.

Table 4. The state's neutrality versus the middle ground's neutrality

	The state's "neutrality"	The middle ground's "neutrality"
What it is	An official procedural stance — "not support, not oppose, not advocate" — constituted by concrete actions (censorship, no approval of public events, no marriage institution, no anti-discrimination legislation)	The daily attitude of the middle group, roughly half the population: "don't interfere with others, but don't actively support either"
Who defines	The definer (independent variable) — officialdom decides "which frame this matter belongs in"	The receiver (dependent variable) — its judgment relies heavily on the frame signals given by officialdom
How it forms	Active choice: naming the restriction of queer public visibility "content governance / maintaining order / protecting minors"	Passive anchoring: under high trust, accepting this naming, and therefore experiencing the same restriction as "neutral routine management"
Substance	Procedurally "no stance," result-wise maintaining the status quo — a constructed neutrality	Morally "unapproving," behaviorally "non-interfering," institutionally "unsupporting" — a transmitted neutrality

6.2 The date-pit society: the middle ground swings with the state's frame

Chapter IV sketched the "date-pit" structure of Chinese public attitudes: about two-tenths fully accepting, about three-tenths explicitly rejecting, and about five-tenths as a middle ground of "non-interference but no active support." Small at both ends, large in the middle — what truly decides the situation of sexual minorities is this roughly five-tenths of the middle with no fixed stance. Why do these five-tenths have no fixed stance? Because they hand the "power to define" to the authority they trust most. The Edelman Trust Barometer shows trust in the Chinese government reached 90% in 2020, ranking first among major economies for three consecutive years, with a composite trust index of 79 in 2024 (the US was 46). Such high trust means that most state policy actions carry an "innate presumption of legitimacy" in the eyes of the middle

ground. The transmission chain is complete: the state's attitude toward gay-themed film (censorship, delisting, no projects) is named "content governance, maintaining order," the high-trust middle ground accepts this naming, concludes "this is only neutral routine management, not targeting anyone," and the public visibility of sexual minorities is continuously reduced without a single step being recognized as "not neutral." Whatever attitude the state holds toward gay-themed film, the middle ground's attitude toward gay people will roughly follow — not by coincidence, but by transmission.

6.3 The same act, two reference frames, two verdicts

Take "the state bans gay-themed film and TV and restricts related public content." Within China's internal **relative frame**, mainstream opinion likewise considers public dissemination of same-sex relationships inappropriate, so the restriction is read as "neutral routine governance." On the **absolute frame** of queer rights, however, "not supporting, not opposing" effectively equals "not supporting": no marriage institution, no anti-discrimination law, systematically restricted public visibility, uncorrected popular prejudice. The objective effect of the state's actions is continuous suppression of the public rights of sexual minorities, whatever the middle ground believes it sees. **Relative neutrality is not absolute neutrality.**

6.4 Why this "neutrality" is especially dangerous for sexual minorities

Because the middle ground does not believe they are "homophobic," they will not actively attack sexual minorities but will not speak for them either; they regard "not discussing it publicly" as social harmony rather than the deprivation of rights; and when policy tightens further, they will support it as a matter of course, because to them this remains "governance." The situation of sexual minorities therefore depends on the attitude of the middle ground, the attitude of the middle ground depends on the state's frame, and the state's frame toward LGBTQ people is restrictive. Every link in the chain is self-consistent, and sexual minorities are not genuinely protected at any single link.

6.5 A toolbox of philosophical concepts

"The middle ground genuinely believes it is neutral" is no accident; philosophy and sociology explain it completely. **Gramsci's cultural hegemony:** domination is maintained not by force but by consent, as the values of the dominant class are internalized as society's "common sense," so the dominated "voluntarily" identify with them; the middle ground's matter-of-fact attitude toward restricting the public presentation of homosexuality is precisely such a naturalization. **Althusser's interpellation:** when you answer "this is normal governance," you have already been interpellated into the frame that treats restriction as neutral. **Festinger's cognitive dissonance:** admitting "the institutions I support restrict gay people" would clash

with the self-image of "I am a tolerant, neutral person," so the least-effort path is actively reinterpreting the restriction as "maintaining order" or "protecting minors." **Rawls on procedural versus substantive neutrality:** procedural non-favoritism does not yield neutral outcomes; because the existing default structure is the heterosexual norm, a "not supporting, not opposing" institution will necessarily skew toward maintaining the status quo — a substantive non-neutrality that shifts its cost onto the minority. Four concepts point to one conclusion: neutrality is not a discovered fact but a constructed self-perception, and the gap between relative and absolute neutrality is a mechanism, not a rhetorical matter.

VII. From Chengdu to the World: The Universality of Homophobia and the Bias of the Gaze

7.1 China-Russia comparison: different institutional forms, identical public logic

Table 5. Russia and China compared

Dimension	Russia	China
National support for same-sex marriage		about 7% (2019) about 40% (2014 urban)
Legal status	All-age ban on promoting "non-traditional sexual relations"; LGBT movement designated an extremist organization by the Supreme Court	No criminal statute targeting identity itself; systematic restrictions at the level of public dissemination
Target of control	Identity, organizations, public expression	Publicly disseminated content and works
Asylum channel	Exists (Russian sexual minorities can apply for political asylum in some countries)	Virtually nonexistent
Gender baseline	Overall extremely conservative; women slightly milder	Overall mid-low tier; women significantly more open

The common ground of the two countries: the private sphere may exist, the public sphere must be invisible; fantasy works may flourish in niche circles, but cannot enter the mainstream. Russia enforces through explicit law and organizational designation; China enforces through content control and default convention. Regarding the outcome — the public visibility of sexual minorities is systematically lowered — the two are highly consistent.

7.2 The trap of cultural relativism

Some Western leftists excuse restrictions in Chinese society with "this is East Asia's unique culture, not homophobia," and some selectively cherry-pick "Chengdu already proves China's tolerance." This cultural relativism has two fatal flaws. First, culture can determine the form of expression, but the essence of homophobia — the denigration and exclusion of minority identity — is shared across cultures; no cultural context automatically turns "non-interference without protection, while letting prejudice circulate as jokes" into "tolerance." Second, it conflates "the liveliness of danmei fantasy consumption" with "the equality of real society." The boom of danmei web fiction is precisely the emotional compensation after public space is closed; taking that compensation as evidence of real tolerance is a serious misreading. Russia

is the starkest contrast: at the 36th Moscow International Book Fair's 2023 bestseller list, **Heaven Official's Blessing** was the only Asian novel in the top ten, in the same period that Russia's judicial system was criminalizing "homosexual propaganda." A book banned in reality yet crowned in the fictional market best demonstrates the chasm between creative prosperity and rights situation.

7.3 The bias of the gaze: why Russia gets empathy and China does not

International attention to queer situations is never a purely humanitarian allocation; it is doubly distorted by racial aesthetics and political narrative. Russia belongs to the white racial category, and its queer situation is packaged as "the suffering tragic white person" — with both a political "anti-authoritarian resistance" narrative bonus and a position at the center of Western gay aesthetics; it therefore receives far more empathy than its numbers warrant. China (and East Asia) sits at the other extreme: it is a "distant political Other," its queer situation used as a tool for institutional argument, yet it barely enters anyone's desire or aesthetic radius. Asian women still have a layer of "exotic softness" stereotype to be consumed; Asian men are long marginalized in the global aesthetic system. The suffering of Russian queers is aestheticized into charm; the suffering of Chinese queers is politicized into news. The priority of equality discourse always yields to the priority of aesthetics and desire.

7.4 Theoretical deepening: Orientalism and the white gaze

Edward Said's **Orientalism** (1978) argues that the West constructs "the Orient" through a whole apparatus of discourse as a heterogeneous, stagnant Other that can be described and consumed. Projected onto queer issues, China's queer situation is "Orientalized" into "a unique cultural phenomenon" rather than "a universal human-rights issue" — precisely the intellectual root of the cultural relativism that excuses homophobia. The same restriction is "authoritarian oppression of freedom" when it happens in Russia (worthy of anger) and "the particularity of Eastern culture" when it happens in China (worthy of understanding). Whiteness studies add the second half: white is not merely a skin color but a set of unmarked norms, so white suffering is naturally seen as "human suffering," while Asian suffering always needs extra explanation to be seen. Empathy is not distributed by need; it is distributed according to a racialized order of desire.

VIII. The Western Filter: How the English-Speaking World Manufactured "Gaydu"

8.1 How "Gaydu" traveled abroad

"Gay Capital" was not invented by Western media or the English-language internet; it is a homegrown meme that has circulated for about two decades in China. What the English-language internet did was the second step: upgrading it from a folk meme inside China into an international verdict about "China's queer utopia." Three channels did the work. **Mainstream English media:** Sixth Tone's 2016 piece *Chengdu, the Questionable Queer Capital of China* spread the label while recording local dissent — one person said plainly that "winning that title takes real cultural substance, and that is not really the case." **Tourism and lifestyle industry:** English-language travel guides and gay travel sites (Unveil China, chinatraveljourney, pinktickettravel, GayOut) endlessly repeat "Chengdu equals China's most open and tolerant gay city." **Western documentary and photography:** works such as Alessandro Gandolfi's *QUEER CHINA* frame Chengdu's gay community as a "tolerant, fervent free port" for Western audiences to consume. The commonality of these three channels: they cite almost exclusively the spatial narratives of bars, nightclubs, and NGOs — none of them cites a single national attitude survey. The utopia narrative itself even knows the truth: the well-known gay travel site Utopia-asia writes on its own Chengdu page, "Many Chinese gays say Chengdu is a gay heaven. But don't expect to see rainbow flags or pride parades. What it means is that gays in Chengdu feel tolerated, integrated to the point of near invisibility — in fact they are almost invisible." "Almost invisible" was written by the author of the utopian narrative on his own promotional page; most re-transmitters simply choose not to quote it.

8.2 The distortion of translation: amplification, cropping, sealing

When Western media re-translated Chengdu, they performed three operations, repeated over and over. **Amplification:** magnify "relatively relaxed nightlife" into "the city is the most open." **Cropping:** delete from the narrative the same-ruler data of Chapter II (Chengdu men: 40% oppose same-sex marriage, nearly half label homosexuality a psychological perversion, national bottom). **Sealing:** erase from the story's timeline the fact that ChengduPride ran from 2008 to 2018 and then shut down amid nationwide tightening. Thus a multi-faceted Chengdu — relaxed nightlife plus bottom-tier marriage attitudes plus tightening space plus discontinued pride — is flattened into one sentence: "China's most open gay city." This is not a misunderstanding; it is cropping. What is cropped out is precisely the institutional and attitudinal data that decide the real situation of sexual minorities; what is kept is precisely the most consumable, most spectacular nightlife.

8.3 Why the West needs "China equals a leftist utopia"

Chengdu's "queer utopia" provides evidence for "China equals progress," and "China equals leftist utopia" in turn lends an aura of tolerance to Chengdu. The two narratives prop each other up, and their common root is the Western left's utopianization of China — a tradition spanning nearly a century. In the 1950s, French left-wing intellectuals treated the new China as a "political utopia to be pilgrimaged"; Chinese scholarship puts it precisely: "it is less about praising a progressive utopia epitomized by China than about satisfying the political expectations of French society." Cross-cultural imagology holds that Western images of China have always had two opposite archetypes, "idealization" and "demonization," and the "idealized" China functions as a utopian reference point the West uses to critique its own society. The contemporary version is "Chinamaxxing": in March 2026 the English-language leftist magazine Jacobin published an article praising "Chinamaxxing," and was sharply criticized by the Asian-American leftist outlet New Bloom, which argued: "This is not the West deciding to endorse China's economic governance model; it is the West deciding to criticize its own inequality by imitating an imagined China." What the Western left needs is not the real China but the imagined China — a symbolic weapon for fighting the West's own internal battles. In this symbolic system, Chengdu's gay nightlife is the most convenient piece of the puzzle: it proves "China is progressive" and proves "China is not so bad." The real situation of Chinese gay people — bottom-tier marriage attitudes, tightening space, pathologization — is precisely what this symbolic system must delete, because it would ruin the utopia's utility.

8.4 A closed loop of mutual evidence

Place the "queer utopia (Chengdu)" and the "leftist utopia (China)" side by side, and a near-perfect circular argument emerges. The left needs evidence for "China equals progress"; it takes Chengdu's gay nightlife as proof; Chengdu is manufactured as a "queer utopia"; which in turn "proves" China is progressive and tolerant; China's institutional restrictions thus appear "not so bad"; and "not so bad" makes the Chengdu utopia seem credible. The loop closes, and the real situation is excluded from the loop. Every link is indifferent to the real situation of Chinese sexual minorities: the left consuming "progressive China" does not need Chengdu's marriage data, the travel guides consuming "open Chengdu" do not need institutional analysis, and China's sexual minorities exist in neither the left's symbols nor the tourism lens — they vanish between the two narratives.

8.5 The reality check: what the same system has done to gay people

The cruelest thing about the utopian narrative is that it can coexist with reality while remaining almost completely disconnected from it. The following are verifiable public records, not positions, from the same country and the same period as the "queer utopia" label:

Table 6. Public records: restriction of same-sex content and queer life in China

Date	Event	Meaning
2017-06	The Regulations for the Content Review of Online Audiovisual Programs placed "homosexuality" under "non-normal sexual relations/behaviors," alongside incest, sexual perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual violence	At the level of official text, homosexuality is listed with sexual perversion
2021-09	The National Radio and Television Administration ordered a nationwide halt to danmei-adaptation dramas (BL-themed TV adaptations)	Creative prosperity does not mean permission; the market was shut down wholesale
2022	The Mo Dao Zu Shi (Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation) animation was taken down	Even the hottest works are not exempt
2025-09	The Australian horror film Together had its mainland-China version use AI to swap one man in a same-sex wedding scene into a woman, plus six minutes of cuts; international distributor NEON publicly condemned the "unauthorized alterations" and halted release; the film was pulled the day before its premiere	Censorship escalated from deletion to AI-falsifying facts
2025-11	Apple removed the gay dating apps Blued and Finka from the China App Store at regulators' request	Even the private social tools of sexual minorities are being purged
2026-07	The state "Qinglang" (Clear-and-Healthy) campaign against chaotic live-streaming show groups named "deliberate shipping of fake couples (CP), scripted male-male fanservice (maifu)" as a core target	"Fanservice" is being swept away as chaos

Together deserves its own record. Instead of deleting the gay scenes, the distributor used generative AI to turn one member of the same-sex couple into a "woman," forcibly turning a same-sex wedding into a heterosexual one. Global media (The Independent, The Daily Beast, GCN, Spain's Público) all covered it. The film itself is a body-horror story about a mysterious force forcibly fusing two individuals into one, and the censor did exactly that: using the hand of power to erase a relationship. Even the horror inside a fiction became a prophecy of the censorship outside it. And underneath lies a deeper chill: if AI face-swapping can become a routine censorship tool, audiences will no longer be able to confirm whether the images they see have been altered — censorship has escalated from deleting to rewriting history. At the same time that homosexuality is swept away as a "non-normal sexual relation," same-sex weddings are rewritten with AI, and gay dating apps are removed — internationally, Chengdu is manufactured as a "queer utopia" and China as a "beacon of progress." These two things must be seen together, or neither is visible.

8.6 The position: this is not a misunderstanding, it is collusion

At this point, neutral words such as "filter" or "bias" should be dropped. The narrative of "Chengdu equals queer utopia, China equals leftist utopia" is not the West's well-intentioned misreading, nor an innocent accident of storytelling inside China; it is a structural collusion, completed by multiple parties, whose function is to conceal the real situation. The Western left's "Chinamaxxing" consumes a symbolic China and harms the sexual minorities of the real China; the Gaydu tourism and media industry packages the living spaces of a minority as consumer spectacle; and China's own systematic suppression — listing homosexuality alongside incest and sexual perversion in review regulations — comfortably enjoys the respectability that the Western utopian narrative brings, which makes suppression seem "not so bad" and the real situation even less visible. The utopian narrative and the censorship machine are, in effect, accomplices. When "queer utopia" becomes the mainstream international narrative, the situation of real gay people becomes even harder to see, because every piece of evidence pointing to the truth collides with this carefully built utopia.

IX. Conclusion

Back to the original question: "Is Chengdu really tolerant?" The answer depends on which Chengdu you mean. If you mean the Chengdu of nightlife, of danmei fantasy consumption, of young people's entertainment scenes — yes, it is relatively permissive, and this is real and worth cherishing. If you mean the Chengdu of marriage values, of the mainstream gender order, of acceptance of real gay people — its conservatism sits in the national bottom tier. This too is real. Two Chengdus exist simultaneously, without contradiction.

What is genuinely wrong is substituting the overall impression of the first Chengdu for the overall conclusion about the second: using "the freedom to consume male-male love stories" to masquerade as "the sincerity of accepting real gay people," using the liveliness of a niche to cover the silence of institutions, using "non-interference" to masquerade as "acceptance," using relative neutrality to masquerade as absolute neutrality. Tolerance is never a label but a series of testable indicators: whether institutions protect, whether public space is visible, whether prejudice is corrected. When all three are absent, the remaining "non-interference" is just another spelling of inaction.

The purpose of this deconstruction is not to assert that a city "is homophobic," but to establish a methodology. Before discussing any "tolerance," first ask three questions. Which layer of tolerance do you mean? Is the data measuring it from the same ruler? Is the reference frame you stand in relative or absolute? These three questions matter more than any conclusion, because they are what separate a tested statement from a narrative that has merely circulated for twenty years.

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Appendix A: Data and Definitions

Caliber notes. (1) The "Chengdu men oppose same-sex marriage at 40% and rank last nationwide" figures are the dating-platform survey caliber; the original province-by-province charts could not be individually re-verified publicly, but verified data from the same survey (Southwest male opposition about 33%; national male opposition 35%) support the same conclusion direction. (2) The social-distance figures in Chapter III come from the CSS2021 and CSS2023 studies by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; the exact wording "the lowest acceptance is for gay people and people living with HIV/AIDS, while the relatively higher acceptance is for people of different religious faiths and for former convicts" is quoted from the published text. (3) All percentages note their year and source; mind the caliber differences when quoting. (4) Chapter V's disaggregation of "subculture" into three propositions (danmei fantasy consumption, tolerance of queer narratives, acceptance of real gay people) is a correction of a logical flaw common in popular discussion. (5) The philosophical concepts in Chapter VI and the critical theory in Chapter VII (cultural hegemony, interpellation, cognitive dissonance, procedural versus substantive neutrality, Orientalism, whiteness) are standard theoretical frameworks, used to provide explanatory structure for empirical observation, not direct assertions about specific events. (6) The events in Chapter VIII are all public reporting; **Together's** alteration details and NEON's condemnation appear in the international original reports listed above, and event dates and film details are subject to those original reports. (7) The Korean parallel (72% refusal of former convicts versus 52.3% refusal of sexual minorities, Korea Herald 2024) is a regional reference from a neighboring society and is not presented as Chinese data. (8) The English-language sources for the "Gaydu" narrative (Sixth Tone, Unveil China, Utopia-asia, Gandolfi) are directly accessible originals, and the "almost invisible" sentence on Utopia-asia is a verbatim quote.

Definition of "tolerance." Throughout this paper, "tolerance" is treated not as a single attitude but as a set of measurable dimensions: abstract rights cognition (e.g., equal employment), moral evaluation (is the orientation itself wrong), public visibility (may same-sex content appear in public), institutional rights (marriage, anti-discrimination law), and private contact willingness (a gay neighbor, a same-sex wedding). A high score on one dimension cannot be extrapolated to all dimensions; this is the "dimensional separation" principle applied throughout.

Definition of "neutrality." "Relative neutrality" means the verdict reached within a given society's own mainstream frame; "absolute neutrality" means the verdict reached against a standard list of minority rights (institutional recognition, protection from discrimination, public visibility, correction of prejudice). The same act can be "neutral" in the first frame and "systematic restriction" in the second; the paper's claim is only that the two must not be conflated, and that the second frame is the appropriate one for evaluating the situation of a minority.

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