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Does Higher Education Have a Civic Bonus? Exploring the Role of Higher Education in the Formation of Social Attitudes in Contemporary China

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Abstract
This research explores how higher education shapes youth's social attitudes in terms of gender equality, homosexuality and the urban underclass in contemporary China. We draw upon empirical evidence from in-depth individual interviews involving 68 students. Our findings highlight different patterns of acceptance, utilisation or rejection of knowledge to inform their social attitudes. The students further demonstrate varying levels of positional attitudes according to their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Moreover, the state and its command over quality citizenship and ideology education play an important role in shaping social attitudes. Our findings also highlight toxic consequences of rural-urban inequality on social attitudes.

Key words
Higher Education, China, social attitudes, youth, tolerance, gender, migrant underclass, homosexuality.

Περίληψη
Η έρευνα αυτή εξετάζει πώς η τριτοβάθμια εκπαίδευση διαμορφώνει τις κοινωνικές συμπεριφορές των νέων αναφορικά με την ισότητα των φύλων, την ομοφυλοφιλία και την αστική κατώτερη τάξη στη σύγχρονη Κίνα. Έχουμε βασιστεί σε εμπειρικά στοιχεία που προέκυψαν από ατομικές εις βάθος συνεντεύξεις με 68 φοιτητές. Τα ευρήματά μας καταδεικνύουν την ύπαρξη διαφορετικών προτύπων αποδοχής, αξιοποίησης ή απόρριψης της γνώσης τα οποία επηρεάζουν τις κοινωνικές τους συμπεριφορές. Οι φοιτητές επιδεικνύουν περαιτέρω διαφορετικά επίπεδα συμπεριφορών ενδεικτικών των στάσεών τους, ανάλογα με τα κοινωνικοοικονομικά και δημογραφικά χαρακτηριστικά τους. Επιπλέον, το κράτος και η διοίκηση που ασκεί σε ζητήματα ποιοτικής ιδιότητας του πολίτη και ιδεολογικής παιδείας παίζουν σημαντικό ρόλο στη διαμόρφωση κοινωνικών συμπεριφορών. Τα ευρήματά μας επισημαίνουν, επίσης, τις τοξικές συνέπειες της αγροτικής-αστικής ανισότητας στις κοινωνικές συμπεριφορές.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά
Τριτοβάθμια εκπαίδευση, Κίνα, κοινωνικές στάσεις, νεολαία, ανεκτικότητα, φύλο, κατώτερη κοινωνική τάξη των μεταναστών, ομοφυλοφιλία.

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Introduction

China's higher education has gained much attention both at home and abroad. We know that the unprecedented expansion of enrolments since the late 1990s and the massive production of STEM graduates have now outpaced many Western countries (Carnoy et al. 2014; Liu, 2016, 2019). We also know that the State has sponsored elite programmes such as the 985 and Double First-Class universities for pioneering its lead in science and technology (Marginson 2016; Liu 2019). We also know that the country's Research and Development measures and research outputs have now surpassed many East Asian counterparts and even Western countries (Marginson 2016; Liu et al. 2016). However, little is known about the effect of university learning and socialisation on social attitudes. Meanwhile, it is evident that higher education is central to the political ideology of the Communist Party. For instance, the Chinese President Xi Jinping revived the debate on the role of universities as strongholds of Socialist ideology, 'political awareness, moral characteristics and humanistic quality' (Xinhua 2016) by arguing for further teaching and learning of political ideology in universities. However, existing research has not sufficiently explored the role of higher education in shaping social and civic attitudes in contemporary China. In light of this gap, this research explores young people's social attitudes in terms of gender equality, homosexuality and the urban underclass.

We draw upon 68 interviews with university students and graduates from the birth cohorts between 1993 and 1999, asking how, in an era of increasing inequality, they perceived gender (in-)equality, homosexuality and migrant workers and how their knowledge derived from university education and experiences contributed to the formation of their social attitudes. Our data reveal that the knowledge gained from formal learning, informal socialization and associational activities plays an important role in informing students or graduates' actions, beliefs and attitudes. Our findings further link different patterns of attitudes to the effect of family characteristics. University students and graduates demonstrate varying levels of positional trust and tolerance according to their socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics. By providing new evidence in the Chinese context, the present article raises doubts regarding the widely accepted discourse on the public good of higher education and its spill-over effects, such as liberal citizenship, social cohesion, tolerance and trust.

Conceptual Framework

There are primarily three strands of literature that explore social attitudes and the level of social trust and tolerance in individual societies and cross-national contexts. First, research on social cohesion investigates, at both the theoretical and empirical levels, shared values and identity; interpersonal, inter-/intra-group and institutional trust; tolerance for other individuals and cultures, civic participation; and law-abiding behaviour and patterns (Green and Janmatt 2011: 6). This strand of literature relates inequality to social cohesion, identity, trust and civic participation (Green and Janmatt 2011; Green et al. 2006; Putnam 2015). It is argued that inequality in income, wealth and opportunities undermines collective, shared values and identity in a society (Green and Janmatt 2011). Moreover, inequality among different individuals and social groups widens social distance (Green and Janmatt 2011), thereby weakening social trust and tolerance whilst allowing space for conflicts and crimes.

Second, another strand of literature examines the effects of university education and experiences, including formal and informal learning experiences, socialisation and associational activities, on social attitudes (Doyle and Skinner 2017; Campbell and Horowitz 2016; Bowman 2013). Some studies explore the implications of the political characteristics of a faculty and a university on their students' political attitudes in the US context (Gross and Fosse 2012; Mariani and Hewitt 2008). It shows that a liberal faculty or university is more likely to introduce politically liberal ideas through classroom teaching and interactions with students; however, the results of the impact of liberal beliefs on their students are mixed (Gross and Fosse 2012; Mariani and Hewitt 2008). Other research also highlights the differences in academic disciplines and the implications on students' social attitudes (Elchardus and Spruyt 2009). For instance, Elchardus and Spruyt's study focuses on the effects of university knowledge on students' civic and social attitudes by using first-hand survey data in Belgium (2009). The findings suggest that academic disciplines represent contrasting socio-political attitudes, with social sciences characterised as liberal leftism and the law and economics characterised as conservatism, and that students' socio-political attitudes correspond to the academic disciplines that they have selected (Elchardus and Spruyt 2009).

Furthermore, university socialisation and on-campus associational activities contribute to spill-over effects at the societal level, including advanced democratic values and solidary social relations between different social and cultural groups (McMahon 2009;

Marginson 2011; Kingston et al. 2003). Many theoretical and empirical studies show that the socialisation and interactions with students from different social and cultural backgrounds in the informal setting on campus contribute to positive attitudes on gender egalitarianism and tolerance of cultural and ethnic diversification in different contexts (Cunningham 2008; Dey 1997). The concept of free space is used to capture the competitions and compromises of different political ideologies on a university campus (Dey 1997). Moreover, the expansion of higher education and increasing diversification of the student population (Liu et al. 2016) provide new space for both 'in-group' and, more importantly, 'out-group' socialisation (Bowman, 2013; Tadmor et al. 2012).

Literature on social trust has identified in-groups as immediate circles of family, friends, and community, while out-groups refer to circles of unfamiliar people and interactions (Delhey et al. 2011). It is argued that formal and informal activities associated with university experiences allow students to interact with those from different linguistic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds in the era of globalised higher education (Liu et al. 2016). Apart from direct socialisation with peers, campus associational activities and activists also play an important role of promoting feminism, gender equality and support for same-sex civil rights and legislation (Hong-Fincher 2018; Schott-Ceccacci et al. 2009; Cunningham 2008).

Third, the last subset of research highlights the persistent importance of family characteristics in reproducing civic and social attitudes through higher education (Campbell and Horowitz 2016, Chi and Hawk2016; Kim et al. 2017). Some studies suggest a direct reproduction pattern of social attitudes and political beliefs between the parental generations and their children. For instance, a US study suggests that parents' political beliefs are reproduced through direct socialisation with their children (Jennings et al. 2009). Moreover, Kim and colleagues' longitudinal study traces gender attitudes between generations and finds that parents with gender egalitarian attitudes passed on those attitudes to their children in some urban areas in China between 1999 and 2014 (Kim et al, 2017). This finding is shared across a number of contexts such as the US and the Netherlands (Campbell and Horowitz 2016; Filler and Jennings 2015; Sieben and de Graaf 2004). Furthermore, quantitative survey studies among university students on their attitudes towards homosexuality in China show that socioeconomic and demographic factors such as urban residency and higher parental educational levels count for a higher level of tolerance of LGBT people (Chi and Hawk 2016; Lin et al. 2016).

Some studies further use statistical sophistication and available data to examine the effects between higher education and family characteristics on social attitudes. Campbell and Horowitz's research uses the data from the 1994 Study of American Families and the 1994 General Social Survey to test the effect of family backgrounds and higher education on civic and social attitudes (2016). They find that university education has an impact on attitudes toward civil liberties and gender egalitarianism, even when controlling for family characteristics (Campbell and Horowitz 2016). Similarly, a survey study among university students in a Central-Eastern European region compares the effects of faculty characteristics to those of family backgrounds (Fényes 2014). It shows that female-dominated disciplines are more likely to develop gender egalitarian attitudes than male-dominated fields and that students' family geographical origin and religious beliefs still contribute to less gender equality attitudes regardless of higher education experiences (Fényes 2014).

Given the complexity of the effects at the individual, educational and societal levels, it is not surprising that these results are mixed, as it is difficult to disentangle how family characteristics, university learning and socialisation and social inequality make an impact on students' civic and social attitudes. We know that social inequality might have contributed to increasing social distance between different social groups, thus narrowing social trust and affecting civic and social attitudes. We also know that university formal and informal learning experiences, interactions with faculty members and peers and associational activities have an impact on social attitudes. We also know that the expansion and diversification of higher education provide more formal and informal space for students from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to socialise and interact. Nonetheless, we still have scant knowledge of how higher education has shaped social and civic attitudes in the increasingly unequal society of China; how university knowledge and socialisation make an impact on young people in the way they engage and interact with those from different backgrounds; and how university experiences shape their trust and social attitudes towards out-groups. In this article, we will examine how university education and experiences affect young people's social attitudes in terms of gender equality, homosexuality and the urban underclass in contemporary China.

The Chinese Context

China has several attractive attributes for examining the relationship between the expansion of higher education and social inequality and the implications of this relationship on social attitudes. First, social inequality has been an enduring social issue in China (Philips 2017). Income inequality at the family and regional levels has dramatically increased since the Reform and Opening-up in 1978 (Goodman 2012; Dong and An 2015; Qi and Dong 2016). Xie and Zhou (2014) estimate that income inequality by the Gini Coefficient was 0.3 by the late 1970s, rising to 0.35 by the mid-1990s and to 0.55 by 2010. Moreover, income inequality between urban and rural areas and across regions has become pronounced during the course of the market reform. For instance, urban residents in Shanghai earned twice as much as those in Gansu, whilst rural residents in Shanghai had an average income 3.5 times higher than that of residents in Gansu in 2011 (CSIN 2011).

The uneven distribution of income and wealth between urban and rural areas and across different regions has direct implications on social attitudes and trust between the urban citizens and rural migrant workers. Rural migrant workers represent the out-group in terms of citizenship and social security in relation to the urban citizens. Studies at the contextual level shed light on the low trust between migrant workers and urban residents, which is related to their segregation in terms of housing, identity and socialisation (Liu et al. 2017; Gu et al. 2016; Fu et al. 2010). Some empirical studies also find a high level of discrimination against migrants from rural areas due to their dialects, personal appearance and hygienic habits (Liu et al. 2017; Gu et al. 2016; Fu et al. 2010). However, we have scant knowledge the attitudes of highly educated youth toward migrant workers.

Second, higher education opportunities have expanded at an unprecedented level since the late 1990s (Liu, et al, 2016). China's controversial One-Child policy has had an impact on both the drivers and the outcomes of higher education (Liu, 2017). On the one hand, the One-Child cohorts have increased demand for university opportunities, as urban parents have concentrated on their education investment in their only children (Kim et al. 2017). On the other hand, the demographic characteristics associated with the One-Child cohorts also result in an increasing and equal representation of women in higher education (Liu, 2017). Meanwhile, social attitudes about women and gender inequality have gone through dramatic shifts as a result of political movements and

social transformations. From the Socialist discourse of the Women as Half of the Sky to a retreat to traditional female virtue (Ding et al. 2007; Hong-Fincher 2016), the mainstream discourse about women in China still only recognises them as necessary accessories either to the patriarchal state or to patriarchal individual families (Hershatter 2004; Berik et al. 2007). With the increasing equal participation of women in higher education, can we expect university students to have gender egalitarian attitudes?

Third, the unique feature of higher education learning and experiences is the role of the Chinese Communist Party in shaping citizenship and ideology education as well as engaging the students in political and civil associational activities (Liu, 2016, 2017). The Chinese Communist Party has a long tradition of being closely involved in teaching, learning and socialization in universities in China (Liu, 2016). The Party branches on campus are important players in organising formal and informal associational activities such as Youth League and a range of volunteering societies (Zhang 2016; Wang 2016). In addition to the associational events, the Communist Party also promotes political ideology through compulsory civic and ideology courses (Liu, 2016; Xinhua 2016). The key characteristics of civic education are the emphasis on 'quality' citizenship (Murphy 2004) and the citizen codes of conduct, such as the 'Socialist Concepts of Honour and Disgrace' (Jiang and Xu 2014). The core ideology courses further incorporate traditional cultural values, thus becoming a hybrid of a set of traditional and modern quality citizen codes of conduct, the 'Socialism Core Value systems' and the law (Zhang 2016).

However, there are some contradictory elements in these core courses which might inform different actions, strategies and attitudes. For instance, LGBT people as an out-group of the mainstream culture have always struggled to gain adequate civil and legal rights (Sim 2014). Prior research on the subject identifies traditional culture and persistent Confucianism as the main explanations for the general lack of tolerance toward homosexuals (Chi and Hawk 2016; Lin et al. 2016). On the one hand, university education contributes to a greater understanding of civil and legal rights, particularly in relation to vulnerable groups, such as LGBT people. On the other hand, the knowledge of traditional culture and values might have further consolidated the traditional radius of trust based on ethnicity and culture (Li and Liang 2002; Pye 1999), as well as patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal networks (Hershatter 2004), thus leaving little space to accommodate those outside the traditional cultural norms and values, such as

LGBT people. There are still many unanswered questions regarding how university education and experiences can affect civic and social attitudes.

Therefore, the present article aims to fill the gap in existing research by examining the social attitudes of university students. We use in-depth individual interviews to explore the respondents' narratives on the impact of their knowledge and higher education experiences in shaping their social attitudes regarding gender (in-)equality, the legalisation of civil rights for homosexuals and citizenship for the migrant underclass. This research asks a number of questions: 1) what is the role of university education and experiences in shaping youth attitudes? 2) How do their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics affect their attitudes?

Data and Methodology

The data for this research consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young people from the birth cohorts between 1993 and 1999. The interviewees were selected from a variety of social backgrounds as well as from different geographical origins. Interviews with the undergraduates were conducted between April and October 2017 in Beijing. The rationale for choosing Beijing as the primary research site was that it provided a desirable demographic base that allows us not only to search the eligible population from the 1993-1999 cohorts but also to maximise the research population from diverse geographical origins. Students were selected randomly from different types of universities and fields of study, including elite or key universities, comprehensive universities and universities with specialized programmes such as education.

The respondents came from a variety of fields of study, including STEM fields such as environmental science, telecommunication technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine. Others came from the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences fields, which include education, law, foreign languages, literature, history, accounting and finance, and media studies. We recruited students from the library, sports centers and restaurants on campus and from student-organised societies such as the Environment-Initiative Club. In addition to the physical approach, we also used social media websites and applications such as WeChat and QQ to complement the search for graduates. We posted a research recruitment advertisement on WeChat on 8th March 2017.

Table 1: The socioeconomic and demographic details of the 68 interviewees (birth cohorts between 1993 and 1999)

	Key Universities (*16*) and % in total	Non-key Universities (*52*) and % in total	% Total number (*68*)
Socioeconomic Status			
Urban	11 (16.20%)	25 (36.80%)	36 (53.00%)
Rural	5 (7.30%)	27 (39.70%)	32 (47.00%)
Gender			
Male	7 (10.29%)	26 (38.20%)	33 (48.49%)
Female	9 (13.24%)	26 (38.20%)	35 (51.44%)
Fields of Study			
STEMS	8 (11.80%)	28(41.10%)	36 (52.90%)
Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences	8 (11.80%)	24(35.30%)	32 (47.10%)

Table 1 summarises the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the 68 interviewees, university students and graduates, from the birth cohorts between 1993 and 1999. This table also includes the pathways of higher education – that is, the types of universities and the fields of study. For the former, we distinguish key universities from non-key institutions in our sample. Key universities refer to the world-class universities and national prestigious universities such as the 985 and 211 institutions. The rationale for selecting different sample sizes for key and non-key universities is to provide a quasi-representation of the research population between 1993 and 1999. Key universities are highly selective, accounting for only around 20 per cent of the new recruits to higher education (Liu, 2017). Therefore, 16 respondents from key universities and 52 from non-key universities were recruited to match the selection rates for different types of institutions. For the fields of study, we primarily distinguish the STEM subjects from Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, with 36 and 32 from these respective areas.

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted from one to two and a half hours on average. All of the interviews were conducted in public locations chosen by the respondents, including cafés and restaurants. All of the interviews were conducted in Mandarin; interview data were audio-recorded with the respondents' consent, transcribed in Chinese, and analysed in English. The students' identities and institutions were anonymized, and pseudonyms were coded instead of their real names.

Three rounds of coding were used in the data analysis. First, we relied on open coding to identify the patterns of social attitudes by closely following the words and phrases used by the interviewees. The second round of coding involved identifying the types of narratives on civic beliefs and attitudes informed/shaped by 1) core/ formal learning and knowledge; 2) informal socialization and 3) civil society organisations on campus. In the final round of coding and analysis, we sought to assess whether these beliefs and attitudes represented 1) aacceptance or internalization of knowledge from core/formal learning or informal socialisation on campus; 2) utilization of their knowledge and experiences; or 3) rejection of such knowledge. We further link these patterns of attitudes to students' socioeconomic and regional backgrounds.

Findings

Attitudes on Women and Gender

The men and women in the sample, regardless of their socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds, illustrated contrasting perspectives on gender equality by utilising their knowledge derived from formal learning or reflecting on either their learning experiences with university academics, or their experiences associated with internships or job-hunting. The majority of male respondents believe that the contemporary society is more or less equal between men and women in terms of education, earnings, opportunities, and status. By contrast, the majority of female informants think that women are still at a disadvantage in almost all respects, even with higher education degrees. For example, Junxi Li, a 22-year old urabn undergraduate in a law school, linked his knowledge on civil legislations and the Constitution to gender equality:

> *"The Constitution states clearly that men and women are absolutely equal in legal terms. Particularly in the One-Child generation. I don't see gender inequality. In reality and in legal terms, we are equal".*

When asked to elaborate on why gender equality is particularly relevant to the One-Child generation, he used the example of the 2011 Marriage Law:

> *"The 2011 Law specifies property ownership. When women get married, they can have house co-ownership with their husbands as long as they put in deposits, which is very likely because the women from the One-Child families are treated the same as men".*

However, Junxi's perception of women's equal legal rights contradict existing scholarship on women's disadvantages in marriages, including property ownership and

other material negotiations (Friedman 2005; Hershatter 2004). For instance, Hong-Fincher's (2016) recent research on the 2011 Marriage Law shows that the persistent patriarchal norms in marriage practices allow men to transfer intergenerational assets into house purchases, whilst the women they marry are not likely to be able to match the same level of deposits or assets. This imbalance in intergenerational transfers of assets put women at a particular disadvantage, since the 2011 Marriage Law only recognizes ownership based on the name registered on the property deed (Hong-Fincher 2016:47). Therefore, Hong-Fincher argues that women are shut out from the massive accumulation of financial profits in urban property markets and that they are financially vulnerable in the event of marriage dissolution if they are unable to contribute to equal deposits. Such incidents in the private sphere are in fact a reflection of the persistent inferior status of women in the public sphere – in this case, in relation to their legal status.

Similar to Junxi's views, Diqin Yang, a 24-year-old graduate from engineering and architecture and a rural citizen, used the phrase 'gender differences' rather than gender inequality by drawing upon his job-hunting experiences:

> *"I went to an interview at a company specializing in property development. There was a long queue of many applicants. The girl in front of me waited for more than three hours so we chatted. When it was her turn, the interviewer did not raise his head to look at her and turned her away immediately with a simple sentence: "We don't want women".*

This incident stayed with him, but he did not think this was an act of discrimination. He insisted that it was a matter of '*division of labour*' and that women were not '*suitable*' for jobs like supervising a construction site and working closely with the construction workers, who were mostly male. Diqin's narrative suggested that highly educated males show territorial prejudices against women in their occupational choices.

In contrast to men's apparent obliviousness regarding persistent gender inequality, female informants voiced their frustration and struggle in achieving equal opportunities, particularly in terms of access to the labour market using their knowledge from their fields of study. Haiyu Sun, a 25-year old rural postgraduate in Education Studies, drew upon her undergraduate study on economics and further study of ideology education and discussed the shifting rhetoric regarding the role of women in the Chinese society:

> *"Women have always an important part of the labour force. In the Socialist era female labour meant working at the same communes and factories as men. Since the market reform, the discussions focus on different productivity and division of labour. Now we hear more talk about "men outside, women*

> *inside" or "women returning to domestic duties" and the importance of fude (female virtue). A lot of women my age went to university. It is ridiculous to use this feudal ideology to lecture modern women".*

Haiyu's narrative illustrates that women's life opportunities have been constrained by persistent forms of patriarchy, first by the patriarchal state during the Socialist era and then by the subsequent resurgence of Confucianism regarding traditional female virtues during the market reform. Women's status and opportunities are conditioned upon the state's political agenda and positional competitiveness with men in the labour market (Berik et al. 2007; Friedman 2005). The apparent irony lies in the fact that highly educated and highly skilled women are expected to retreat to the traditional roles defined in the private sphere and thus to tone down their competitiveness with men in the labour market. Furthermore, women are under pressure to 'comply with' the Confucian codes of female virtue, which prescribe their subordinate roles to men.

While Haiyu observed the general shifting attitudes regarding the role of women at the societal level, Xiaonan Cheng, a 20-year old urban undergraduate in Business, drew upon her own experiences of being objectified and discriminated. She expressed her dismay at her lecturer's '*open discrimination*' against women in the class:

> *"A male professor explained youth unemployment one day. He objectified women as investment capital and said a lot of problems or liabilities associated with hiring a female employee, such as maternity leave, age and productivity. By contrast, men are trouble-free for the employer. I was very uncomfortable in his class".*

Xiaonan was frustrated by the lack of compassion and understanding from the male perspective. Moreover, she was appalled by the fact that women are constantly reduced to the economic measures of productivity and efficiency. She perceived that women's responsibilities in the private sphere, including child-rearing and old-age care, were completely bypassed in the external male-dominated rhetoric of competitiveness, cost and returns. Xiaonan expressed her belief that Chinese society is very unequal, with women being under-valued, under-appreciated and increasingly subject to positional competition with men.

Attitudes on Homosexuality and LGTB People

We now turn to examine the respondents' social attitudes towards homosexuality and the civil rights of LGBT people. China criminalized homosexuality until 1997 (Kang 2012). Around half of the informants confirmed that they had met friends or classmates who 'quietly confirmed' being gay or lesbian. When we asked them about their

friendships with their gay acquaintances and whether they should have the same rights of marriage as heterosexual people, most of the respondents expressed their views as 'none of my business' or 'don't support and don't disagree' (DSDD), while they sometimes showed tolerant and even respectful attitudes towards LGBT groups. However, the majority of respondents (65 out of 68) did not support the legalisation of same-sex marriage and civil rights for these minorities.

Generally speaking, female students seemed to be more tolerant than their male counterparts, and students from urban areas were more tolerant than those from the rural areas or small counties. This finding is consistent with previous statistical studies, which highlight the gender and geographical differences in the patterns of tolerance of homosexuality among university students (Lin et al. 2016; Chi and Hawk 2016). Among all the informants, only three students supported the legalisation of same-sex marriage and the protection of their civil rights. The majority of the interviewees had some reservations about homosexuality, particularly regarding the legalisation of same-sex marriage. The narratives represented 1) the utilization of knowledge to justify prejudices and 2) the reflection of socialization experiences to confirm their attitudes.

First, some informants sought to utilise knowledge derived from their studies to justify their prejudices and discrimination. Zhongyu Wang, a 24-year-old postgraduate rural student from a medical school, discussed his views on homosexuality:

> *"To my medical knowledge, homosexuality is a type of mental illnesses. Some people experience trauma early in life, and it is transformed into a distortion of sexuality. Homosexuality is a mental disease which can be cured by medical methods".*

When asked further whether he would consider a different explanation of homosexuality as biologically natural, Zhongyu responded that his view was based on medical knowledge and evidence and was therefore more scientific than other explanations:

> *"A lot of people are very narrow-minded and homophobic. But I am a scientist. I have a lot of sympathy towards gay people. I look at this from my professional viewpoint. It is just a mental illness. Nothing more. It can be cured like many other medical ailments".*

Similar to Zhongyu's view, Zinan Song, a 24-year-old urban postgraduate in legal studies from an elite university, shared the view of homosexuality as a '*mental disease*' but acknowledged that homosexuals should have the right to '*love*' and '*have a relationship in private as long as it is not intrusive to others*.' Differing from Zhongyu's medical approach, Zinan proposed a legal framework which could '*constrain the*

dangerous behavior of homosexuals. 'Both students' narratives illustrated how university education had equipped them with a 'professional language' that justified and perpetuated discrimination and social injustice against LGBT people.

Second, some respondents drew upon their socialisation experiences on campus to confirm their attitudes towards homosexuality. These attitudes vary from the typical social taboo of homosexuality to reflections on the complexity of deep-seated social inequality. Zhaogang Liu, a 22-year-old urban undergraduate in engineering, shared his first-hand experience with a gay university schoolmate:

> *"He was not openly gay but we all knew. There was no conflict. But the dorm-mates tried to keep some distance from him. For instance, if he used the shower in the shared bathroom, nobody would use it again until the cleaning lady cleaned it. We all crammed to the other available bathroom. This was silly, but I followed because I did not want to appear to be different".*

While Zhaogang's experience was a typical response stemming from ignorance and social taboos regarding homosexuality in China, some respondents blamed the influence of 'Western' culture and metropolitan life styles. For instance, Qinzi Yang, a 24-year-old undergraduate in Engineering, related his socialising experiences with his town fellows to justify his attitudes towards homosexuality:

> *"I think more and more people came out as a result of Western culture. I am from a rural village. The people in my hometown were fine (being straight). When they came to Beijing, they were influenced by the trendy homosexual culture. They spent too much time in the bars and clubs around Sanlitun. I think they tried to fit in to the metropolitan culture. We rural folks faced discriminations in Beijing. I guess they just tried to be gay to feel "modern".*

Qinzi's narrative revealed deep-seated cultural conflicts as a consequence of enduring geographical inequality. This confirmed the previous research on persistent discrimination against rural citizens and migrant workers (Gu et al. 2015; Fu et al. 2010). Geographical inequality does not exist only in quality of life and access to educational resources, healthcare and opportunities (Liu et al. 2017). It is also, and more importantly, further amplified in the 'social distance' in terms of languages, habits and lifestyles, particularly between people from rural and urban areas. Such social distance undermines social cohesion between outsiders from small towns and the natives of metropolitan cities. People like Qinzi think that social distance is responsible for his friends' conforming to homosexuality in order to develop a metropolitan identity. Thus, it seems that when people from small towns fail to close this social distance, they use moral judgments to 'criminalise' the metropolitan lifestyle. The toxic consequence of

regional inequality is that both privileged and poor social groups became more socially conservative and exclusive.

The rhetoric and the general attitudes regarding homosexuality among university students have raised serious doubts about the role of higher education and university experiences in achieving tolerance, trust and cohesion in contemporary society. What is surprising is the fact that these university students did not seem to question the existing social taboos. Furthermore, their attitudes toward homosexuality proved to be highly complex, reflecting the deep-seated social distance magnified by geographical inequality.

Attitudes on Migrant Underclass

Having acknowledged the precarious living and working conditions for migrant workers, the informants had divided opinions about what kinds of benefits and entitlements should be available to the migrant workers. The students from rural areas or ethnic minority backgrounds were more sympathetic towards the migrant underclass and called for progressive policy implementations for social welfare, whilst urban students were comparatively less sympathetic and tended to reject social reforms that would allow the migrant underclass to have entitlements equal to those of the urban citizens. While both urban and rural students utilised their knowledge on citizenship to justify their views on the 'Household Registration System' (Hukou) [i] and social entitlements associated with the hukou, the urban students internalised quality citizenship and meritocracy whilst rural students reject such notions.

Among urban students, female respondents' narratives might suggest 'soft' discriminations regarding linguistic and lifestyle barriers to integration into urban communities. By contrast, male students seem to demonstrate 'hard' discriminations against legalising citizenship and providing social entitlements to the migrant underclass. For instance, Yeling Dai, a 22-year-old undergraduate in accounting and finance expressed her attitudes towards the migrant workers:

> *"We (urbanites) all feel a little bit intolerant of them. There are invisible conflicts on a daily basis. Some of them are uncivilised. Their behaviour does not fit the urban citizens' standard".*

Echoing Yeling's perceptions, several urban female respondents mentioned the concept of '*poor quality of citizen behaviour*' in relation to migrant workers. These narratives embody the state's top-down approach of 'quality' citizenship (Murphy 2004), which is embedded the core learning of civic and ideology education. On the one hand, it

prescribes the key areas to 'modernise' citizens – including language, daily habits and education – and to create a homogeneous pattern of citizen qualities. On the other hand, it is used to justify the 'social distance' between the urban and rural population. The underclass status of migrant workers is attributed to their lack of civilised qualities.

If these narratives are interpreted as unconscious soft discriminations against the migrant underclass, the male urban respondents seem to demonstrate another level of intolerance. For instance, Qiuhe Yang, a 23-year-old undergraduate in foreign languages, used his knowledge of quality citizenship to justify his belief that equal citizenship should not be provided to migrant workers: '*Cities like Beijing need good quality citizens, like those who have PhDs from abroad. The PhDs should get the Beijing hukou, not the migrant workers*.' He seemed to use the code of meritocracy to justify the rationale for prioritising those with advanced degrees for legal citizenship. This, yet again, suggests that privilege is self-reproducing and segregating, in the sense that the privileged used education as a reason to perpetuate discriminations. Similar to Qiuhe's ideas about the hukou as a merit-based reward, Zikai Tang, a 24-year-old postgraduate from one of the elite universities, proposed an education-based screening process that would provide some migrant workers with legitimate hukous.

The code of meritocracy, which is primarily used in access to higher education, was proposed by Zikai to be extended to implementing the hukou as a fair mechanism to select those migrant workers with suitable qualities while filtering out those who cannot meet the urban standards. Differing from the clear discrimination and abuse by the urban citizens in some previous case studies in Shanghai and Tianjin (Gu et al. 2016), the highly educated youth in this study used the discourse of citizen qualities and individual merits to 'dress up' their persistent prejudices against the migrant underclass.

By contrast, those respondents from rural areas and from ethnic minority backgrounds rejected the notion of quality citizenship and proposed social reforms to provide migrant workers with social entitlements. Hongxu Zhang, a 20-year old undergraduate in information technology, rejected the concept of quality citizenship by relating his own rural background to that of migrant workers. Having studied in the city as a rural student and experienced persistent discrimination, Hongxu argued that migrant workers' behaviour comes from a lack of self-esteem, not a lack of 'quality'; therefore, '*it is wrong to use citizen quality to judge migrant workers*.' The majority of the respondents from rural backgrounds shared Hongxu's perspectives and argued for more labour protection and entitlements for migrant workers.

Zixia Han, a 22-year-old undergraduate in a law school, further drew our attention to the effects of the lack of citizenship and security on child-rearing and a hardening sense of inferiority among migrant workers. Zixia shared her life story of being a child of migrant workers. The pain and emotional scars from her separation from her parents at an early age stayed with her. Zixia discussed the widely stereotyped image of the children of the migrant workers as 'bear[ii] cubs' ('*xionghaizi*') with an unhygienic appearance and undisciplined behaviour. She adamantly rejected the notion of quality citizenship and highlighted economic insecurity as the source of the problem of childcare. The precariousness of their employment led Zixia's parents to work 24/7 and bounce from one factory to another across almost all of the eastern provinces:

> *"These xionghaizis are not a low-end population. Nor do they lack "quality".
> I was one of the xionghaizis. I was untidy because my parents had to work day
> and night to earn a living, so they did not have time to look after me".*

Furthermore, specialising in civil law, Zixia also utilised her knowledge from her study to argue for the implementation of a universal insurance system that would allow migrant workers to transfer their health and employment insurance across all provinces. In addition, she argued for the legalisation of hukous for migrant workers who stayed and worked in the same city for at least three years, which would help to establish some security for their families.

Discussion and Conclusion

This is a study of how higher education shapes youth attitudes towards gender, homosexuality and the urban underclass in contemporary China. The main conclusions that we can draw from the findings are as follows. Our data provide some new evidence on how university learning and socialisation experiences have affected youth social attitudes towards gender, homosexuality and the urban underclass. We argue that the knowledge from formal learning, informal socialisation and associational activities plays an important role in informing students' or graduates' actions, beliefs and attitudes. The students develop their social attitudes by accepting or internalising their knowledge or experiences; strategically utilising their knowledge and experiences to justify their attitudes; or rejecting the knowledge that they received from university.

Our findings further link these patterns of acceptance, utilisation or rejection to the effect of family characteristics on social attitudes. University students and graduates demonstrate varying levels of positional trust and tolerance according to their

socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics. Rural students demonstrate a high level of tolerance of migrant workers and support progressive social reforms for equal citizenship with the urban population. However, they also show evident prejudices and discrimination against homosexuals.

By contrast, urban students demonstrate varied patterns of tolerance of LGBT people: some of them seem relatively respectful, while others use professional language to dress up their intolerant attitudes. However, they invariably show attitudes of intolerance toward migrant workers, either by soft discriminations, such as those involving language and lifestyle, or by hard discriminations, such as the use of the hukou to prevent equal citizenship and social entitlements. Furthermore, the narratives from the female students or graduates illustrate a higher level of trust and tolerance toward these out-groups compared to their male counterparts, which is consistent with the findings from prior research.

Although past research has suggested a wide range of spill-over effects of public goods, such as liberal citizenship, social cohesion, tolerance and trust associated with higher education, our research does not provide sufficient evidence to support the extension of this argument to the Chinese context. Instead, we argue that higher education might be an alienating factor that creates further social distance between privileged and the vulnerable social groups. First, higher education equips young people with the knowledge and skills that some of them have used to develop a 'professional language' to justify persistent prejudices and discriminations, such as those against homosexuals. Some young people used the knowledge derived from their studies to perpetuate patriarchal norms and values with regard to gender issues. The highly educated urban youth seem to internalise the State's top-down discourse regarding quality citizenship in such a way as to protect their own privileges and entitlements as well as to justify both soft and hard discriminations against the migrant workers.

Second, the expansion of higher education has intensified the competition among educated youth during their university studies and their transitions into the labour market. The competition fetish plays a dual role in affecting the social attitudes of young people. The intensified pressure from the university education and the demand for advanced degrees have drawn students into academic knowledge and skills, which leaves little space for them to develop civic commitments and consciousness. While there is a lack of space for civic activities, the highly educated youth seem to further internalise the ideology of meritocracy. The codes of meritocracy seem to dictate their

social attitudes, and they use these codes to justify persistent discriminations against the rural migrant workers and to strengthen patriarchal values regarding female subordination.

At the contextual level, our findings highlight the toxic consequences of persistent rural-urban inequality on social attitudes. On the one hand, the highly educated urban youth develop either soft discriminations against rural migrant workers or resistant attitudes to legalising citizenship for the migrant underclass. On the other hand, having scant social and cultural resources, the rural students use moral judgments to 'criminalise' homosexuality as a consequence of the metropolitan or urban lifestyle. The result of persistent rural-urban inequality is that both privileged and vulnerable social groups become more socially conservative and exclusive.

On the side of policy, our findings also suggest a vacancy in the civic dimension of higher education. The State's top-down quality citizenship only seems to connect urban citizens with a shared understanding of citizenship. Its discourse is ingrained in the range of narratives, from qualifying urban citizenship to justifying soft discriminations. While there is little evidence of a new generation with progressive and inclusive social attitudes, highly educated youth seem to retreat to a set of traditional values and norms and a narrow radius of tolerance toward out-groups. These conclusions suggest further avenues for future research regarding the relationships among inequality, higher education, and youth social attitudes in China.

Notes:

[i] The Hukou refers to the Household Registration System in China. The hukou identification is issued by local authorities, which links place of residence to eligibility of social entitlements and benefits such as education, healthcare and pension insurances. Migrant workers, originally from rural areas, cannot switch to the urban Household Registration System.

[ii] This term is often used to describe the children who have poor personal hygiene, bad manners and a lack of parental discipline.

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