

# Gay Male Leaders in the Corporate Sector of China: A Phenomenological Study

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## Background, Problem, and Research Questions

The study addresses three research questions:

- How do gay male leaders in the Chinese corporate sector perceive the acceptance of homosexuality in the workplace?
- How do gay male leaders navigate the disclosure or concealment of their sexual orientation at work?
- How does the sexual orientation of gay male leaders influence their leadership behaviours and styles?

The historical evolution of same-sex love and intimacy in Chinese society has been characterized by shifting attitudes. While ancient China displayed acceptance through stories like Long Yang Jun's, the introduction of Western concepts during the late Qing dynasty led to disapproval, with homosexuality even being classified as a mental illness after 1949. However, this perspective changed after homosexuality was declassified as a mental disorder in 2001, coinciding with the emergence of social networking apps for sexual minority groups, exemplified by Blue City's app Blued. Despite these changes, existing research has primarily emphasized the lack of acceptance of homosexuality in Chinese society and workplaces, as seen in studies such as Li & Zheng (2013), Burki (2017), and Wang et al. (2020). In contrast, Western countries, which have shown increased acceptance of homosexuality, have seen research on sexual minority leaders contributing to both leadership studies and societal acceptance. For instance, studies by Chang and Bowring (2017), Griffin-Earnest (2019), and Salvati et al. (2021; 2023) offer insights into differences in leadership styles and effectiveness, the impact of internalized sexual stigma, and leader acceptance.

Studying homosexual leaders in China's corporate sector holds value due to the country's significant sexual minority population. Given the limited existing literature, this study aims to explore the experiences of these leaders, enhancing our understanding of how sexual orientation influences leadership behaviours and processes. By doing so, it seeks to provide guidance for the leadership development of homosexual professionals and foster a more accepting and equitable work environment in China. Through this exploration, the study not only addresses research gaps but also strives to reduce stigma and bias based on sexual orientation.

## Methods

Data for this study were collected through 16 semi-structured interviews conducted with purposefully selected gay male leaders. These participants ensured representation across

various ownership structures and regions within Chinese enterprises. The participants were sourced from the social network of the first author, who had established a substantial network by volunteering for organizations supporting gay men in China. All interviews were conducted electronically via WeChat and covered topics related to participants' sexual orientation and its impact on their workplace experience, both generally and from a leadership perspective. Among the 16 participants, 3 had openly disclosed their sexual orientation at their workplaces, while the remaining 13 had not yet come out. Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Results**

#### *Acceptance of Homosexuality in the Workplace*

Participants' experiences and attitudes highlighted concerns about the lack of acceptance and fear of exposure, especially in environments with low acceptance, such as state-owned enterprises. These concerns often revolved around professional advancement, colleague relationships, and the missed organisational advantages that are generated from heterosexual marriage. However, individuals in more inclusive environments, like multinational corporations, expressed higher self-confidence and authenticity in disclosing their sexual identity, underscoring the significance of fostering accepting workplaces for LGBTQ+ individuals in China.

The study revealed that participants employed various strategies to manage their disclosure or concealment of sexual orientation at work. The majority sought to keep their sexual orientation private, either by downplaying its relevance or due to apprehensions about discrimination and consequences. Some participants chose to present themselves as heterosexual leaders by aligning their marital and parental status with prevailing norms. Opting for compatible workplaces was another strategy, with some participants seeking work environments more accepting of homosexuality. Only a few participants openly revealed their sexual orientation at work, and even among them, it was explained that while they were comfortable discussing LGBT topics, they didn't necessarily present themselves as gay in the workplace.

#### *Leadership Behaviour*

The study participants generally expressed that there is limited connection between their sexual orientation and their leadership behaviour and style. Most regarded their sexual orientation as a private aspect unrelated to their professional role. Nonetheless, some participants noted perceived similarities in the leadership behaviour of gay male leaders, such as greater empathy and a gentler leadership style. Most participants, regardless of their openness about their sexual orientation, believed that their leadership behaviour and style were more influenced by individual personality traits than by sexual orientation. While most participants exhibited supportive behaviour towards their subordinates and emphasized high work standards, their approaches to managing relationships with subordinates varied. Some participants, especially those presenting themselves as heterosexual leaders, maintained strictly

professional relationships to avoid revealing their sexual orientation. In contrast, others formed deeper connections with subordinates based on shared interests and values.

### **Conclusion**

Our findings are consistent with existing research on societal and workplace acceptance of homosexuality in China, encompassing regional variations and acceptance within different organizational contexts. We identified four strategies and related leadership behaviours used by gay male leaders in the Chinese corporate sector to navigate their sexual orientation: privacy, presenting as "normal," coming out, and selecting compatible workplaces. These strategies align with concepts from Social Identity Theory of Leadership (Hogg, 2012) and Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Dienesch & Linden, 1986), suggesting that leaders balance their identity with workplace expectations and adapt leader-subordinate relationships accordingly. Participants' leadership behaviours reflect these strategies, with some adjusting their behaviours to conform to organizational and societal norms, while others adopt more transformational leadership traits, deviating from China's prevalent paternalistic leadership style, and focusing more on supportive behaviours towards subordinates. This approach is potentially driven by a desire to foster reciprocal social exchanges and enhance leadership influence. Overall, the study enhances our understanding of how gay male leaders adjust the significance of their sexual orientation, informing their strategies for disclosure or concealment, and shaping their leadership behaviours. These insights have implications for both research and practice, offering valuable guidance for career development, promoting diversity and inclusion, and advancing societal acceptance of the LGBT community.

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