# From Repression to Performance: An Autoethnographic Account of a Chinese Young Gay Man

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**Abstract:** The inherent tension between traditional ethics and sexual identity among young gay men in Chinese culture has constructed the unique living condition of them. Based on autoethnography, this paper traces a life course focusing on identity negotiation mechanisms of a young gay in multiple fields including family, workplace, school, and online communities. This transformation not only reflects the gradual adjustment of traditional ethics in Chinese modernization, but also provides a reference for understanding the adaptability of minority groups in China.
**Keywords:** Young Gay Man; Coming Out; Autoethnography

## 1.Introduction

This article explicates my entire process from confirming my sexual orientation in high school to fully coming out. The purpose of this study is to explore how a Chinese young gay man resists the pressure of traditional culture and family, and to analyze what factors prompted this change, as well as the differences in my coming out strategies in various situations, and whether my experience is representative of young gay community in China.

## 2.Theoretical Framework：Dramaturgical Approach

Goffman is the founder of dramaturgical theory, and his contribution lies in the first systematic and theoretical application of the metaphor of drama, re-examining social life from this unique perspective. Performance, stage crew, region, discordant roles, off-stage communication, and impression management are the six major components of dramaturgical theory. Goffman points out that society is a stage where people, whether intentionally or unintentionally, use certain techniques to make others form an impression that they hope they will have, and make this impression serve their own purposes[1]. Within the dramaturgical theory, front stage and back stage are two spatial elements that coexist in the dramatic system . The performance of an individual at a specific time presents a certain situation to the audience, which requires the use of standardized, rule-based settings and props. Goffman refers to this area of performance as the front stage. The back stage is the part of the stage that is not seen by the audience and is restricted to the audience and outsiders. The back stage is usually adjacent to the front stage, but they are distinct from each other. On the front stage, people present their socialized selves, while in the back stage, people present the spontaneous, most essential parts of themselves. Goffman believes that sociologists should observe how people transition from the back stage to the front stage

# 3.Methodology: Autoethnography

 As a postmodern research paradigm, autoethnography is a research style and writing form that connects the individual with culture, examining the self within the socio-cultural context[2].。 In other words, autoethnography emphasizes the subjectivity of "I," exploring the relationship between the individual and the cultural and social structure they are situated within through personal narratives.In essence, autoethnography is reflective and serves as a powerful tool for critically examining social power and discursive practices[3][4].

Evocative narrative is also known as personal narrative, and it is a method that researchers tell stories about their academic identitiy and personal characteristics by focusing on the everyday events they have personally experienced[5]. Evocation refers to the purpose of a work contains expression and discussion, rather than the representativeness emphasized by traditional social research. Evocative narratives typically use first-person writing, with the author positioning themselves as the subject of study, thus transcending the separation between the researcher and the subject of study in traditional social research [6].

In this article, "I" possess a dual identity as both a researcher and the subject of research. Through first-person narration and a review of my own life journey, I focus on issues commonly encountered by young gay men, such as identity and coming out. The aim is to convey the voice of a young Chinese gay man to the readers, broadening the depth and breadth of international scholars' research perspectives on Chinese young gay men.

# 4.The story of "I"

## 4.1 Repression: Who am I?

### 4.1.1 Self-doubt and Stigma

I was born in a rural area of central China. Even as a child in elementary school, I felt different from others, often having better relationships with girls. At that time, I was too young to have any concept of sexual orientation. It wasn't until junior high school, when I got access to the internet, that I became aware of the fact that some boys like other boys. However, I didn't consider myself gay at that time. It was during high school that I truly began to contemplate my sexual orientation. At the beginning of my freshman year, I noticed my attention would linger on male classmates. There was a part of me that doubted myself, questioning if I was truly gay and if there was something wrong with me. At the same time, my classmates had negative comments about gay, such as "disgusting" and "sick," which made it even harder for me to identify as gay. In this way, I was equated with disgusting and sick. And finally the scene came when I was under much pressure.

From the perspective of dramaturgy, I did not yet have a clear sense of role as a child, and my frontstage performance differed from social expectations, while the backstage was still a period of exploration. In junior high school, I came into contact with the Internet and learned about homosexuality, but I had not yet self-identified with it. Considering the social stigmatization of homosexuality, it led me to hide my true self in the foreground to avoid being labeled negatively. This internal and external conflict exemplifies the role conflict and impression management strategies in dramaturgy.

### 4.1.2 The dual pressure from culture and family

After confirming my sexual orientation, a period of repression followed. The sources of stress can be mainly divided into two parts: on one hand, the cultural tradition of in China, and on the other hand, my family situation. From the perspective of cultural tradition, the most obvious constraints on individuals may be the ideas of the unity of family and state, familism, and the family-centered approach. Filial piety holds an important position in traditional Chinese culture, as the saying goes, "governing the world with filial piety." . It is in this context of mainstream culture that I decided to temporarily conceal my homosexual identity. From the perspective of family circumstances, I am the only son in my family, and the responsibility of continuing the family lineage naturally falls on me. Undoubtedly, this has put a lot of pressure on me. I told my mother several times that I do not want to get married, but she didn't approve, it is under the dual influence of cultural tradition and family circumstance that I choose to remain silent, thereby also placing myself in repression.

## 4.2 Coming out: Declaration in various fields

### 4.2.1 Peer group field: Start with good friends

I began to consider coming out after starting college, feeling that I had gained freedom. During freshman military training, I

came out to two female classmates from high school who were my best friends at that time. They did not discriminate or look down on me. We often gathered together, and I would share my romantic life with them.

Entering college meant breaking away from my old community and gaining a new arena to reconstruct my social role, providing a more forgiving frontstage with less stigmatizing pressures from before. I chose to come out to two high school friends who belonged to a trusted backstage where I could more safely show my true self without fear of negative judgment.

### 4.2.2 Family field: Multiple aspects of parental reactions

After coming out to my friends, the next question that haunted me was when to come out to my parents? This issue was like a nightmare, causing me anxiety. At that time, I searched online for information about coming out to parents and I always could see a tip that one should wait until they are financially independent before coming out. Back then, I frequently self-depreciated, thinking that even finding a job after college graduation was a challenge, let alone achieving financial independence. So, should I still come out? Between being true to myself and breaking the filial piety, I felt as if there was a force tearing me apart. During the summer after college graduation, under immense psychological pressure, I came out to them. Later, due to psychological issues, I saw a doctor, and my mother found out that the unimaginable pressure I had been under. Now, my parents have completely different attitudes towards my sexual orientation; my father rarely mentions it, while my mother expresses complete respect and support.

My journey of coming out presents the role collapse and reconstruction in the family theater, revealing the deep dilemma faced by sexual minorities in the core kinship network, breaking the performance without financial independence, leading the audience in the family stage into a role perception crisis. The turning point is the incident of the psychiatrist's visit to the doctor, where the intervention of the medical authority reconfigures the rules of the performance, prompting the mother to change from a moral judge to a collaborator in the performance, and reconstructing the discourse of the family theater.

### 4.2.3 The workplace field: the game between professional identity and sexual identity

Between my graduation from university in 2020 and my enrollment in graduate school in 2024, I had several jobs. I worked as a teacher in a kindergarten, and considering the risks of coming out, such as parents may claim that a gay teacher could corrupt children. I initially did not share this with my colleagues. However, one day on the way home from work, while chatting with a colleague, I mentioned that I would not get married, and she immediately asked if I was gay. At that moment, I admitted it, and she told me she wouldn't spread the word. Later, I joined a foreign trade company where everyone was preoccupied with their own work, and there was no need for me to disclose my sexual orientation. I didn't stay long at the foreign trade company before leaving. Finally, I went to educational institution, where I also initially kept quiet. Later, considering that my colleagues were around the same age and more open-minded, I posted a status on my social media feed, setting the leadership as invisible, which implied that I am gay.

My coming out strategies in different professional fields can be seen as a dynamic process of absolute cover-up, strategic cover-up to partial disclosure. Parents have high moral expectations of kindergarten teachers, at which point they are a demanding audience, and I chose to completely conceal my sexual identity by compressing my sexuality into the background to ensure moral impeccability in my frontstage performance. The foreign trade workplace is a depersonalized stage, where my colleagues are the functional audience, focusing only on performance and output rather than personal identity. I follow the irrelevance principle, where sexual identity is completely removed from the front stage performance and becomes a private matter that does not need to be mentioned. In the hosting organization, the younger colleagues constituted a subculture-friendly audience that was more inclusive of sexual minority issues. At this point I planted sexual identity cues in the foreground to screen out allied audiences while maintaining informational ambiguity for conservative audiences.

### 4.2.4 School field: From the cleandestin to the public

During my undergraduate studies, I adopted a completely different coming-out strategy compared to my graduate school. In my undergraduate years, I adhered to a "don't ask, don't tell" policy with my classmates. Unlike in high school, the connections with classmates were not as close, I didn't tell anyone in my class. I only came out to two friends from other departments who I was close with, and they both respected me greatly. Interestingly, my classmate and roommate once asked me if I was gay over dinner, and I nodded. He even said he had long suspected that I was. When I reached graduate school,

whether to come out to my classmates was a concern that troubled me at the beginning of my first year. Especially during casual conversations with classmates, when I heard the remark that all homosexuals have AIDS, I realized that coming out could potentially harm me. However, after coming out to my parents and receiving respect and support from my mother, I wanted to face myself honestly. Being gay is a very important part of my life, and I couldn't possibly hide this aspect of myself throughout my three years of graduate school. I first shared articles about sexual minorities on my social media, then posted photos of myself with my then-boyfriend, and finally chose to publicly come out during some presentation in class.

The shift in my coming out strategy from undergraduate to graduate student is essentially a dynamic assessment and scenario-based adjustment of audience and performance risk, reflecting the complexity of managing the boundaries between the foreground and background in performance. The weak connectivity of the undergraduate class constitutes a low-pressure performance field, so I adopted the strategy of "don't ask, don't tell", placing sexual identity in the background to maintain the image of the class by avoiding any hints of sexual orientation. In graduate school, I did not return to the limited invisibility of my undergraduate studies in the face of a potentially prejudiced audience, but rather reconstructed the foreground through staged performances. My mother's support dissolved the traditional impediment of filial pressure. I was able to import more backstage authenticity into the school field, forming a source of confidence in coming out.

### 4.3 Performance: The Daily Practice of Queer Identity

### 4.3.1 Reconstruction of body symbols

After coming out, especially after receiving my mother's support, I went from feeling ashamed of my sexual identity to feeling proud of it. I began to wear rainbow badges on my backpack and started to customize T-shirts with slogans about sexual identity at Taobao stores. These practices are based on my strong identification and are also a rebellion against traditional gender binaries.

Rainbow badges and slogan T-shirts as symbols constitute what Goffman describes as "front stage performance props". These symbols are not only declarations of self-identity, but also signals of alliance to the outside world, attracting potential supporters and screening hostile audiences.

### 4.3.2 Self-presentation in cyberspace

Not long after coming out to my parents, I publicly shared my sexual orientation on my WeChat Moments, and my friends thought I was very brave. Since then, I have shared stories I've created with gay themes or shared my life insights. I have also met many members of the LGBTQ community on social platforms, which has made me feel less lonely.

Self-presentation in cyberspace can be seen as a "real virtual performance". When I express my sexual identity on the Internet, I go through a process: the first step is to understand the expectations of the potential audience. When presenting myself online, I need to consider different groups of viewers, such as family members, friends, coworkers, or strangers. For example, one might be more discreet in a circle of friends and more open in a specialized sexual minority community. The second step is self-reflection to determine the role I want to play and express who I am through the role of the creator. The third step is to choose a role that balances the expectations of others with the needs of the self. Keeping a low profile in family groups while openly supporting affirmative action on Twitter.

## Conclusion

This article uses autoethnographicand Goffman's dramaturgical framework to outline the trajectory of a young Chinese gay man from identity repression to public performance. This journey is not only an exposure of private experience, but can also be seen as a slice of the situation of sexual minorities in contemporary China. Under the concepts of "being honest" and "being true to myself", I chose to come out under the cultural tradition of filial piety and the pressure of family succession. My coming out strategy varies according to different fields and can be summarized as a gradient exposure process of impression management. What can be seen is that my journey is common among members of the gay community and also reflects individualized differences. It should be noted that the choice of whether or not to come out should be based on one's own reality.

Of course, there are inherent limitations in using autoethnography as a research methodology, and describing my own experience alone cannot encompass the full sample of young gay men. And it should be noted that this review of my life

course is a process of actively sifting through information, making it difficult to be completely objective, and I have not included all the details from repression to performance. However, no one knows me better than I do, I have tried to be as objective as possible in the writing process, but still have an emotional bent. Therefore, this paper can be regarded as a new attempt to understand the cultural connotations and behavioral motives behind a young gay man's journey from repressing to accepting through writing of the process. This paper can provide useful reference for scholars to study young gay men in China and enrich the research methodology of sexual minority studies.

## Funding

## Conflict of Interests

The author(s)declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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