

An Exploration of Transgender Individuals' Identity Experiences in the Chinese Context

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Abstract—With the diversified development of Chinese society, transgender groups have come into people's awareness, but their living conditions are not optimistic. Therefore, the purpose of this preliminary study was 1) to explore the experiences, including main difficulties faced by Chinese transgender people in their daily life, 2) to raise awareness of respect for transgender people, and finally 3) to improve the visibility of social issues among transgender groups in China and try to find ways to make their lives better.

In order to achieve these goals, we conducted a semi-structured interview with four adult trans-identified Chinese participants via the WeChat group. First, the stories indicate that shaping one's transgender identity can be a very challenging process. Second, while there were also positive experiences, Chinese transgender individuals also faced many difficulties regarding their mental health, intimate relationships, public places, hormones and sequelae of transgender surgery, and the shortage of drugs available during COVID-19's pandemic. Third, at present, China's transgender support system is relatively weak. In particular, the family support is not enough, and the development of sexual minority support institutions is still in its infancy. I hope this study inspires legal and social change, contributes to the existing literature on trans studies, and has strong theoretical and practical significance.

Index Terms—Transgender individuals, China, gender identity experiences, difficulties, support.

I. INTRODUCTION

China's rigid gender roles and social environment is severe. This disproportionately affects transgender individuals. For example, 4 million transgender individuals live in China, where 75% have experienced extreme social discrimination (Cai, Wang, Lau, Li, Ma, Liu, 2016) (Zhang, Best, Tang, Liu, Huang, Tucker, 2016). [1], [2] In addition, the 'Transgender population general survey' report in China 2017 showed that most the transgender individuals in China were facing challenging living conditions, for instance, concerning mental health, medical transitioning, and so on. From the previous research, studies of Chinese transgender individuals mainly focus on HIV, which indicates that physical health for transgender individuals is an urgent problem. (Tang, Tang, Meyers, Chan, Chen, Tucker, 2016) [3]. In addition, Ye Zhang and colleagues' research suggests that compared with gay men, transgender individuals were more likely have experienced intimate partner violence and sexual violence (Yan, Lin, Xiao, Lin, McFarland, Yan, Wilson, 2019) [4].

From the above literature, it can be found that the object of study is Chinese transgender. However, not all transgender individuals have the same experiences. We need to differentiate. For instance, research (Yan, Lin, Xiao, Lin, McFarland, Yan, Wilson, 2019) [4] focuses their object on transgender women, indicating that transgender women in China face high social rejection and discrimination along with the unmet need for various types of health care. Although some research pays attention to transgender women, few studies focus on transgender men, and we cannot see what kind of identity experience and what specific challenges they face.

So how are these findings in line with Chinese transgender individuals now? To answer this question, I collected transgender individuals' personal stories around their experiences, including potential struggles they face and how they navigate them.

The purpose of this preliminary study was 1) to help more Chinese people understand Chinese transgender individuals, let more people become sensitive, and raise awareness to respect transgender individuals. 2) I wanted my work to help transgender individuals in China gain more social resources, social support and 3) let the social environment become more friendly and inclusive.

My research was during the epidemic period of COVID-19, which has a specific particularity, while there are mainly these studies in the past literature. During the pandemic, a study (Wang, Pan, Liu, 2020) showed that it is even more difficult for transgender individuals to access hormone interventions and gender-affirming surgeries during the COVID-19 pandemic [5]. Furthermore, transgender research now in China should pay more attention to effective ways to solve the main problem they have encountered and find out the distinction of difficulties or need that transgender man and transgender women have.

As times change, transgender individuals' daily experiences may also vary in the Chinese context. Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges that Chinese transgender individuals face in 2021. This study also aims to summarize the support systems that transgender individuals have and to analyze what support systems may offer in the future to Chinese transgender individuals, as well as to help more Chinese people to understand Chinese transgender individuals and let the social environment become more friendly and diversified.

II. THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

I wanted to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are individuals' experiences of being transgender in the Chinese context?

Transgender individuals are defined as persons whose gender identity and gender expression differ from their biological sex assigned at birth. (White, Towensend,1998)

- 2) What struggles do Chinese transgender individuals face?
- 3) How can Chinese transgender individuals be supported in their non-normative gender identity?

To answer these questions, I used a qualitative research design, as qualitative research pays more attention to giving voice to the interviewees, which was one of my main goals.

Coronavirus prevented face-to-face interviews, so I conducted online semi-structured interviews. I recruited participants via research flyers through transgender Wechat groups in January 2021 (generic purposive sampling). My inclusion criteria were: 1) transgender identifying, 2) living in China, 3) Chinese citizen, 4) over 18 years old, and 5) two transgender men and two transgender women.

In total, I interviewed four transgender individuals; two transgender women and two transgender men. They were between 19 and 31 years old and lived in different Chinese provinces.

Qualitative research allows the selection of a small number of cases (Chenxiangming, 2000) [6], focusing on the in-depth and detailed description and analysis of a phenomenon at the micro-level^[6], so it can help me to have a deeper understanding of the living conditions of transgender individuals.

When we scheduled the interview, I submitted the informed consent form to my four participants. When we started interviewing, I used a topic guide to ask questions, which were divided into four parts. The first part is Introductory Questions, which focus on learning about my participant in more detail. For example, 'K' told me where she lives and the status of their gender. In the experience and the challenging parts, I asked about their experiences and what kind of support they had. In the last part, I created the visual pattern to see what type of environment they genuinely need and what sort of support they need.

Each semi-structured interview took 45 minutes on average. Participants gave good feedback for the interview, and after the interview, I asked them what kind of name could be used in the paper, and they gave me these answers: 'KI' and 'RI' are transgender women; "Lingrong" and "FAN" are transgender men.

A. Ethical considerations

1) Informed consent

In the beginning, I used a recruitment flyer to find participants in the WeChat group. When people contacted me via WeChat and told me they wanted to join in the study, I sent the informed consent form to them. An informed consent form refers to the participants' "right to know they are being studied," (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011) [7] and having "detailed information about what the study will involve" (Miles, Huberman, Saldaña, 2014) [8]._Participation is voluntary, and participants have the right to withdraw at any time (Gibbs, 2018) [9].

2) Reciprocity

Before the interview, I sent a digital thank you card to each of the participants, and my sincerity was shown in this card,

which hopefully increased our trust of each other. Additionally, after the interview, I gave each of them a thank you card via WeChat. KI and FAN gave me feedback that they also benefited from taking part in the research, which made them very happy and more confident.

3) Sensitivity

There was a risk of having painful memories triggering from their past when I asked them some questions. If the respondents had such feelings, they could ask the researcher or refuse to answer the question. I was fully respectful of the privacy and personal freedom of the participants.

4) Anonymity

Linked to sensitivity is the participants' right to privacy. Thus, in this research, anonymity must be used in the study (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011) [7]. 'KI', 'RI', 'FAN' and 'Lingrong' were used in the research after asking what name that they want to use.

In addition, the information of the participants will be kept strictly confidential. When the interview started, I was given consent by the respondent that I could record the audio. Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with a specific individual will remain confidential at the end of the study. All recordings will be deleted, and I will only keep the anonymous transcripts.

III. DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY

I conducted data analysis from February to March in 2021. After obtaining the original data through the semi-structured interviews, I transcribed the data verbatim and applied a thematic analysis via coding and code categorization.

I categorized the codes based on similar wordings and concepts. For example, respondents mentioned that they "had a lot of happiness in the online LGBTQ+community" and "got a lot of help from friends online." These two types of tags are classified as "existing support systems" in secondary coding.

Finally, I tried to figure out how to tell the overall story and how the themes relate to my research questions. For example, consider the second-level coding, "start to dress up after completing your gender identity" and "often go to the gym." To develop admirably handsome muscles, there is a core correlation between the phenomena presented by these secondary codes, which can be described as the process of life change after the completion of gender identity.

Additionally, I wrote memos to help me with the data analysis and overall storytelling.

When completing the coding of the interview data of the four interviewees, I once again sorted out the logical comparison of the commonness and particularity of different interviewees to describe a complete exploration of transgender individuals' experiences in the Chinese context.

IV. FINDINGS

What are individuals' experiences of being transgender in the Chinese context?

THEMES: Time

An important theme is time, because participants have different experiences in different periods. I have found it in each of my interviewees, and each participant has gained a different experience in one way or another, and they are acting at all stages of the transition.

Before transitioning

My interviewees all said that they behaved differently from most people of the same sex at some time. For example, one of the participants before transitioning, KI, a transgender woman, said that she preferred to play with girls and liked people with gentle personalities when she was in primary school. She thought the boys around her were obscene.

“The first time I realized that I was different, about five or six years old, when I was in the primary school, I thought it would be fun to play with girls, and I am more interested in playing games with girls than playing games with boys. When it is quieter and less violent, such as rope skipping and paper-cutting, and you know what I especially want to play with them. I don't like this kind of strenuous activity that the boys play because they are too rude and talk a lot of dirty words.”

Similarly, as a transgender man of 19, Fan showed differences when he was in primary school and spoke a lot about primary school experiences in his interview with me.

“When I was in primary school, I didn't like to play with girls, and I thought all my girls liked dolls, right? But I may prefer things like Altman or racing cars, and then my sports is much better than girls, that is to say, maybe even better than some boys who are good at sports.”

Because all four participants found the differences between themselves and other physiological groups, coupled with the popularity of the Internet, my interviewees learned about transgender groups from the Internet and thought they were transgender individuals. For example, as Fan told me:

“In the process of gender identity, the Internet has helped me a lot. I have met a lot of LGBTQ+ circles through Facebook and Instagram, and I have a deeper understanding of my gender.”

While these online LGBTQ+ groups are important for everyone, in one case specifically what was the driving force was something other than just this online group. To give a concrete example of driving force, I want to talk more about KI's experience. As a trigger warning though, KI story has to deal with addiction and non-consensual genital surgery.

“Sex addiction is an important driving force for me to transition to a transgender woman. I try my best to get rid of my sex addiction. I can only have a gender reset surgery. Before I became a transgender woman, I was sick because of my sexual organs. Sex addiction is killing me. Later, it was only when I was forced to die in front of my parents that they understood me and asked me to have surgery.”

So far, we have focused on people's experiences before transitioning. Now we will consider experiences after transitioning. Some of my main themes here are the way of dressing, hormones, and love.

After transitioning

Dress & Hormones & Love

After the transition of transgender individuals, there is a significant change in their appearance and dress. For

example, RI, one of the transgender women I interviewed, said she started wearing makeup after the transition and bought a dress she liked very much.

“Daily make-up is a new skill for me now, I still in the process of learning to make up. I like white dresses and I love to wear them, you know what, I can let my voice be feminized through self-control. Well, the most exciting thing is that my friends say I am a beautiful girl.”

RI also told me that she already used hormones, which made her “skin smoother” and made her feel “more satisfied with [her] voice.”

One of my interviewees, Lingrong, a transgender man, said his Adam's apple, beard, and voice have changed after using hormones. There are other examples of just how crucial hormone treatment can be for the level of comfort of transgender individuals. As Lingrong said:

“Using hormones can be a very vital part for most transgender individuals, I feel much better after transitioning, I used hormone, and now I have no pain for menstruation and also got the cute beard and had low-fat rate and the most exciting things are that I can make muscle distribution and have a girlfriend.”

Though hormone changed his appearance, it also let Lingrong have an unexpected love. A university sister confessed to him, and they are now very happy together, Lingrong told me happily.

“After using the hormone, I have more confidence in finding a partner. When I was in college, I met love, which is my great harvest after the transition. I am now in love and happy with my partner.”

Except for love, my interviewees share some of the physical and mental states of transgender people after the transition.

Physical Condition & Mental Condition

My participant KI was the only one who had a gender reset surgery. She told me that she felt better in her body, especially psychologically, after transitioning, but she also has a little physical problem after surgery.

“After surgery I feel much better now, and I also feel that I have been reborn, but I still have some sequelae after the operation, such as urine leakage, so I need to go to the hospital for examination every six months.”

But this is not the case for everyone. Fan is worse than before after transitioning. His parents can only reluctantly accept the appearance of Fan. He told me that he got a strong sense of depression.

“After the transition, my parents felt that they could not hold up their heads in front of relatives and friends. I felt sorry for my parents, but I wanted to obey my heart, so I had a strong sense of depression.”

For now, we can generally know some transgender individual's physical and psychological conditions, both of which can relate to their emotions.

Emotion

At present, transgender individuals are more vulnerable to external interference that produces bad emotions, and most of my interviewees are negative after transitioning. My interviewee Fan, a transgender man, had a sense of destructive emotions and he told me these with an angry voice. In terms of drugs, I spend a lot of money, more than 500 yuan in two months, and now I am still a student.

Sometimes I regret it because of the problem of money, and sometimes I

am quite unhappy. Well, I should admit in my heart that I don't need drugs, but I can't go back now, right?"

However, when a person is depressed, the heart will gather more negative emotions, which may lead to emotional collapse and even mental illness, and which will create a vicious circle. (Yang Xueling, 2020) [11]The negative emotions also coming, which means a psychological counseling website for transgender people should be built, which can be set up together with government departments, and the website should be publicized to ensure the psychological balance of transgender people in China.

Benefit after transitioning

My four participants also get a lot of benefits after transitioning, which indicates that it is particularly important for them to transition, and it is also the exciting part, which reminds us that support for transgender people is very necessary. Here are two of their benefits.

KI, one of the transgender women, told me that she was "reborn" and "ma[d]e a lot of new friends who merge as different jobs."

Another transgender man, Fan, also told me that he was very grateful for being able to make the transition and gain a lot from becoming a man.

"The appearance helps them a lot," Fan said. "In particular, for example, when I went to travel outside to go to the toilet, it was very troublesome when I did not change my appearance or did not do something about my gender identity. As a girl, when you travel to the toilet, you will now have a long queue, and then as a man first, it may be very convenient."

As we can see that the interviewees gained a lot of benefits after the transition, which is an increase in their confidence and also supporters. All in all, supporting transgender groups and making them truly equal is a sign of social progress.

Pandemic

This interview coincided with the epidemic period of COVID-19, and some interviewees reported that they were lonely between outbreaks, which reduced the chances of being face-to-face with friends, and aggravated their depression, just like RI told me:

"During the pandemic, it was a dark hour for our transgender individuals who need the drugs to maintain. We have already lost the offline tea party, I like it very much, making me so happy since I can make friends here. However, it only has an online one, and the opening time is decreasing, so I feel lonely in the pandemic."

The epidemic has had a significant impact on transgender individuals who need drugs to maintain their body shape and who need surgery. For example, KI had a bad experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"My surgery sequelae need to be done, but the preparation is delayed because of the epidemic and will be done in mid- 2021, so I feel so upset."

What struggles do Chinese transgender individuals face?
THEMES: Difficulties after passing.

The purpose of this study is first to help more Chinese people understand Chinese transgender individuals; second,

to help transgender individuals in China gain more social resources and social support; and third, to help the social environment become more friendly and diverse. In order to achieve this, I need to investigate the struggles Chinese transgender individuals face at first. Four interviewees told me about the difficulties they encountered in life: psychological, social, and so on.

Psychological Struggles

Psychological struggles are common among the participants. They reported that they have negative moods before transitioning. Difficulties around them impact them so much, RI told me that she got a severe mental problem.

"I seem to be stuck in gender things, and I got a serious mental problem which going to killed me, and I was quickly into deep distress, the mental problem was the toughest one for me, I don't know when will I die."

Similarly for my other interviewees, most of their mental problems are related to "gender." Four transgender individuals face a certain degree of mental depression and helplessness. During the interview, they spent the longest time talking about their psychological problems, and the interview also gave them a platform to express their mental pressure.

Family & Friends

The family was one of the places where the interviewees encountered the most difficulties. Although family seems to be a haven, it has become a place to suffer more harm for transgender individuals. For example, two of my interviewees, FAN and RI, mentioned that they were not understood by the family, and were scolded by them.

"They think me that I was abnormal, and they are so upset and even sobbed in front of me, which makes me stress out, there is no understood between me and my parents." (FAN) "I am so obsessed with girl's dresses, but when I told my family, they are so angry and I feel they are disgusted with me, I can't feel any warmth from my family, which is

horrible."(RI)

Family and friends are very important relationships and also vital support systems for them. Fan and KI encountered a friend-leaving problem after transitioning.

Fan had "discrimination" and "dissatisfaction" from his friends, and KI said:

"Some friends can't understand me after I passing, I can feel that they alienate me, it was so bad."

Public Places

Public places, such as toilets, shopping malls, swimming pools, workplaces, etc., have been created for transgender individuals. Four of my interviewees encountered difficulties in public places.

Airport

Transgender individuals may encounter an embarrassing situation in public such as a security check in the airport, As one of my participants, Lingrong said to me that :

"On some occasions where I need to show my identity card, the changes in my photo and my voice will confuse the security inspectors and will ask other security inspectors to come to check their identity, and the passengers in the queue will also come to take part in the fun. It makes me feel embarrassed."

KI experienced problems in the workplace and she also

mentioned that it would be hard for transgender individuals to change the jobs and find a job. She told me that:

“For me, I had long hair, which is puzzled by colleagues, so colleagues usually criticized me. Well, it is not easy to change jobs because the new environment is discriminated against in the workplace, and transgender jobs are difficult to find, HR thinks that we are different, some of my friends only have part-time jobs, mostly part-time jobs with low wages such as handing out flyers.”

Transgender individuals encounter more difficulties when looking for a job and work. In contrast, the income of the job they find is not ideal, so they can't afford to buy drugs, and illegal channels are expensive for drugs, and you need a lot of proof to get the medicine prescribed by the doctor.

Just like RI said: “It is difficult for transgender individuals who need drugs urgently and in some special time.”

In addition to the workplace, the transgender individual meets problems in the school. The other three interviewees are still in college and living in the school dormitory, where they are discriminated against by their roommates. Lingrong became a little depressed when he told me about it.

“You know, I have already transitioning but I still living in a girl's dormitory, which is awkward, and I even had discrimination by my roommates.”

Additionally, going to the hospital for medical examinations and the fitting room in the shopping mall are places transgender individuals are afraid of. These places have no friendly measures to offer.

RI said: “I am afraid to go to the dressing room, afraid of physical examination, afraid of security check and the toilet, my heart is not so strong, but I hope we can be understood and treated well by more people.”

Hormones & Surgery

In addition to the difficulties in public places, Chinese transgender people also encounter corresponding difficulties in hormone use and surgery.

Hormones are the first choice for many Chinese transgender people. Taking hormones not only changes their appearance and voice but also gives them a lot of physical benefits (Liu, Xin, Qi, Wang, Hong, Yang, Pan, 2020) [10]. However, many Chinese transgender people say that hormones are also considered an important difficulty.

Lingrong told me that he would be very uncomfortable after using hormones. First, his temper would become very grumpy, and the second was that he had a lot of acne on his face, which was very uncomfortable, causing severe skin diseases.

“My mood swings a lot, and since my voice change, people around me were puzzled, the worse one is that I got bad acne in my face, which drives me mad.”

And so does KI. She experiences problems, too. She told me that:

“I was a little embarrassed because I get bigger breasts under the influence of hormones, which seemed bad that I need to camouflage by wearing loose clothes.”

Besides, gender reset surgery has become the choice of many Chinese transgender people. Among the interviewees, only one transgender woman underwent gender reset surgery, and she had a lot of sequelae after the operation, which impacted her life.

“Before I was able to do the surgery, there are various obstacles in front of us; for example, one of the difficulties is issuing a no-criminal record certificate for surgery and also notarizing an operation after surgery it causes urethral deviation surgical sequelae problem.”

Although Chinese transgender people face many difficulties and challenges, we formulate strategies and expand support systems for their suffering through orderly planning. The future of Chinese transgender people will be bright.

How can Chinese transgender individuals be supported in their non-normative gender identity?

Theme: plans for after passing & for future

Plans for after passing that Chinese transgender individuals have identified as important reference the significance of providing them with support for non-normative gender identities. This shows the vital need to establish more friendly measures for them to ensure that they can complete their plans, like getting gender reset surgery more smoothly and be better in the future.

Plans for gender reset surgery

Even though gender reset surgery can be harmful, many of the interviewees have plans for this surgery in the future. This also reflects the importance of expanding the support system to some extent. Transgender people need more support in China to reduce the negative effects of surgery on their psychology and lives. Among the interviewees, Lingrong and RI have to plan for gender reset surgery, and they told me that: “I wanted to have surgery when I was in college, you know, this is my dream, but I didn't have enough money now.”

(Lingrong)

“Well, I change my appearance and be more gentle in the future, and have Vaginal cosmetic repair surgery, yes, I want to do this.”(RI)

KI put forward her opinions on the future development of surgery.

“The procedures before the operation should be simplified, or it is not good for transgender individuals.”

It is necessary to improve the procedure of gender reset surgery, improve doctors' medical skills, use science and technology to enhance the quality of gender reset surgery, and create a high-quality medical environment for transgender people in China.

Better social interaction in the future

Chatting with friends, participating in tea parties for Chinese transgender individuals online, etc., all belong to social interaction. In the process of social interaction, which can make themselves more valuable, they get out of their comfort zone, get to know more and more different people and things, and love life more and more, which helps to reduce the generation of negative emotions. In my four of my participants, they are all into the social interaction, just like my participant RI told me that:

“Thanks to the Internet, which create my new channel making friends, well, it is positive, I love it. I frequent daily participation in online LGBTQ community tea parties, and I can feel that my social status is better and later, I set up my small team and create my official account.

Suggestion to China future

At the national level, Fan sees that China needs to learn

from countries that have done an excellent job with gender issues and adopt legal safeguards in the future.

“Like the Nordic countries, the government has abolished the so-called male and female identity between men and women since childhood, such a situation that men and women must be the divide. The application of these experiences can be carried out on a pilot basis in some provinces in China to promote the development of "gender" in China step by step. And I also think drugs are guaranteed by the government to reduce the cost of drugs and do not need to be imported.”

Gender education for future

Gender education is essential in the future. Only by speeding up the popularization of gender knowledge in China can Chinese transgender people gain the understanding of many people. In the future, gender education should be aimed at young students and needs to train parents who have just given birth. Parents need to receive an education.

It is crucial to establish a training mechanism for parents to let them know the concept of gender. If you understand the differences in gender identity, you will be prepared when the child is born, and you may be able to understand the child in the future better.

V. CONCLUSION

In sum, my research aimed to explore the daily life of Chinese transgender individuals and the main difficulties they face, find their support system, and try to find ways to make their lives better.

At the same time, it has also taken a small step in identifying the problematic differences and requirements between transgender men and transgender women.

Though this is only a preliminary study, it provides theoretical support for the government and a small number of sex-related institutions and enriches the existing literature. My findings also explore the challenges that are commonly communicated with other studies, for example the preliminary research only tells us part of the situation. Still, it gives us an understanding of the future and the importance of the topic.

Future research should deeply investigate and analyze one of the significant and urgent difficulties faced by Chinese transgender individuals, such as no transgender-friendly facilities in public places and explore ways to solve these difficulties. In addition, the current transgender research in China should first pay more attention to finding effective ways to solve the major problems they encounter and find out the differences between the difficulties or needs of transgender men and transgender women.

Continuing this research is important. It is urgent. What makes it urgent is mental health, the challenges people face daily, and the hope that came across with some of the stories you heard. And then, just as a reminder, if you

remember, all four participants I spoke to said that before and after the transition, they had more negative emotions than positive emotions. Mental illness was always with them, so this is an essential reason to support them. They found their value in the process of gender identity and transformation and used their strength to empower themselves and sexual minorities after the transformation. Therefore, my paper also illustrates the importance of providing support to transgender individuals in China through future research and substantial legal and social changes.

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