



Cultural Navigation and Spatial Integration: The Experience of Chinese Queer Immigrants in Manchester's Urban Public and Queer Spaces

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Abstract. This study explores how Chinese immigrant Queer communities interact with public spaces in Manchester, focusing on how social and cultural backgrounds influence their participation and integration. Using queer theory and ethnographic methods, it reveals the impact of social, educational, and cultural factors on their experiences, highlighting both opportunities for inclusion and ongoing racial and cultural biases. The findings emphasize the need for continued efforts to enhance inclusivity in urban Queer environments.

Keywords: Chinese Queer, Urban Public Spaces, Culture, Manchester, LGBTQ+.

1 Introduction

As I walked through Manchester's vibrant streets, the city's diverse cultures and identities unfolded before me. This journey aims to explore the interaction between Chinese immigrant Queer communities and public spaces in Manchester, focusing on the influence of social and cultural backgrounds on their participation and integration into local Queer spaces.

Sedgwick's definition of queer as "a fluid network of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances" captures the complexity central to queer theory^[14]. José Esteban Muñoz emphasizes its aspirational orientation toward imagining alternative worlds^[13]. Michael Warner views queer as challenging normative frameworks, especially heteronormativity^[15]. Cohen extends this to show how queer intersects with social, cultural, and educational backgrounds, complicating normative structures^[7]. Thus, queer theory examines systemic inequalities and exclusions, serving as an epistemological approach that challenges assumed norms. As researchers suggest, queer theory lacks a fixed political referent or subject, positioning itself as a methodological approach to understanding the complexities of normativity^[8]. This perspective aligns with the broader goals of queer theory to disrupt and critically analyze established norms rather than to reinforce or replace them with alternative identities.

The queer theory draws from postmodern feminism and gay and lesbian studies. Foucault's genealogical approach argues that sexual identities are constructed through power discourses^[9], while Judith Butler's concept of gender as performative suggests

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that gender is an ongoing act^[4]. In sociology and geography, queer approaches challenge traditional notions of the modern subject and expose socio-spatial dynamics^[2]. Queer anthropology disrupts assumptions, opening new ways of thinking about sexuality and gender^[16]. These studies reveal that what is considered "normal" or "deviant" varies widely across cultural contexts, challenging universalizing notions of sexuality and gender. Queer anthropology also critiques the historical focus on same-sex desires and gender transgressions, advocating for a broader understanding of queerness that includes various forms of non-normativity and resistance^[8]. This perspective is essential for understanding how social, cultural, and educational backgrounds shape the experiences and interactions of Chinese Queer individuals within Manchester's Queer communities, as well as their role in urban space regeneration.

I draw upon foundational work on Queer spaces, which shows how spaces are often heterosexually produced and how non-normative practices by gender and sexual identity minorities actively "queer" these spaces^[2]. The concept of Queer space challenges traditional notions of spatiality, revealing how Queer individuals and communities appropriate and claim urban spaces. Manchester's Queer spaces are multifaceted and evolving. Research on the formation of "gay villages" highlights the political and economic dimensions^[1], emphasizing the influence of urban regeneration on these enclaves. Chinese Queer individuals in Manchester navigate these spaces with unique social, cultural, and educational backgrounds that shape their interactions and experiences. This critique extends to the spatial practices within Manchester's Queer community, where issues of culture and race intersect to create complex layers of inclusion and exclusion. Through this research, I aim to contribute to the broader discourse on Queer space, highlighting the importance of considering intersectional factors such as education, race, and cultural background.

2 Methodology

Ethnography is a qualitative research method that involves immersive observation and interviews to study people and cultures^{[11], [12]}. With critiques emerging respecting its very colonial origins and potential to further Western hegemonies, ethnography has refashioned to make dense, contextually-based insights into human behavior and social interactions possible^[6]. Queer ethnography challenges hegemonic assumptions about sexuality and gender through the examination of fluid and performative dimensions of identity^{[5], [10]}. This methodology engages heteronormativity and homonormativity constructions and the ways these constructs shape queer lives^[3]. This approach pays attention to the complexities that queer theory brings into play for queer identities, which are usually not able to be captured using traditional methodologies.

During my master's studies in anthropology, I conducted a year-long ethnographic study in Manchester, including two months of intensive fieldwork. I interviewed 15 individuals, ensuring diversity in gender and age; To capture the complexities of Chinese Queer individuals' experiences in both Western and Chinese cultural contexts, I focused on how they navigate their identities and activities within these dual environments. Furthermore, there were occasions when I engaged in participant observation by

visiting various queer places such as bars, clubs, cafes, and community centers. I also participated in day-to-day activities with participants, such as attending Drag Queen shows and Pride parades, to gain nuanced insights. This immersive approach provided a deeper understanding of how these spaces are used and transformed by the Queer community. Moreover, I consulted archives, news reports, and historical documents on the development of queer spaces in Manchester.

3 Discussion

Chinese Queer individuals in Manchester navigate their dual cultural identities within the local Queer community in diverse ways. Many others like Li who is a Chinese gay man aged 31 years outlined his story from being reticent as far as participating actively in Manchester Pride. "At first I was afraid to join the local Queer community group because I did not want my cultural background to make me look different. Nonetheless, it didn't take long before acceptance, and a place where I felt that I belonged were established. These findings highlight the importance of creating spaces that promote gradual integration without alienating members based on their cultural identity. The sense of belonging that Li eventually found is crucial for understanding how immigrant Queer communities navigate and contribute to their local environments.

Social and educational backgrounds influence Chinese Queer individuals' experiences, but an individual is key in transforming Queer spaces. Mei, a 27-year-old transgender woman with a master's degree, exemplifies this. She noted, "My education helped me understand and advocate for my rights more effectively. It also made me more comfortable participating in local Queer events and activities. One of the methods I use is organizing cultural events and being involved in community projects, I think that this way I am contributing to making Manchester a more flexible and open city." Mei's experience demonstrates individuals shaped by education and social background, foster cultural integration and urban regeneration.

Interviews revealed that while there is a general spirit of inclusivity, underlying tensions do exist. For example, some participants reported experiences of subtle racial and cultural biases. Liu, a 46-year-old Chinese gay man, reflected on this experience: "There is an openness, but sometimes I feel there are implicit biases. It's not always overt, but it affects how I interact with others in these spaces." This dynamic indicates that while public spaces strive to be inclusive, there are persistent challenges related to racial and cultural diversity. Addressing these issues requires ongoing dialogue and initiatives to bridge cultural divides and foster genuine inclusivity.

Through interviews, it becomes apparent that the collision of Eastern and Western cultures deeply affects Chinese Queer individuals. Some interviewees, like Xiao, a 52-year-old non-binary individual, shared their experiences of participating in both Chinese and Western Queer activities. "In China, I often felt restricted, but here in Manchester, I found freedom in expressing my identity. However, balancing these two cultural perspectives can be challenging." Manchester's diverse cultural landscape fosters a complex balance among various Queer communities. My research uncovered a dy-

dynamic of interaction and occasional friction between different cultural groups. The integration of Chinese Queer individuals into broader Queer spaces is often mediated by their interactions with other community members and their own cultural and social positioning.

The historical and cultural contexts of LGBTQ+ rights in the UK and China profoundly shape the experiences of Chinese Queer individuals in Manchester. Contemporary identity negotiations around queerness take place against a historical backdrop of LGBTQ criminalization and a slow move towards toleration in Britain. However, China has recently made legal advancements, which have been constrained by ongoing social conservatism as well as political restrictions. Emerging queer identities in these contexts are shaped by different historical paths and expressed through diverse cultures.

Manchester Pride exemplified an increasing acceptance trend despite existing challenges towards criminalization in the UK. In China, however, even though homosexuality is no longer illegal in the country, society's attitudes and government censorship continue to hinder visibility and activism among LGBTQ groups. These divergent stories reveal the different levels of freedom and acceptability that Chinese Queer individuals in Manchester went through.

Besides, taking into consideration issues of intersectionality and socio-cultural dynamics like race, disability, and class within the historical context of UK society vis-à-vis traditional Confucian values and political conservatism in China might be more comprehensive. Public conversation on LGBTQ+ issues in the UK has made significant progress with many initiatives aimed at celebrating achievements as well as educating the public. However, backlash from conservative segments highlights the ongoing tension between visibility and societal acceptance. On the other hand, although it is tightly controlled in public discourse, there are emerging spaces for queer expression such as film festivals or online platforms which become important to visibility for advocacy purposes. Indeed, efforts point out how resilient the Queer communities could be when making their way through limited environments.

Profoundly impact on social background; educational performance showed high participation. Higher education often provides connections that make it easier to navigate Queer spaces. Queer Chinese people with more privileged educational backgrounds are able to comprehend and advocate for their rights in a deeper way that allows them to participate both academically and within the community of Queer. This educationally advantaged position also enables less uncomfortable involvement in local Queer activities and events. On the other hand, taking part in these events is another important way through which they exert themselves. Through organizing cultural festivals, community workshops, and advocacy groups among others; Chinese queer individuals contribute towards a more inclusive and diverse urban environment. These efforts encourage cultural exchange as well as contribute to Manchester's queer culture with unique perspectives and traditions hence broadening the city's queer cultural awareness. Making Queer events and spaces Chinese-oriented will increase the cultural sensitivity of the indigenous.

Moreover, Chinese Queers have played a crucial role in establishing support systems that cater to their specific needs as a community. The networks offer invaluable re-

sources such as mental health services, legal advice, social assistance, etc., so that individuals can navigate through the intricacies of intersecting marginalizations. Workshops and seminars are the places for LGBTQ+ rights, cultural sensitivity, and intersectionality studies. The education and empowerment of the Chinese and Queer communities in turn are also promoted and these cultural gaps are more or less filled while the awareness of more inclusive Queer identities is raised. They are the ones who play the main role in setting up events, such as the Pride parade, cultural festivals, or community gatherings, which bring community members together, and make them feel that they belong to the mixed group which they are. These contributions are very important in creating adaptable and culturally integrated urban environments in Manchester.

These results indicate the coexistence of cultural diversity and public spaces as both the facilitators and inhibitors of integration that the Queer community has to deal with. Understanding these dynamics is essential for fostering more inclusive and supportive Queer spaces that address the diverse needs and experiences of all community members. The situation of contemporary urban public spaces where queer identities and public spaces are in close relation with both historical legacies, cultural contexts, and personal narratives makes it not only rich but also easier to analyze.

4 Conclusion

This research attempted to examine how Chinese Queer immigrants in Manchester engaged in public areas and what factors influenced their integration. Their social, educational, and cultural backgrounds are the major determinants of their immigration process. A queer theoretical lens was used by the study to see the city from the perspective of queer people and explain how they perceive the city. The results of this study show that public spaces have a great impact on assisting in harmonious living or obstructing it. Their better educational and social background would additionally serve to facilitate better understanding between them thus enhancing community solidarity. The UK and China have very different historical and cultural backgrounds in terms of LGBTQ+ rights that are going to affect how Queer identities are going to be expressed and integrated. The findings will help the community to have a deeper understanding of the diversity they are facing and thus make them able to better support their fight. The findings provide insights for scholars, activists, and policymakers committed to supporting diverse Queer communities.

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