

On the LGBT Activism in Mainland China

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THE 21ST CENTURY has witnessed the rapid growth of the LGBT movement in mainland China. A bigger and more diversified LGBT community has emerged along with a more tolerant attitude from both government and society. This article aims to delineate this complicated development.

Before 2000 homosexuality was still an extremely sensitive topic in mainland China. [\[1\]](#)

Gay and lesbian organizations were quite undeveloped and there was little visibility within the general public or in the mass media. Thanks to the development of the internet, however, and under the blossoming of the global LGBT movement, the recorded gay and lesbian community first began to develop in Beijing in the early 1990s.

By 2012 more than 100 LGBT organizations have been established in various parts of mainland China. [\[2\]](#) Numerous online groups dealing with different LGBT issues have been set up. All over the country LGBT activities have attracted attention from both the mass media and the general public. Most important have been street activities against homophobia on IDAHO (International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia) and celebrations of Gay Pride Month in June. [\[3\]](#)

Although technically homosexuality is not considered illegal, it is nonetheless considered immoral by the government and therefore a political incorrect topic to appear in the mass media. Most LGBT representations in the mass media stigmatize homosexuality as a perversion and identify homosexuals as promiscuous and potentially infected with AIDS. Despite the stereotyping, there are more open discussions about gays and lesbians in the newspapers and on TV.

Inside the LGBT movement, it is actually the gay movement that dominates. Lesbians and other sexual minorities are quite marginalized. There are also conflicting opinions on various issues, mainly between the gay and lesbian communities. These include the cause of homosexuality as well as how to deal with mainstream heteronormative values, including the legislation of gay marriage.

Three key words could summarize the LGBT movement in mainland China: ambiguous tolerance, conflicting diversification and strategic divergence.

Although it seems that the government and the society tolerate homosexuality, such tolerance is questionable, and different strategies have emerged within the LGBT movement over gender/sexuality. As I have been mainly involved in the lesbian community, my focus is from the perspective of a participant-observer within the lesbian movement.

First, I will point out how attitudes in mainland China moved from seeing homosexuality as a taboo to more tolerance. This change is mainly based on opinions from the juridical system, the medical establishment, the mass media and the academy.

I will then briefly review the general development of the LGBT community in mainland China and foreground the strategy that the gay community has adopted around AIDS prevention. I will next discuss situations the lesbian movement confronted and outline the different strategies lesbian activists adopted.

Finally, I offer my preliminary criticism about the LGBT movement and conclude with my expectation of how such a movement can go beyond identity politics to building a coalition framework.

From Taboo to Tolerance

Ancient China had a long history of tolerance towards homosexuality. As a matter of fact, same-sex love and intercourse were quite common and acceptable among males in different dynasties, especially within the royal family and in intellectual circles. As long as the men fulfilled their duty of carrying on the blood tie by marrying and having their own children, they were free to engage in these relationships.

It was not until the May Fourth Movement (1917-21) that the concept of “homosexuality” as sexual inversion was introduced into China. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, homosexuality became taboo and was rarely discussed.

In the 1980s homosexuality was only mentioned in studies on sex and psychology as a perversion and abnormality, a product of Western capitalism. Although there was no specific law against homosexual behavior, homosexuals could be arrested and punished under the crime of hooliganism.

This crime was cancelled in 1997 — a date considered a landmark event in the decriminalization of homosexuality. However, some experts and gay activists feel the definition of hooliganism was too vague, and the reason it was wiped off the books was to reform the legal system, not to show tolerance toward homosexuals.

In 2001, homosexuality as a perversion was delisted from psychology texts; three years later the Ministry of Health in China wrote the first white paper on homosexuals. Although mainly an investigation of the number of gays affected with HIV, this was followed a few days later with the first open discussion on gays and AIDS on a CCTV program, “Facing up to Homosexuality rather than Ignoring It” (Tongxinglian: Huibi buru Zhengshi). [4]

No longer perceived as the corruption from the west, homosexuality was stereotyped as promiscuous behavior that could lead to AIDS. Over the past few years there have been an increasing number of reports and open discussion, some quite neutral or even sympathetic, such as one on gay marriage over Ifeng TV in 2012. [5] More commonly, however, homosexuality is either associated with AIDS or as entertainment one might consider voyeurism.

On the other hand, more attention has been paid to the LGBT community in the academy. There are an increasing number of university courses on LGBT issues such as Fudan University and Sun Yat-sen University. [6]

Three of the earliest and most influential scholars facilitating studies on gender/sexuality are Li

Yinhe, Zhang Beichuan and Fang Gang. The first, a very famous sociologist on sex and sexuality, has been submitting a legislative proposal for gay marriage ever since 2003. This has helped to increase the visibility of the LGBT issue.

No longer a taboo subject, homosexuality remains a sensitive topic in many aspects of life including the mass media, the workplace and inside the family. Still considered immoral, homosexuality as an issue is under censorship in the official newspapers, movies and TV programs.

LGBT organizations are not allowed to legally register with the government and therefore most are underground. "Coming out" to parents is still the biggest difficulty for most. As tolerant as the society has become, outside the LGBT community most gays and lesbians still keep their sexual orientations a secret in the workplace and in the family. In summary, such tolerance seems superficial and ambiguous.

Development of the LGBT Movement

Beginning as small private gatherings in a foreigner's house in Beijing, the LGBT movement moved on to some bars in the early 1990s. In those gatherings, activists made connections and started to organize activities together.

In 1997 and 1998, some gay and lesbian activists participated in the Chinese Tongzhi Conference in Hong Kong, in which they were able to identify with the new term of "Tongzhi" for Chinese homosexuals. They also developed ties with Chinese gay and lesbian activists in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and North America.

LGBT communities have developed unevenly, being particularly strong in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The LGBT community in Beijing seems to be the movement center in mainland China. It has the most authoritative LGBT organizations, the most diversified activities, and the closest connection with international foundations.

The Beijing LGBT Center (Beijing Tongzhi Zhongxin) [7] is comprised of four famous organizations: Aizhixing AIDS Organization — mainly dealing with the AIDS prevention and the promotion of the knowledge on AIDS, [8] Tongyu Lala Organization — the most authoritative lesbian organization in China, [9] Aibai Cultural and Education Center — one of the most authoritative gay organizations, [10] and Les+ — the first published lesbian magazine. [11]

In addition, Beijing Gender Health Education Institute promotes education on LGBT issues and closely cooperates with different organizations to hold some big LGBT events. [12]

Compared to the private gatherings and activities inside the community in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the movement now holds important LGBT activities and public events all over China. Since 2001 the Tongzhi Film Festival (later changed to Queer Film Festival) has been organized by the queer activists in Beijing. The other big event held in Beijing is the national LGBT conference, where almost all the LGBT leaders from various parts of China gather and discuss the different issues and future development.

Another important LGBT event — the Rainbow Media Awards Ceremony — has been held in Guangzhou from 2012 to 2013. This event gives awards to the press and TV programs that portray LGBT characters and issues positively.

Since 2009, LGBT activists in China have organized different anti-discrimination against sexual

minorities on IDAHO day. In June, the LGBT organizations hold diversified activities to celebrate Gay Pride Month. The Gay Pride Festivals held in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou have been the grandest.

With the introduction of the internet in 1998, the LGBT movement spread throughout China. Although censored, the internet remains the most convenient way for local gay and lesbian activists to get in touch with more experienced activists, to connect with the international LGBT community and a great resource for grassroots lesbian and gay organizations.

As a result of these international connections, gay and lesbian organizations in mainland China have also adopted the inclusive term LGBT for self-identification instead of “Tongzhi,” so as to be geared to the international LGBT movement.

I would point out, however, that the development of the gay community developed very fast because of the government and international foundation funding on AIDS prevention. Other sexual minorities, and mainly the lesbian community, have fewer resources and less visibility. As a result, gay and lesbian organizations have developed differently.

AIDS has been a double-bladed sword for the gay community in mainland China. On the one hand, because of the high HIV rate among gays, the government could no longer ignore them. While stigmatizing gays as being promiscuous, the government had to subsidize gay organizations in order to promote AIDS prevention and education.

With such funding, gay organizations have been able to grow quickly but are also under government surveillance. They have a pact with the government to supervise and control gays with HIV. This means reporting gays with HIV to the government and making sure they are within the medical system.

Confronted with this stigmatization, the movement has responded by establishing a gay image as “sunshine.” That is, gays are presented as having a positive and monogamous lifestyle. Draping the LGBT community with mainstream heteronormative values has been questioned by other gay as well as lesbian activists. Unlike the gay movement in mainland China that has official funding and visibility because of AIDS, the lesbian community has limited resources and remained invisible to the government and public.

The Lesbian Movement “Lala”

Lesbian activists have adopted different strategies to make their movement, overwhelmed by the gay movement in the 1990s, an independent, visible and diversified presence with transnational connections. The Fourth UN Conference on Women and its NGO forum held in Beijing in 1995 has been considered a milestone not only for the whole LGBT movement in mainland China for bringing in the concept of “NGO” organizing of LGBT organizations, but also for connecting local lesbians with the foreign lesbian activists.

Until then most feminists in China did not know lesbians existed in Beijing. The conference inspired the early development of the lesbian movement and its cooperation with feminists more linked to the state (“state feminists”). However, at that time homosexuality was still considered taboo and such cooperation did not last.

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, the development of the lesbian movement went up and down. With the development of the internet, however, came the possibility of linking lesbian activists

in different places of China, and with lesbian organizations abroad. At that time, “Lala” [13] began to be used as a way of self-identifying and gradually replaced “Nu Tongzhi” (Female Tongzhi) and “lesbian.”

In 2005 two important lesbian organizations were established in Beijing. Tongyu, founded by the veteran lesbian activist Xian, is the most famous and authoritative lesbian organization in mainland China. It planned the earliest performance art on gay marriage in the public space in 2009, attracting attention from the mass media.

Having staged what is believed to be the first performance art on gender/sexuality issues, Tongyu has re-oriented its function to be a resource platform to new lesbian organizations. It offers all kinds of material support, including funding and training. Meanwhile Beijing Lala Salon, under the help of Xian, offers cultural activities in the form of a salon for Beijing lesbians.

In fact, there are three important strategies that lesbian activists have discussed. The first is that movement has re-established subjectivity as “queer lala” (ku’er lala), based on the appropriation of the queer theory and declared independence from the gay movement in the “Pretty Fighter Debate.” [14] The second is negotiating with and contesting against the feminist movement through the emergence of the “feminist lala.”

The third is a transnational connection with the establishment of the authoritative transnational lesbian organization — the Chinese Lala Alliance (CLA) — to facilitate sharing experiences with veteran Chinese lesbian activists from Hong Kong, Taiwan and North America.

CLA was established in 2007 by Chinese lesbian, bisexual and transgendered activists from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and North America. As a transnational organization, it facilitates the exchange of movement experiences among those four areas. Its purpose is to enhance the development of the lesbian movement in mainland China with mature experiences from Taiwan, Hong Kong and North America.

CLA offers the most important national lesbian activity annually — Lala Camps, where active lesbian activists from different parts of mainland China meet well-known lesbian activists from Hong Kong, Taiwan and North America. Together they share their experiences and strategies. In 2009, Les+ — the first published lesbian magazine in mainland China, under the direction of Tongyu, was also successfully launched.

There are also some quite famous lesbian organizations in other places that have played an important role in the lala movement. These include Nv’ai in Shanghai, [15] Relax Lala Association in Xi’an, [16] and Sinner B in Guangzhou. [17]

Sinner B was established by the feminist lalas in 2012, and marked a new kind of subjectivity for both the lesbian movement and the feminist movement in mainland China. Posing the possibility of cooperation between feminists and lesbians it also provoked some heated debates as well.

Queer Lalas — the Pretty Fighter Debate

On 11 December 2011, an account called “Pretty Fighter” was registered in Weibo and a manifesto issued proclaiming “We are lalas. We are queer. We want to speak out.” [18] Such “we” as “ku’er Lala” — queer lalas, according to “Pretty Fighter” — meant all the marginalized sexual minorities including lesbians, bisexual, and transgender people, who had been altogether marginalized in the gay movement.

Such a response can be traced back to three articles published by Aibai (a prominent gay organization) in mainland China that used a biological-essentialist argument to explain homosexuality. These claimed as scientific fact that homosexuality is inborn and argued that queer theory was harmful for the LGBT movement in the Chinese context.

“Pretty Fighter” challenged this biological-essential discourse and made the counter-argument from queer theory that there is a plurality and fluidity of sexual desire. This challenge caused a debate within the whole LGBT community and gradually revolved around arguments on whether there was gender dominance in the movement.

Fifteen days later CLA made their official response in support of “Pretty Fighter,” publishing their statement through Tongyu’s website. [19] CLA emphasized the importance of the independence of the lesbian movement in mainland China and called for “lalas” to get rid of their passive position as an appendage to the gay movement, and speak out for themselves. This statement actually formed the declaration of independence of the lesbian movement as queer lalas.

“The Pretty Fighter Debate” is as one of the landmark events within the LGBT movement. It raised the issue of whether to explain the existence of homosexuality on essentialist or queer arguments, and also highlighted the lack of gender awareness in the mainland LGBT movement. It not only marked the independence of the lesbian movement, but also constructed the subjectivity of “queer lala” with an inclusive queer politics, thus incorporating other sexual minorities into the lesbian movement.

New Interactions

Since 2012, a new chapter of the feminist movement in mainland China has been opened with the emergence of young feminist activists and their “controversial” feminist performances and street activities. These have attracted the attention from both the mass media and general public.

Interestingly, most of those young feminist activists are also lesbians, such as Sinner B [20] — the first feminist activist group in Guangzhou and famous for starting the first feminist performance art. [21] Sinner B members coined the term “feminist lala” to refer to their double identities as lala activists and feminist activists.

The emergence of “feminist lalas” and their controversial feminist activities have provoked heated discussions between feminists and lesbian activists about the necessity of such cooperation. Some lesbian activists have challenged such cooperation by pointing to the disappearance of lesbian subjectivity given that feminist activists felt they had to hide their identity as sexual minority.

Despite these debates, the new interaction between feminists and lesbian activists has reopened after the earlier failed dialogues between state feminists and lesbian activists following the Fourth UN Conference on Women and its NGO forums. Such a new interaction charts a different direction for the lesbian movement. Instead of a coalition inside the LGBT community, it is now forming a coalition with the feminist movement — also indicating the increasing gender awareness inside the lesbian movement.

New transnational interactions have been brought in by CLA, not only different experiences of lesbian movements, but also a more inclusive movement strategy. “Lala” now includes lesbians, bisexuals, transgender and intersex people. In addition, in the annual lala camps, popular concepts in the Tongzhi studies in Taiwan, such as “Diversity in Making Family (Duoyuan Chengjia)” [22] and “Hui Hun Fei Jia” (Querying the Marriage-Family Continuum) [23]) have been introduced by Taiwan

lesbian activists.

Under such queer influences, lesbian activists in mainland China have developed diverging opinions from the gay community on gay marriage legislation. Over the past two years, while gay activists support the legislation, lesbian activists see marriage as one of the state ideological apparatuses that consolidate heteronormativity and patriarchy.

Queer theory challenges the state's control over the population with privileges attached to the institution of marriage, including the right of inheritance and tax benefits. Rather than support the institution, lesbian activists prefer to deconstruct marriage itself.

In a nutshell, the lesbian movement in mainland China has adopted diversified strategies to develop independently and establish new subjectivities including as "queer lala" and "feminist lala." Now going beyond the framework of identity politics, lesbian activists are developing an open coalition with the feminist movement, moving toward an identity based on queer politics, and embracing a transnational perspective.

Reflections and Conclusions

The picture of the LGBT movement in mainland China is multilayered. It has made a lot of progress, amazing LGBT activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Quite a few LGBT activists from Hong Kong have been actively participating in the LGBT movement in mainland China as well, particularly the famous transgender activist Joanne and gay activist Ken.

Beyond such exciting developments, the whole movement nevertheless remains urban-centered and oriented around the middle class. There is little attention paid to address the class division inside the LGBT community. This is particularly evident among poor queers in the rural areas. Yet queer lesbian activists are also questioned as too elitist, their arguments seemingly too distanced from the main concerns of grassroots lesbians, who are concerned with issues such as finding a partner and coming out to their family.

In Shanghai there is even an emerging queer capitalism, where the LGBT community has increasingly cooperated with big corporations. Queer activities are more and more "marketized." To date, however, there have been few discussions on this cooperation and how it is (un)able to facilitate the further flowing of a LGBT movement

This article has aimed to offer a glimpse of the LGBT movement in mainland China. It is preliminary and therefore might not be comprehensive. Yet through such a glimpse, it still can be seen that the LGBT movement has rapidly developed with the establishment of diversified LGBT organizations, issues discussed, and emerging conflicts and divergences between the gay community and the lesbian community.

In the postmodern world, where different social movements are inclined to adopt difference-sensitive framework and to appreciate a decentered subjectivity, I think such conflicts are inevitable. Every social movement will have some blind spots, but what matters is how to overcome them. I believe that the LGBT movement in mainland China is learning and moving forward, particularly the lesbian component of the movement.

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P.S.

* Against the Current (#173), November-December 2014. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Footnotes

[1] Editors' note: While the term "homosexuality" is anachronistic in contemporary Queer discourse in the West, we are retaining here the language that's current in the Chinese context.

[2] More information can be referenced at <http://www.zhihu.com/question/20578932> (accessed May 02, 2014).

[3] For some background see <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/chinese-activists-brave-arrest-stroll-idaho170514> — ed.

[4] The CCTV program can be viewed at http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDA1NDA4MTI=.html (Accessed July 01, 2014).

[5] For more details, see <http://v.ifeng.com/quanminxiangduilun/tonghun/> (Accessed July 01, 2014).

[6] Fudan University in Shanghai is the first university to open up a course on homosexuality in mainland China in 2005. Happy Together (Rainbow Association) — the first rightfully registered student association on LGBT in mainland China — was established in 2006 in Sun Yat-sen University under the help of Professor Ai Xiaoming, who is famous for fighting for the underprivileged people and against the injustice in mainland China. The association was cancelled a year later because homosexuality was sensitive. However, the Gender/Sexuality Education Forum in Sun Yat-sen university established by Professor Ai is still an important institution to facilitate the movement on gender/sexuality in Guangzhou. The course on diversified gender and sexuality offered by Professor Song Sufeng, from the same department as Professor Ai, has also invited many LGBT activists to share their experiences with the students and therefore have inspired quite a number of students to participate into the LGBT movement in Guangzhou.

[7] See <http://bjlgbtcenter.org/> (accessed July 29, 2014).

[8] See <http://aidslaw2010.blogspot.hk/> (accessed July 29, 2014).

[9] See <http://www.tongyulala.org/> (accessed July 29, 2014).

[10] See <http://www.aibai.com/> (accessed July 29, 2014).

[11] See <http://blog.sina.com.cn/lesplus> (accessed July 29, 2014).

[12] See <http://www.bghei.org/> (accessed July 29, 2014).

[13] “Lala” is the most popular self-reference for the lesbians in mainland China instead of “lesbian” or “female homosexuals.” It is believed that the term originated from the famous Taiwan lesbian writer Qiu Miaojin’s novel *Crocodile Tears*, whose lesbian protagonist was called “Lazi.”

[14] The Chinese name for this landmark event inside the LGBT community is “Meishaonv Lunzhan.”

[15] <http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/1823786275> (accessed July 29, 2014).

[16] <http://blog.sina.com.cn/xianles> (accessed July 29, 2014).

[17] <http://www.weibo.com/u/2720529531?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=infdomain> (accessed July 29, 2014).

[18] More information can be referenced at http://weibo.com/p/1005052536529315/weibo?is_search=0&visible=0&is_tag=0&profile_ftype=1&page=30#feedtop (accessed May 02, 2014).

[19] More information can be referenced at <http://www.tongyulala.org/newsview.php?id=1212> (accessed May 02, 2014).

[20] The weibo is <http://weibo.com/u/2720529531> (accessed May 02, 2014).

[21] For more reports, please refer to <http://weibo.com/u/2720529531> (accessed May 02, 2014).

[22] More information can be referenced at <http://tapcpr.wordpress.com/%E8%8D%89%E6%A1%88%E5%85%A8%E6%96%87/> (accessed May 02, 2014).

[23] Ding Naifei & Liu Renpeng, eds. *Querying Marriage-Family Continuum* (Taiwan: Shenlou Ltd, 2011).