Birthday in Beijing
Women Tongzhi Organizing in 1990s’ China

Up to the early 1990s, the word ‘homosexual’ (male or female) did not exist in the Chinese laws or media. In the medical literature and in dictionaries, homosexuality was explained as a mental illness or as a sexual perversion. Before the 1990s, many homosexuals, especially lesbians, did not know that there were other people with the same orientation. Women Tongzhi created the first homosexual community in Beijing. When I was active in the women’s movement in Delhi from 1978 to 1990 as founding co-chair of Manushi (1995), editor Claude Summers claims it was. We also found evidence of welfare for both Chinese and foreign women. It was held at the Sheng, and Susan Jolly, an Englishwoman, began to organize tongzhi get-togethers every Wednesday evening at a non-recognition and a lack of understanding. The psychiatrists spoke of the homosexuals who had come to the hospital to be cured, who were unhappy and sometimes suicidal. Encouraged by this atmosphere of debate, one man ‘came out’ about his homosexuality. Afterwards, he and I started to use a different language, different experiences and feelings, to demonstrate that not all homosexuals live lives of tragedy and suffering. I met a few homosexual people at that meeting. We realized that we needed our own space to discuss and share our experiences, and help each other. By the mid-1990s, two or three people began to organize the first homosexual (or tongzhi, the word most commonly used nowadays) activities in Beijing. During the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, theactivist Wu Chunsheng organized a lesbian dancing party for both Chinese and foreign women. It was held at the National Women Tongzhi Conference’. The first National Women Tongzhi Conference was held in Beijing in October 1998. Altogether about thirty women tongzhi participated. After the Conference, a board of five members was established, and an internal magazine, Sky, was initiated. Then since then, women tongzhi have started to use both international and national funds to organize their activities. The riots exploded when the police raided a bar (the Stonewall) in New York’s Greenwich Village in June 1969, and gays fought back. The riots lasted for a week, but their impact was powerful and long-lasting – within less than a year, gay liberation groups sprouted in over three hundred cities throughout the US, and a political movement began in support of equal rights for sexual minorities.

Editor’s note

This paper is part of a chapter in Hsiung Ping-Chen, Maria Jaschok, and Cecilia Mihwitz (eds), Chinese Women Organizing. Oxford: Berg (2002).

When I was active in the women’s movement in Delhi from 1978 to 1990 as founding co-editor of Manushi, India’s first feminist journal, homosexuality was rarely if ever discussed in left-wing, civil rights, or women’s movements, or at Delhi University, where I taught. Among the earliest newspaper reports I saw on the subject were those about female couples committing suicide, leaving behind notes declaring their undying love. In 1987, the wedding of two female police constables, Leela and Urmila, in central India, made national headlines and led to a debate on lesbianism. The women married each other outside the ambit of any movement and with the support of Urmila’s family.

By [Name]

In 1990 the magazine Bombay Dadar Bombay Friends appeared, the first AIDS awareness magazine in India. In 1993, AIDS Bhedwadi Virohi Andolan (Anti-AIDS Discrimination Campaign), known as ABVA, published its pioneering report on the ‘Dreaded Gay’. In the 1990s many Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) organizations emerged in urban areas. Several of them publish newsletters, many now receive foreign funding, especially those that do HIV-prevention work. Sakshiyo, Giti Thadani’s short book on lesbian love in India, appeared in 1996, but is flawed by its erasure of medieval, especially Muslim materials. The population’s ignorance of what homosexuality is a perception that is not only the same-sex love in South Asia is serious ly understudied as compared to East and even West Asia. With a few exceptions, South Asian scholars by large ignore materials on homosexuality or interpret them as heterosexual. As a result, in his introduction to The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage (1995), editor Claude Summers claims that the silence of ancient and medieval India on this subject ‘perhaps reflects the generally conservative mores of the people’. Saleem Kidwai and I had been separately collecting materials for two decades, and in 2000 we published Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History, a collection of extracts translated from a wide range of texts in fifteen Indian languages and written over a period of more than two millennia. We found that same-sex love and romantic friendship have flourished in India in various forms, without any extended history of overt persecution. These forms include inviolable partnerships, highly visible same-sex marriages, and same-sex love in more intimate terms, and codes to distinguish homosexual love and those inclined to it. This confirms Sweet and Zwilling’s work on ancient India, and other recent findings from Western antiquity, and Boswell’s earlier argument that same-sex desire as a category was not the invention of nineteenth-century European homosexuals, as Foucault claimed it was. We also found evidence of male homosexual subcultures flourishing in some medieval Indian cities. Like the erotic temple sculptures at Khajuraho and Konarak, ancient and medieval India had ways of ‘invisibilizing’ and ‘visibilizing’ sexual practices. This is why the whole range of sexual behaviour was known in pre-colonial India.

By [Name]