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 perversity. Before the 1990s, many homosexuals, especially lesbians, did not know that there were other people with the same orientation; there was no one to talk to. Many homosexuals got married (heterosexually), while hiding their same-sex partners from their families. Because of the almost complete lack of information on the issue, many homosexuals were not even sure themselves about their own sexual orientation. (A woman, who was married and had a child, had never heard of, or even thought about homosexuality until she came across the English word ‘lesbian’ on the Internet, and discovered that she herself was one.) Conversely, people who had no doubt whatsoever about their homosexual orientation still did not dare to be open about it.

By Mr. Xi Angqi

To me that there were plain-clothes police in the bar. We avoided police attention, we told all the people we knew to go to a very quiet bar in a small lane, for a ‘birthday party’. We thought of a way to get around them. We sang ‘Happy Birthday’ and cut the cake. I announced: ‘Can you guess whose birthday it is today? Come and whisper it in my ear, and if you get it right, you get a present!’ which consisted of wrapped up condoms and sweets. Everyone started to ask each other whose birthday it was. Those who knew about Stonewall told those who didn’t, who then came and whispered the answer to me. ‘Today is the commemoration day of the American gay movement.’ A young man, having just heard the Stonewall story for the first time, ran over to me and whispered, ‘I, I know! I know! Today is the birthday of all of us!’ I then whispered what he had said to other people: ‘Today is the birthday of all of us.’ I thought, that is probably what the tongzhi movement ultimately means – we are united, we have a common birthdate. From that day on, that bar became the first homosexual bar in Beijing.

Through mail networks, the tongzhi pager hotline, the Internet, the tongzhi bars and discos, and also through an Asian lesbian email network set up by a Chinese woman in America, an increasing number of women tongzhi came to know each other. Our activities also gradually increased and became more regular. From just going out to eat and dancing together, we began to organize sports events and discussion sessions. We elected a ‘Discussion Commissioner’, ‘Communications Commissioner’, ‘Sports Commissioner’, etc., and assigned the respective organizational responsibilities. We also gave our informal organization the name of ‘Women Tongzhi’. ‘Women Tongzhi’ neither had a formal leadership nor fixed participants in its activities. It also had no fixed place.

In the summer of 1998, after the First National Women and Men Tongzhi Conference, I invited four women participants to my house. We were still very excited and felt there was much more to talk about. When I suggested we organize a national women-tongzhi meeting, agreement was nearly unanimous. We established a six-person organizing committee. The Beijing women’s list of about thirty women tongzhi living in the rest of the country. These were contacts she had gathered through a letter-writing network over the years. We decided to invite all those women to the tongzhi gathering, which was then held at a club. To avoid police attention, it was officially my farewell party. We meticulously designed and printed the invitations, which we gave out in all tongzhi places as well as on the street. On the invitation it said: ‘Collecting donations for the First 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, Skj, was initiated. Since then, women tongzhi have started to use both national and international funds to organize their activities.

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Homosexuality in India: Past and Present

By Kush Varma

In 1990 the magazine Bombay Dost (Bombay Friend) appeared and then in 1991, AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (Anti-AIDS Discrimination Campaign), known as ARVA, published its pioneer newspaper, the Gay Times. In the 1990s many Lesbian, 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. Sahayoga, 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 popular belief persists that homosexuality is a modern and Western import. In the summer of 1998, after the First National Women and Men Tongzhi Conference, I invited four women participants to my house. We were still very excited and felt there was much more to talk about. When I suggested we organize a national women-tongzhi meeting, agreement was nearly unanimous. We established a six-person organizing committee. The Beijing women’s list of about thirty women tongzhi living in the rest of the country. These were contacts she had gathered through a letter-writing network over the years. We decided to invite all those women to the tongzhi gathering, which was then held at a club. To avoid police attention, it was officially my farewell party. We meticulously designed and printed the invitations, which we gave out in all tongzhi places as well as on the street. On the invitation it said: ‘Collecting donations for the First National Women Tongzhi Conference’.

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The Remaking of a Cambodian-American Drag Queen

By Karen Quintiliani

Five Cambodian-American men the journey home in 1995 transformed their gay identities – identities imagined through the collective activities and memories of a Southern California Cambodian gay group they helped to establish. ‘Real khítty’ in this group – or those who adopt transvestite lives – socialize with men who have sex with men exclusively as well as married men who have clandestine sexual relations with other men. However, the group members (like those taking the journey home) who successfully adopt a male appearance, work in male professions, attract (primarily) Anglo-American partners, and resist family pressures to marry, are the ones that define drag as the cultural equivalent to being khítty, thereby legitimizing their unique gay identities. During drag performances, the members of the group depict Cambodian and American feminine cultural symbols – the traditional Cambodian Apura dancer and Miss America – to temporarily embody their feminine selves. They also utilize drag performances to initiate ‘closet’ Cambodians into the group, and to educate non-Cambodians about the cultural role and (tacit) acceptance of being khítty in Cambodian society.

The trip to Cambodia provided an opportunity to show their Cambodian ‘drag queen sisters’ how in America they can transform themselves while maintaining the ‘heart’ of a woman. I went on the trip as the ‘real woman’ of the group, a designation that describes my role as a confidante and researcher in the gay group since 1992. However, being a real woman travelling with five Cambodians who appear to be men, provided a critical view of the expected separation between sexual identities between men in Cambodia and the power held by Westerners in a country in the grips of poverty. The events that unfolded during our trip changed how these self-described gay Cambodian men saw themselves, and how the group members expressed their being khítty, as they saw videos and heard accounts about the conditions of their khítty counterparts in Cambodia.

In Battambang, the second largest city in Cambodia, the Cambodian Americans discovered how their khítty counterparts carve out social positions and sexual spaces. Shifting between gender representations and sex roles – like drag requires – blurs the boundaries and the discreet way sexual relationships between men occur in Cambodia. Three of the khítty live in a brothel and cook and clean for the women, only occasionally taking customers themselves. Mai Chaa, which means the ‘old mother’, is divorced and has grown-up children. He abandoned his family to fulfill his desire for male companionship. He is poor, homeless, and ostracized for having left his family, but not necessarily for having sex with other men. The other two khítty live in the temple compound and have taken a vow of celibacy in order to serve the image and honour the loss of partners during the Khmer Rouge years.

Sexual relationships between single men and khítty in Battambang are either arranged or take place through random meetings; in either case the khítty provides the young men with money or food as well as sexual gratification. The Cambodian Americans played the role of khítty through the sexual exchange system, rather than as Cambodian-American drag queens. Before they left Battambang, they gave their up ‘womanhood’ by giving their required gowns and accessories to their khítty counterparts, realizing that ‘the cost of one dress could feed a family for a year’ (in Cambodia). The Cambodian Americans also reunited with a long-time Anglo-American gay friend running a social service agency in Cambodian villages in and around Phnom Penh, the largest and most urbanized city in Cambodia. They helped her offer the Cambodian Americans the choice of any ‘mauche’ Cambodian man at the agency. The Cambodian Americans bristled at their friend’s offer when they were told by some of the Cambodian men that they feared losing their jobs or access to English language classes if they did not agree to engage in sexual liaisons. Their friend appeared to exploit the men’s poverty and to misinterpret a social system that allows for male intimacy without the heterosexual label common in contemporary Western societies.

Until these Cambodian gay group members could travel to their homeland, they imagined being khítty through a set of social and cultural symbols available to them. When they returned to the USA they no longer held drag events as a way to portray their identities as Cambodian and gay. Rather, being khítty became a social responsibility to financially support friends, family members, and to sponsor HIV/AIDS fundraisers for Cambodia, and in some cases to return to their homeland and to nurture relationships with Cambodian men they met on their first trip home. Stuart Hall (1990) describes identity as a ‘production’ constantly in flux as individuals and communities reinterpret experiences in diaspora and from the homeland. By understanding identity as Hall suggests, we gain insight into how sexualities in Cambodia and in diaspora are influenced by transnational relationships and the conditions of poverty.

References


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Mai Chaa, the ‘old mother’, feels awkward in high heels and the black qunap dress, but enjoys the opportu- nity to dress as a woman for the first time in her life.