

It's Time for China's Lesbians to Speak for Themselves

Written by Yujie Guo

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YUJIE GUO, AUG 18 2015

This article is part of a series on gender and sexuality in China. Read more here.

A 'Rainbow' Birthday Party Related to the 'Stonewall Event'

Between 2012 and 2013, the Shanghai NVAI[1] launched the 'China Lesbians' Activism Map'. Within one year, the number of lesbian organisations in Mainland China had doubled, from twenty to forty, most of them independent NOGs. They were low-budget, with no government support and run by volunteers only, but those hard conditions never stopped the radical development of Chinese lesbian societies.

The Chinese LGBT community could have never imagined such growth and strength 20 years ago, especially when lesbians had a lower social visibility than gay men. Up until the 1990s, even 20 years after the Reform and Openness to the outside world, homosexuality was still taboo, and few people knew about the gay rights movement, which focused on resistance and change in both human rights and cultural fields.

In 2006, I met Xiaopei He[2] at Beijing Lala's Salon[3]. The memory of a special birthday party was still vivid and clear in her mind: an evening in June 1996, several friends and he arrived at the Half and Half bar in Sanlitun village[4] for a party celebrating 'Stonewall'. At that time, gay people's activities were usually disturbed by the police. On that day, other bars refused them entry when they said it was an LGBT group party. So for the sake of safety, they presented it as a birthday party. That evening, over 60 people came, including a few foreigners and 8 Lalas. He was so excited because she had never seen so many Lalas together in one place before. Chunsheng Wu[5], the presenter who had been arrested and imprisoned previously for organising a gay dance party, told He that there were undercover police in the crowd and he couldn't take the risk, so He took his job. They sang birthday songs, shared the cake and also, whispered ear to ear, that that day was the anniversary of the American gay rights movement.

It reminded me that the early period of the gay rights movement faced 'real' risks. They had to fight for their freedom with wisdom and courage. But their will for a free life was very strong.

Susie Jolly, a bisexual female coming from the UK, and who participated in the women's and LGBT rights movements in the EU, and had studied Mandarin in Wuhan, was also there. She arrived in Beijing in 1994, the year before the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and wanted to do something important and special even though she was told by friends that it could be dangerous. She organised a family party for gays and lesbians. At that time, there were no LGBT groups or Internet contacts, so finding a gay man or woman was very difficult. Over the years, Susie's homosexual family parties became one of the founding places of China's gay rights movement. This was the starting point for both Xiaopei He and lesbian artist Shitou, two well-known Chinese lesbian activists from those early days. In 1995, Susie and other organizers started moving the activities from their homes to the public space such as bars and parks. Susie had to reconsider the very ideas underpinning the relation between the Chinese gay rights movement and herself; it needed more LGBT volunteers and activists, and also the leadership should have been Chinese. It wasn't easy to find new leaders, because tradition and social culture taught the Chinese that it was easier to be a follower than a leader, especially since gay rights and the LGBT society was banned in China. However, the flame was ignited and burning, growing slowly with more and more parties and salons taking place.

Photo by Yujie Guo: 2012, the author (middle with striped top) with other China mainland Lala group leaders in
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How the AIDS prevention discourse brought 'gay men' into the public sphere[6]

Yanhai Wan[7] isn't only a famous activist in AIDS prevention, but also plays an important role in the Chinese gay rights movement. He still remembers the beginning of his research into AIDS and gay people. In 1991, he was working at the China's National Health Education Institute, which launched a new project: 'Research about Gay Men and Knowledge, Faith, Attitude and Behaviour Relating to AIDS, and AIDS Education Studies'. He became a leader of the project.

The research group set up a meeting to discuss how to contact gay groups. One research partner, a policeman from the Beijing City Public Security Department, gave his advice: when a gay man was detained, they could be made him to complete a questionnaire and take a blood test before they were released. The police at Dongjiaomin Alley substation were good at dealing with 'rabbits' (the nickname for gay men in old fashion China), they could find and arrest several dozen overnight[8]. Wan was shocked by his words. For him, this behaviour contravened the ethics of social science research, but he wanted to assure cooperation, so didn't object or refuse. The social psychologist approved the idea and Wan then agreed but asked the police to make sure that men were released after the tests without notifying their family or place of work. That was settled.

The period between May and July 1991 was unforgettable for Wan. Each week he worked for three nights in Dongjiaomin Alley Police Substation. On the first night he met a middle-age man and felt so nervous that when they made eye contact he couldn't speak properly. Despite his discomfort, he persisted and the detainee treated his questions seriously, but Wan didn't feel good about this.

Over the following two months, 51 gay men were forced to submit information for the project, following a specific procedure: an interrogation, a blood test, and a questionnaire. From this group, one man was arrested for 'wrong' attitude towards the 'research', one man tried to commit suicide but failed, and an old man kneeled in front of the researchers and police, saying he wasn't a human being any longer because of his homosexuality and asked to be forgiven.

Wan felt huge amount of guilt, "Our actions were only slightly different from the way fascists might have behaved. I had a bad feeling about it all because I was a part of them, when in fact our original purpose was to help people not hurt them."

However, because of this study, it's now very easy to show the predicament of gay people at that time who suffered gratuitous torture from the system. For these early researches, gay groups were their 'patients' or 'subjects'. Wan said, "We called gay people 'the other/ they', and assumed they were different to 'normal people', isolated by society, potential trouble makers, and difficult to deal with." They discussed the details about research methods, but never thought or treated gay people as possible friends.

In the 1990s, another researcher Beichuan Zhang[9] had an important influence on gay men studies. Winner of Barry & Martin's Prize, he is a famous senior homosexual studies expert, and an HIV/AIDS activist, working in a hospital affiliated to Qingdao University. Zhang was involved in a campaign for gay men and women's rights after he saw his former colleague and teacher Shide Qin exposed and persecuted for his homosexuality at work. In 1994, he published a seminal gay text: '*Homosexuality*', which was followed by a flood of feedback from gay people who wanted to explain their own suffering and personal experiences. In 1998, Zhang founded the Friend Project and published the gay magazine *Friend Exchange* to improve knowledge about homosexuality, gay people's health care, and HIV/AIDS prevention. His works played an important role in homosexual education among gay people.

Compared to Zhang and other gay group researchers, Yanhai Wan was more deeply involved in political issues. He expanded the discourse onto AIDS prevention and connected it to the gay rights movement. He came to know both fields very well because he had a medical and public health background and later joined the gay rights movement. From his experience and research, he advocated a clear opinion: AIDS education had to combine minority people's rights and the liberation movement.

Wan's former *danwei* (working place), the National Institute for Health Research, launched the cultural salon 'World of Men' for gay people in 1992, but this was banned by the Ministry of Health the following year. Wan's situation at work became very difficult, so he decided to establish the Aizhixing Action Institute, which ultimately became the

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biggest HIV/AIDS prevention non-profit group in China – and which later costed him his job. Through the project he promoted alternative kinds of actions for improving public knowledge about HIV/AIDS prevention, and supported the rights of AIDS patients and homosexual groups. As the result of this impressive work among gay people, his group became the most politically dangerous in China.

On the evening of August 24th, 2002, on his way home after a film showing for gay people, Wan was detained by the National Security Department of Beijing. The government claimed he had leaked a classified document about AIDS prevention in the Henan province, where several isolated villages had been involved in illegal blood trade and were known as 'AIDS villages'. Tortured for the first week, Wan was eventually released after a month of detention. This was due to international pressure. After his release he was told he could register as a legal non-governmental organisation. Wan received a lot of attention from the international society for his work and hard-learned experience and managed to raise a substantial budget from external funds, which he used to support many gay groups and gay actions. The new millennium awareness and recognition of gay rights benefited greatly from Aizhixing Action project and Wan's work.

This awareness was reflected in the Chinese government's actions on AIDS prevention and issues concerning gay men in society, through the establishment of the Disease Prevention Centre which helped to set up NGOs. By 2010, according to Beichuan Zhang's knowledge and preliminary estimates, China had more than 300 volunteer groups working for the HIV/AIDS prevention campaign. In addition, international groups' funds for AIDS prevention became available in China, although the government took responsibility for the management and distribution of these new budgets. But this state management of international donations needs close scrutiny, and questions should be asked about the groups and activities that are being funded. How do they manage their budgets? How effective is their work? Zhang criticised some of the groups, which for him lack awareness of human rights and social gender consciousness, they are instead entangled with internal political struggles, and often use up their resources while failing their primary duties. Other people worry about the political position of these NGOs, since they are under the control of a powerful government. It's very hard for them to challenge the political system to further support vulnerable people's rights.

Although life for gay people was still very problematic at that time, they had found support from international bodies and even government support, and they benefited especially from the HIV/AIDS discourse and prevention movement. As a part of LGBT society, lesbian groups achieved much less from this wave of AIDS originated gay rights awareness.

The Edge of Radical Development and Splits within LGBT Society: Much Differences Between Gay and Lesbian Groups?

Before the first LGBT group conference in 2012, the community had developed very quickly through the Internet, where huge online gay societies soon found each other and built homosexual networks online, voicing their opinions and preferences in online chat rooms, websites, forums and through social media.

In June 2012, the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute hosted the first 'National LGBT Community Leadership Conference' with 80 Chinese LGBT activists representing 53 organizations from over 23 regions attending. The conference's focus was to speed-up the 'cooperation and development of Chinese LGBT organisations'. But the debate between gays and lesbians attracted a lot of attention. For many representatives of the LGBT society this was the first time that arguments and sharp differences between gay groups and lesbian groups were aired in public.

The following year, the second 'National LGBT Community Leadership Conference' took place in Beijing on the 17th to the 18th of August. There were more than 140 LGBT activists, representing 70 organizations, in over 28 different Chinese regions. In addition to mainland Chinese delegations, some international groups were represented too. Participants all actively participated in the conference, which marked an increase of over 50 % in comparison with the first conference. I was invited to represent the Chinese Lala Alliance[10]. Unlike the previous year, there was no 'fierce debate' between gay and lesbian organisations. However, there was a general feeling that the Lala's voices were being muffled: only two workshops out of nine were held by Lala organisations; during the entire conference

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only eleven Lalas spoke as a presenter or speaker; and only five lesbian groups were involved in the conference. Why was that? For me, it's because there are some deep structural and ideological problems in the LGBT community which haven't been addressed, and as a result nothing has changed. For example, would it be possible to set up a group among rural comrades (the common name for both gays and lesbians in China), for poor or disabled comrades? Can they afford the time or expenses to make this trip to Beijing for the conference? Are they articulated enough to speak for themselves at such high level events?

Recently, the divide and different demands between gay and lesbian groups has become more evident, although some people have dismissed it, saying that "the Lalas' rhetoric is much stronger than their gay counterparts", meaning that gays can't win any debates because lesbians have learned to use more western words and theories. But this comment avoids and fails to recognize the real issue which is that some gay (men's) groups have dominated the voice of China's LGBT society for too long, and that the lesbian comrades are entitled to an equal say and an equal voice in LGBT issues. Especially when the debate concerns the groups' existence and the quality of outside resources, nobody should ignore the power of discourse.

Some gay groups call themselves an LGBT group because it's fashionable, because of international demand, or to remain politically correct. They don't really understand the true meaning of LGBT: to recognize and understand the differences within the group. To take another example, some people who don't agree with Queer Theory give out lectures about the Chinese Queer societies in America. Is it confused thinking or political opportunism?

One of the reasons for which Chinese Lalas are setting up 'feminist lesbian' groups is to react against gay men who are dominating the LGBT movement. For example, a gay men's online magazine, *Togayther* established in January 2013, calls itself 'the first lifestyle magazine for gay people in China'. In fact, in the LGBT media market there are two lesbian lifestyle magazines which appeared much earlier: *Les+* and *Chinese Gay Story* that the 'gay media' has chosen to ignore. For the publishers of *Togayther*, 'gay' only means gay men.

Actually, it's a common understanding both in the public sphere and within LGBT societies, that 'comrade means gay comrade', 'gay means gay man'. Under the flag of the anti- HIV/AIDS movement, numerous gay groups have been established in China, and lesbian groups have become just a part of the gay men's gay rights movement, integrating the title of 'comrade' and then ignored by others. So many Lalas have experienced difficult moments when they cooperate with gay men, because they have not been given a voice in their discussions and their opinions are ignored by their counterparts. For a long time, Lalas inevitably felt anxiety and mistrust until they found 'feminism': this was an opportunity to establish a voice of their own, one that is different from the gay men's.

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In recent years, China's young generation of Feminist Activists[11] has given striking and attractive performances in the public sphere. Interestingly, quite a lot of well known feminist activists[12] are lesbians, or have unknown sexualities. Feminist Lala groups[13] spread from Guangzhou to other cities very quickly and began to ask questions like "What is the relationship between lesbianism and feminism?", and "What is the relationship between the movement for lesbianism and that of feminism?"

A young Feminist Activist answered this question in her own way: the more marginalized topics and controversial issues can find a place in the agenda for discussion, the easier it becomes to hold meetings and events with some lesbian participation. This is because marginalized issues are usually introduced to the public sphere by marginalized groups. Their marginalized identity and situation gives the queer groups a chance to raise more radical voices and actions, and to strengthen the challenge against patriarchal power systems.[14] But this cooperation isn't easy; there are some difficult moments and arguments.

For example, some people make ironic comments about the cooperation suggesting that "lesbians are riding on the feminists' coattails". The other part of this irony might be that "gay men are riding on the AIDS prevention movement's coattails". These comments suggest that both lesbian and gay movements are politically and theoretically rootless and they have to 'borrow' discourse, financial resources, and legitimacy from other groups and movements.

Why do Chinese lesbians have to participate in feminists' social movement and share feminist discourse?

According to the Chinese official gender discourse, which is also recognized by mainland scholars, gender equality remains a basic state policy since 1949, when founding the New China. At that time, China's women's rights appeared more advantageous in comparison to most countries in the world, at least by the standards of state policy. However, in the traditional patriarchal system women are inferior, and male culture and traditions have dominated China for over a thousand years.

Today, the patriarchal ideology has become stronger and lesbians have experienced the same gender inequality as women: family abuse, discrimination in their careers and in the labour market, a shortage of female public bathrooms, and 'leftover women'[15] pressure. I can't see any reason to stop lesbians joining gender equality movements usually formed by feminists.

But lesbians face a double marginalized and voiceless problem after joining the feminist movement. They seem to become 'normal' women, where their sexual identity is no longer important. The fact is that gender and sexuality cannot be the same in a lesbian's personal experience and political advocacy. Even though more lesbians become visible through feminist activities, we have to protect our marginal identity in this marginal group. And we have to believe that marginal identity is powerful and strong, and that this can bring about a serious challenge and change to the patriarchal system.

Acknowledgement: Translated by Huili Meng. All footnotes made by translator.

Notes

[1] A lesbian NGO group based in Shanghai founded in 2005

[2] Xiaopei He is a well known senior lesbian activist and academic, who focused on disabled LGBT's sexual rights. He is also the executive director of Pink Space Sexuality Research Centre, an NGO that 'provides opportunity for sexually oppressed people to tell their sexual desires and practices, to form communities and fight for sexual right.': <http://pinkspace.com.cn/>

[3] Lala is a popular Chinese term for lesbian.

[4] Sanlitun village is an area of the Chaoyang District, Beijing, famous for popular bars and international stores.

[5] Chunsheng WU, also called Gary WU, a well known early period senior gay activist, and author of the book *Black Souls under a Red Sun* (1990), see <http://andrejkoymasky.com/liv/fam/biow3/wu01.html>

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[6] Translator's note: Before the UN's fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing, China's lesbian groups were not very visible. Most people knew about gay men but couldn't imagine the idea of a gay woman at all. Because of this, lesbian groups grew at a much slower rate than gay groups and over a longer period. This still applies today.

[7] Wan is a well-known early period AIDS activist, former expert of China's National Health Education Institute, the place charged by China's Ministry of Health (MOH), co-founder of Beijing LGBT Centre, he held the first counselling hotline of HIV/AIDS in 1992, and translated the first announcement of the AIDS epidemic in Chinese.

[8] The local police substation is nearby two then-famous gay men's hangout places: the public bathrooms in People's Cultural Palace and Zhongshan Park in Beijing. Thus policemen from this substation would frequently deal with gay men. High profile director Yuan Zhang's 'first gay film' *Behind the Forbidden City*, takes place in these exact parks, and one hero came from this particular police substation. Some believe the film is based on the real project from 1991, though the director never confirmed it.

[9] Beichuan Zhang and Joan Kaufman (2006) "The Rights of People with Same Sex Sexual Behaviour: Recent Progress and Continuing Challenge in China", in Geetanjali Misra and Radhika Chandiramani (Eds.) *Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia*, Chapter 6, London: Sage, especially p.128

[10] It is a non-profit organization for lesbians, bisexual women and trans-identified people who love women, in mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. 'It is building a feminist 'lala' movement to challenge stigma, end violence, and ensure that lala voices are heard in communities and in women's rights movements. The Alliance provides training for activists and supports the development of new lala groups.' The official Facebook account is: <https://www.facebook.com/ChineseLalaAlliance> (Chinese only)

[11] "Chinese Feminist Activist" is the common name for the new generation of Chinese feminists. See Yaya Chen's article (link at E-IR and the new title of Yaya's article) and Ting Guo's "A Day on the Women's Rights March" *China Development Brief*, 5th January 2015, <http://chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/articles/day-womens-rights-march/>

[12] For example, Maizijia is one of the 'Five Feminist Sisters' of China, who were detained by Chinese authorities before 2015's International Women's Day after trying to start a public advocacy to against sexual harassment on public transport. See Manya Koetes "Is There No Chinese Feminism", *What's On Weibo*, 20 March 2015, <http://www.whatsonweibo.com/is-there-no-chinese-feminism/>. See also "Every Lala Should Be a Natural Feminist", 27 October 2011, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_6019049d0100zjwl.html

[13] Such as @Sinner-B group, @Bcome group and so on, the former's Weibo page is: <http://www.weibo.com/u/2720529531> (Chinese only)

[14] Translator's note: Tingting Wei "A Lesbian Perspective", at the Fourth World Conference On Women in Beijing, published in *China Development Brief* in 2001

[15] 'Leftover women' is a common name for single women who are not married by their late 20s. See Julia Lovell "Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China (review)", *The Guardian*, 5th June 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/05/leftover-women-gender-inequality-china>

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