



Beijing LGBT Centre.
PC: Xin Ying (CC).

Fare Thee Well Beijing LGBT Centre

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The closure of the Beijing LGBT Centre (北京同志中心) on 15 May 2023, only three months after its fifteenth anniversary, caused shock and heartbreak among the Chinese queer community both within China and abroad. One of the largest and longest-running LGBTQ non-profit organisations in the country, the centre had operated as a physical gathering space, a national hub for advocacy and service initiatives, and an incubator for a young generation of queer activists.

Even though the organisation had held fast against multiple waves of governmental shutdowns of LGBTQ spaces and organisations (Wang 2021), news of its closure came as no surprise to those who have been actively involved in the movement. In fact, over the past two years, multiple events it organised were forcefully terminated. The organisation was also subjected to constant harassment and threats from the authorities, and public intolerance.

When it was in the Xin Tiandi Building in Beijing's Chaoyang District—which in the past housed several important feminist and LGBTQ nongovernmental organisations (NGOs)—the centre had to deal with homophobic neighbours who frequently interrupted its activities and reported them either to the building management or to

the police. Because of these hateful reports, many activities had to be held in other temporary locations. In 2021, the organisation eventually moved elsewhere.

Breaking New Ground

The final official closure of the centre is mourned by thousands of supporters, volunteers, and staff who joined its activities in the past and saw the organisation as a beacon of light in a darkening landscape. Founded in 2008 by several queer activists from different organisations, the centre's foremost goal was to provide LGBTQ individuals with various services, including discounted mental health counselling and HIV testing, and safe spaces for community-building activities such as film screenings, dating events, English corners, parties, and discussion groups.

Over the years, the centre also engaged in various groundbreaking political projects. One of the central threads connecting its various programs is the idea that the psychological wellbeing of LGBTQ people must be fostered by affirmative legislation, strong institutional support, and cultural acceptance. In 2014, working with LGBT Rights Advocacy China, an NGO focusing on the legal inclusion of LGBT persons, the centre played a critical role in launching the first LGBTQ impact litigation case, helping a gay man win a lawsuit against an electroshock conversion therapy practitioner (Davis 2014). This was the first milestone in the organisation's important work against conversion therapy.

The centre's core team strove to bring in feminist perspectives when envisioning its programs, introducing projects centring on *lala* women (a Chinese slang term for lesbians), bisexual, pansexual, and transgender individuals. Around 2012, the centre began to provide affirmative training for LGBTQ-friendly therapists and counsellors and to compile information on LGBTQ-friendly clinics. Starting in 2017, the organisation also advocated for the de-pathologisation of transgender individuals in China, working with trans-friendly doctors and experts to promote incremental and sustainable change.

As well as this advocacy work, the organisation kept its feet firmly grounded in community-building projects, while branching out with new initiatives to suit the shifting political context as space for civil society organising continued to shrink. This included an effort to incubate a company solely focusing on LGBTQ-friendly counselling services—connecting therapists with LGBTQ individuals seeking psychological support. Another initiative entailed the creation of volunteer-run self-help groups that provided safe spaces in which to share experiences and build solidarity. Finally, the organisation also initiated several pathbreaking programs to promote LGBTQ inclusion and employment opportunities in major international corporations based in China. Even though the centre is gone, its affiliated counselling service,

self-help groups, and the corporate program carry on its mission, and will continue to operate amid China's hostile environment, albeit in a depoliticised manner.

Queer Sexualities under Attack

Although rights-based activism on issues such as labour rights, anti-discrimination, and women's rights has been under attack and subjected to increasing censorship in China since the early 2010s, work on queer sexualities did not seem to invite intense governmental scrutiny until recently. The most recent affirmative court ruling against forced conversion therapy on a gay man took place in 2017 (Tcheng 2017). However, with the revival of national heteronormative and paternal discourses about the imperative to build the Chinese Dream (中国梦) and enhance Modernity with Chinese Characteristics (中国式现代化), gay male sexualities and homosociality have once again been stigmatised as deviant and responsible for the 'boy crisis' (男孩危机)—that is, the corruption of hegemonic masculinity with effeminate gender expressions that threaten the dominant heterosexual nuclear family form—and therefore a national crisis.

Over the past six years, we have witnessed the shrinking of both political and cultural spaces for LGBTQ visibility and representation. Online gay-themed dramas have been banned by the Beijing Municipal Radio and Television Bureau, as well as the National Radio and Television Bureau, since as early as 2018 (Zuo 2022). Government authorities have also targeted those producing LGBTQ content for other mass media, with the most renowned case being that of author Tianyi receiving a 10-year and six month prison sentence in 2018 for breaking Chinese obscenity laws with her boy's love writings—that is, a genre that features romantic relationships between male characters and targets heterosexual female audiences (Flood 2018). All this was the precursor to the demise of politically active LGBTQ organisations in China, especially those with transnational connections and histories. The 2017 Foreign NGO Management Law further marginalised these entities by rendering illegal any international funding opportunities not approved by the Chinese authorities.

The Beijing LGBT Centre's shutdown is the latest in a long series of disheartening closures of prominent LGBTQ organisations in China in recent years. In 2020, ShanghaiPRIDE, one of China's longest running and biggest festivals celebrating LGBTQ visibility, cancelled its annual event and terminated all activities due to political pressure (Shen 2020). A year later, major LGBTQ social media accounts run by university students were targeted and deleted overnight by the Chinese instant messaging and social media platform WeChat (Reuters 2021). WeChat claimed that some of the groups had broken rules on sharing information on the internet. In November of that year, LGBT Rights Advocacy China, the non-profit organisation that won prominent anti-conversion therapy and anti-discrimination court cases, abruptly announced its

Premises of the Beijing LGBT Centre. PC: Qie Peng (CC).



closure on its WeChat account, without disclosing the reason (Wu 2021). While not necessarily outright political in their orientation, these organisations had the capacity to mobilise their followers, and were rooted in solid community bases, which made government authorities uneasy. Today, the organisations that are still active in China either maintain a very low profile or depoliticise their projects by replacing explicitly gay language with neutral phrasing aligning with state-endorsed discourse.

With the advent of ‘runology’ (润学, a new term referring to the trend of ‘running away’ from China) among politically aware Chinese youths in the wake of three years of zero-Covid lockdowns, and especially since the White Paper movement, queer activists are also among those choosing to leave the country. With little to no space in which to organise and finding themselves under constant police harassment, many people have developed anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Some of those who have access to networks from previous international and cross-regional organising experiences have managed to physically uproot themselves from China by joining visiting programs overseas, applying for graduate school, and even finding ways to seek asylum. However, many of those who decide to stay in China, or who cannot leave, are living with the constant fear of political suppression or in distress, unable to pursue a livelihood; after all, for many activists, work is life and life is work.

A New Era

The closure of the Beijing LGBT Centre signals a new era for the Chinese queer movement. Rights-based activism centring on legal rights and inclusion for those with a distinct sexual identity is no longer the path forward that it was three decades ago. Long gone are

the rosy days of organising and agitating for political change in the lively activist gay scenes in urban centres. Queer people, especially the younger generation, can now only retreat into online communities, which are also under intense scrutiny. These individuals are building on the foundation laid by LGBTQ organisations, shifting spaces of visibility and representation from in-person to online modes of existence. Their initiatives include producing podcasts and videos that highlight personal narratives to educate the public and normalise queer sexuality in a depoliticised manner. On social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu (小红书), makeup tutorials by trans women are extremely popular. These individuals have found a way to increase their visibility while making money by producing sponsored content, such as for cosmetic products. However, content that can be construed as political takes a much longer time to publish or is censored outright. Those that are published can be instantly taken down by the censors if anyone reports them to these platforms.

One of the main implications of the centre's closure and the general shrinking of space for the Chinese LGBTQ movement that is rarely discussed is the affective turmoil that will haunt this generation of activists and the next. With the abrupt unexplained closures of organisations, the organisers, staff, volunteers, and followers have not been able to properly and openly mourn their loss—the loss of physical queer spaces, of myriad LGBTQ-centred projects and activities, and more importantly, of old and new connections.

Although there was an outpouring of emotional posts on Chinese social media platforms detailing fond memories of the Beijing LGBT Centre shortly after the announcement of its closure, they generally avoided mentioning anything political, and used elaborate metaphors to imply that 'you cannot kill us all'. Such self-censored posts are symptomatic of the pervasive fear and political depression that have taken over the Chinese LGBTQ community (and much of Chinese civil society) over the past decade. These are coping strategies developed by netizens to manoeuvre within spaces characterised by extreme and swift censorship.

The reactions to these posts have been mixed, however. While some sympathise with the frustration expressed therein, others have voiced anger and betrayal, turning to conspiracy theories about the centre's leadership and management. Surprisingly, these conspiracy theories tie into state-sanctioned discourse about 'hostile foreign forces' (境外敌对势力). Even with transparent financial statements that clearly show the sources and uses of project funding, these individuals continue to make up stories about the abuse of financial donations. This is a common pattern whenever civil society organisations are closed in China, with gossip and rumours swirling, followed by cyberbullying targeting members of the organisations and their supporters. In the case of the Beijing LGBT Centre, what has been most disheartening is that these accusations against its staff in some cases come from those for and with whom they had worked tirelessly.

At such an abysmal time, queer activists in political exile and those remaining in China try to use a range of means to continue their work. It is a critical moment for all of us who have been involved in this once-thriving movement to mourn our losses and offer ourselves the time and space to heal from past traumas, from political oppression, from organisational dysfunction, and from the myriad feelings of hurt, anger, frustration, depression, and betrayal. Activism is not only about achieving goals and making effective changes, but also should be an opportunity to elevate and empower individuals. By caring for themselves, queer activists can re-establish their connection to the movement and recharge to envision alternative strategies for the future. ■

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