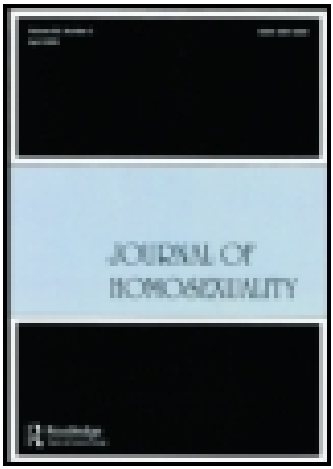

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Becoming a Gay Activist in Contemporary China

Wan Yanhai

LI JIANQUAN'S STORY

In 1994, events happened that stirred up a controversy among gay men in Beijing. Li Jianquan's story illustrates in a nutshell how far lesbian and gay life in China has come and how far it still has to go. On one hand, there is the rapid transformation under which many Chinese women and men who engage in homosexual behavior have also developed lesbian or gay identities and a knowledge of global lesbian and gay cultures. However, on the other, there are the contradictory and uncertain conditions particular to China under which we still live today and the difficulty of becoming visible and active. In the rest of this essay, I try to give a fuller background to Li Jianquan's story. I consider the entry of homosexuality into public debate in China, the legal circumstances concerning homosexuality in China, and the impact of AIDS on the development of gay culture. In the final part of the essay, I turn to my own story to give an account that illustrates in more detail and precision the effects of these Chinese circumstances on both my professional development into a gay activist and my psychological development.

In June of 1994, Li Jianquan, a Beijing delegate at the World Lesbian and Gay Conference in New York, made a widely reported speech (see for example, *Newsweek*). "In China, homosexuality is treated as illegal and as an illness," he told his audience. He added that homosexuality is also frequently the object of social discrimination,

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and he called upon the international community to pay attention to the human rights of lesbians and gays in mainland China. Following this, Li applied for political asylum in the USA and announced that he was setting up "The Great Stonewall Society" to protect and promote the human rights of lesbians and gays in China.

In 1990, just before the Asian Games were held in Beijing, the police had taken in Li and some of his friends. According to his speech, no reason was given. After this, Li lost his job. In 1991, Li and some of his friends began to collect materials about attacks on lesbians and gays in China and the difficulties they faced. In 1993, they began to think about setting up what is now "The Great Stonewall Society."

The very reference to the New York riots of 1968 in the name of the group indicates clear knowledge of Western ideas and achievements. Indeed, it was with the help of Western human rights activists that Li contacted international lesbian and gay organizations, members of the Chinese democracy movement overseas, and international human rights organizations. This also led to the invitation to speak in New York in June of 1994. At the same time, the police began to investigate Li and his friends. Li left China quickly, and began a new life as an exile. He managed to escape, but his friends were followed, beaten, taken into custody, and driven out of their wits.

At the time, many members of the emergent gay community in Beijing were very critical of Li's speech in New York. Some said he was exaggerating, making China out to be much worse than it is. As has been noted in articles published outside China (Berry, 1996; Richardson, 1995), the last few years have seen the development of a considerable semi-public culture of cruising zones, unadvertised gay bars and restaurants, gay corners in discos, and so forth, as well as the efforts of social movement activists discussed in further detail below. Some said Li had tied the lesbian and gay cause too closely to political liberation. Others said that his public work was too mixed up with his personal aims and that maybe he was only doing this so that he could represent himself as a persecuted political activist and could thus stay in the U.S.

However, not long after, Li's pronouncements were proved correct when the Beijing police carried out a thorough crackdown on gay meeting places, arresting many gay men between August and December 1994. This made it impossible to tell whether Li had been forced to

flee by the police's actions or whether Li's speech had angered our government. However, it was hard for anyone to criticize Li Jianquan again after this, and he became a hero to the local Beijing gay community.

FROM TABOO TO OPEN DISCUSSION

Li Jianquan's story indicates that the situation in China is complex and that many people there are still uncertain of their status. Perhaps this is not surprising when one remembers that until recently the entire topic of homosexuality was totally taboo. China's laws, mass media, and scientific reports never even mentioned homosexuality. Chinese people had very few opportunities to read foreign or ancient Chinese documents. If anyone was reported for homosexual behavior, they faced lengthy jail terms. During those times when the ordinary people of China were completely ignorant of homosexuality, we have no way of knowing how many misunderstandings and personal tragedies occurred. All lesbians and gays were effectively forced to lead double lives, and the great bulk of the rest of the population were unaware of their very existence.

This situation began to change when Deng Xiaoping and his followers ascended to power in the late 1970s. They introduced two main policy directions. One is known by the umbrella title of "reform" (*gaige*). It consists of a roll back of state control through the command economy in an effort to stimulate production through the development of a parallel market economy. Some people used the opportunities created by this loosening of central control to break away from their old lives, leaving family and friends and moving to new cities or even overseas in an effort to find a space of their own. As time went by, it also made it much easier to publish articles, organize public seminars, and so forth.

The second main policy direction consists of China's opening up to the outside world. After a long period of isolation, this led to an influx of all kinds of publications and other materials from overseas. Over the last decade and more, two forces have emerged as consistently useful in helping to raise the profile of Chinese lesbians and gays. One is the interest of groups and individuals outside China, and the other is the work of scholars, who can appear in the public eye as objective, fair-minded people with foresight.

As Chinese traveled outside and foreigners came in, the situation of Chinese lesbians and gays gradually became known to the outside world (Bullough & Ruan, 1993; Ruan, Bullough, & Tsai, 1989; Ruan & Chong, 1987; Ruan & Tsai, 1988). At the same time, the international lesbian and gay movement boosted the courage of Chinese lesbians and gays in demanding liberation. The International Lesbian and Gay Association, Amnesty International, and other human rights organizations have continuously brought their influence to bear on the Chinese government. Organizations concerned with AIDS, such as the World Health Organization, have also influenced the policies of this country towards gay men, and, in particular, towards public health policy. In the early nineties, for example, I witnessed the WHO negotiate successfully with the Chinese Ministry of Public Health for the inclusion of safe-sex education for men who have sex with men to be included as part of the country's medium-term plan on AIDS. And during the time of the International Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995, lesbian organizations were permitted to enter China, which without doubt promoted further improvements in the attitude of this country towards lesbians and gays.

As for the second major force helping to raise the profile of Chinese lesbians and gays, Chinese scholarly interest in homosexuality originated in the field of psychology. In 1981, the psychological health specialist Zhang Mingyuan wrote an article on homosexuality in the classical Chinese novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* for the Shanghai magazine *Mass Medicine*. Zhang wrote that homosexuality was extremely odd but that science had yet to make a final decision on whether or not it was an illness. This article did not mention whether or not there were lesbians and gays in China today, and, at that time, ordinary Chinese people certainly did not know that there were lesbians and gays in contemporary China. However, this essay was probably the first contemporary public discussion of homosexuality in China. Shanghai psychologist Liu Dalin told me in 1994 that the author received letters from more than one hundred lesbians and gay men in response.

As scientific and scholarly exchange proceeded during the 1980s, the existence of homosexuality became more widely known, and it became a topic of debate. One point of view believed homosexuality was a sickness from which people needed to be saved. The other felt that homosexuality was a natural part of humanity and that it should be

treated equally. In 1985, the sexologist Ruan Fangfu wrote an essay under the pseudonym Hua Jinma entitled "Homosexuality: an Unsolved Puzzle" in *Good Health* magazine, later republished in the Chinese magazine, *Reader's Digest*. He wrote that homosexuality was legitimate and that it should not be subject to persecution, and he also pointed out that many lesbians and gays existed in contemporary Chinese society.

However, during the late 1980s, homosexuality was increasingly criticized as part of a larger move towards social conservatism, manifested for example in the movements against bourgeois liberalization and to prevent "peaceful evolution" (from socialism back to capitalism). This led to homosexuality being seen as a form of degeneracy found amongst Westerners and those Chinese influenced by the West, and it became an object of public condemnation. In his book *Critique of Sexual Freedom*, Liu Dalin stressed that it was reasonable that lesbians and gays should be subject to "the punishment of society." However, during this period, a few doctors also persisted in trying to help lesbians and gays by treating them medically as opposed to advocating punishment. For example, Dr. Liu Zhenni wrote an essay published in *Popular Health News* which called for helping lesbians and gays and which opposed moral punishment or accusations of criminality against them.

Entering the 1990s, the 1989 Democracy Movement was not able to block completely the concerns of the Chinese people, and especially the educated classes, for people less well off than themselves. The spread of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases further stimulated the scholarly world to pay attention to homosexuality. Ironically, it also gave scholars a good reason for paying attention to homosexuality. Otherwise, people would have been worried that others would interrogate them about why they were not studying some other issue of major importance, but instead were focusing on a problem that few cared about and that was also morally dubious. Seminars, discussions, salons, psychological counseling hotlines and clinics, radio programs, and magazine articles have all helped to improve the understanding of homosexuality in our country enormously, and they have also influenced the policies of our government and legislators.

With this vast increase in public visibility and discussion, the existence of individual articles on aspects of homosexuality has become commonplace. However, the publication of three monographs devoted

to the subject is noteworthy. In November of 1992, sociologists Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo published a study of gay male life in Beijing called *Their World*. In February of 1992, Zhang Beichuan's 700-page survey of materials from the ancient to the modern, the Western to the Chinese, and the medical to the cultural, entitled *Homosexuality,* came out. And in June of 1995, Fang Gang's *Homosexuality in China* was published.

PROBLEMS WITH THE LAW

Although homosexuality has gone from complete invisibility to widespread discussion in the mass media in a dozen years or so, only a very few lesbians and gay men feel able to come out yet. To understand why so few feel safe, we must investigate the law as it concerns lesbians and gay men in China and its impact upon their social status. Given a history where lesbians and gay men were not supposed to exist together combined with the ongoing critical debate about homosexuality, perhaps it is not surprising that the law is unclear and applied in many different ways. Also, the law has affected men and women differently. This is partly because some of the main statutes used against those who engage in homosexual behavior are those concerned with sodomy, which is not usually considered to concern women, and partly because in Chinese society, until recently, many people have not considered women to be agents of sexual desire at all.

However, at least as important as differences in the application of the law according to gender is an overall vagueness and lack of clarity concerning the status of lesbians and gays in relation to the law in China. The position of the lesbian or gay in mainland Chinese society is much the same as that of the "bad element" during the "Cultural Revolution." There is no law explicitly stating that homosexuality is illegal, but all kinds of criminal and administrative punishments have been and are applied against them.

Up until the 1980s, the moment homosexuality became visible, even if no illegal behavior was involved, the people involved were often sentenced to ten or more years imprisonment. In extremely serious cases, such as those concerning homosexual behavior between high school teachers and students, the sentence was sometimes life. For example, in 1975, a Beijing middle school teacher named Wang was sentenced to life in prison for having had a relationship with a

male student (Ms. Zha Jianying of the Chicago Social Psychology Center, personal communication, March 31, 1993. Ms. Zha was Mr. Wang's neighbor and a former student of his at primary school level).

After the 1980s and especially the mid-eighties, as the scholarly and public debate mentioned above developed, homosexuality ceased to be subject to such serious punishment. However, its precise legal status remains unclear. This is from item 254 on page 188 of the *Criminal Law Handbook*, edited by the Criminal Law Office of the Working Party on the Law of the National People's Congress Standing Committee and published by the People's Court Press in January of 1994:

> Q: In the case of sodomy, what crime does one convict on and what is the punishment?
>
> A: In regard to what crime one convicts on and what the punishment is for sodomy, there are no clear stipulations in the criminal law. On the 25th of May 1984, the Law and Politics Committee of the Dalian City Council asked the Working Party on the Law's opinion on this matter. Following research, the opinion of the Criminal Law Office of the Working Party on the Law was as follows: this matter has been researched in the drafting of criminal law. Although this behavior is certainly harmful, it is not appropriate that it be listed as a crime in itself. This type of behavior can usually be dealt with administratively, but in serious cases criminal responsibility can be investigated under the terms of the crime of hooliganism.

This was an internally circulated opinion, to be referred to only by law enforcement agencies in the process of dealing with a case. However, the reply of the Criminal Law Office of the Working Party on the Law of the National People's Congress Standing Committee did not say whether or not homosexuality itself was illegal.

On November 2, 1984, the People's Supreme Court and the People's Supreme Procuratorate stipulated, in "An Explanation Concerning Certain Problems Currently Encountered in the Specific Application of the Law in Handling Cases of Hooliganism" ("84" Legal Research Notes, Item 13), that "sodomising children, forced sodomy of adolescents, the use of violence or force, multiple partner acts of sodomy, and severe cases" constituted the crime of hooliganism.

Back in 1987, during the wave of social conservatism that prevailed at the end of the 1980s, the Head of the Shanghai Municipal Committee on the Determination of the Administration of Psychiatric Justice, Zheng Zhanpei, made a clear reaffirmation concerning the administration of criminal justice in regard to homosexuality:

> because homosexuality violates public morality and therefore disturbs public order and affects the physical and mental health of young people, it clearly constitutes criminal behavior. (Zhang, B., 1994: 633)

In 1992 and 1993, signs of a period of relative tolerance of homosexuality appeared in China. The Chinese Public Security Bureau dropped the case against two lesbians charged with cohabitation, on the grounds that "under the present circumstances in our country where the law has no explicit regulations on what homosexuality is and what criminal responsibility may pertain, the situation you have reported cannot, on principle, be accepted to be heard as a legal case, and it is not appropriate that this should be submitted for legal punishment as an instance of hooliganism."

Despite this improvement, however, in an authoritarian country where the law is not impartial, the rights of lesbians and gays as human beings are repeatedly encroached on, especially during social crackdowns. Particular areas of concern can be specified and examples given.

First, in the midst of the ever greater amount of public discussion and debate around sexuality in general, there continue to be government-supported and public rejections of the rights of lesbians and gays. For example, between September and November of 1994, the National Exhibition on Sexual Health Education was held in Beijing at the China Science and Technology Information Center and later went on to tour the country. The text of the exhibition declared that homosexuality was a sickness, and that "promoting equal sexual rights for homosexuals and heterosexuals" was an expression of bourgeois "sexual license." The exhibition was also opposed to the individual possessing the right to sexual freedom.

Similarly, homosexuality and AIDS are often equated publicly even though, to this day, the Chinese government has not explicitly acknowledged the existence of lesbians and gays in China. For instance, an article by Zhao Zhonglong, in the July 1994 issue of *Health World,*

attributes the spread of AIDS to gay men, stating that gay men are necessarily promiscuous and have partners of both sexes and that they must be stopped.

Third, as already indicated in my account of the Li Jianquan story at the beginning of this article, the police frequently detain gay men. Despite the improvement in the attitudes of law officers noted in the early 1990s, this has not ceased. At the beginning of the Beijing crackdown that lasted from August to September of 1994, many people linked the crackdown to concern about public security around the time of the holding of the 6th Far East and South Pacific Games for the Disabled in Beijing beginning September 4th, and to the celebration of National Day in October. However, these events passed without the crackdown on men engaged in homosexual behavior stopping. It is estimated among the local gay community that during this time at least 200 gay men were detained by the Beijing police, who beat them up, fined them, and held them for periods of between three and seven days. It is said that the police involved claimed to be responding to complaints from the public that gay men were disturbing their daily lives. Some people felt that this was the method chosen by the Chinese government to discourage increasing gay openness and the possibility that gays might become politicized.

Fearful of the police, gays are often unwilling to report crimes committed against them. And of course, gays are often recruited by criminals or blackmailed because of their vulnerability. According to a story currently circulating in the Beijing gay community, a group of gay men from Huainan City in Anhui Province were known as "the toothbrush packers" because they were unemployed drifters who relied on theft to support themselves. They followed one old cadre from his home to his workplace. Fearful that they would expose him, he gave them 2,000 *renminbi* (approximately US$200).

Mugging, theft, and rape are, it seems, happening to gays more and more frequently, making them fearful for their personal security. Even more worrying, when gay men who have had crimes committed against them report them, they frequently find that the police protect the criminal, totally ignoring the rights of the gay person as a citizen. Reports of such incidents are reported to me regularly.

Lesbians and gay men also often lose their jobs or their social status when their sexuality is made public, often following being taken in by the police. The primary reason is that they are fired, but many also feel

unable to face their colleagues. For example, a friend of mine named Xiao Liu was recently expelled after years of training as a Beijing Opera performer after he was discovered having an affair with another student in the academy. His opera career in ruins, he now works on the Beijing metro.

Finally, lesbians and gay men are placed under a lot of pressure from their families to marry. On the basis of an informal survey I carried out in 1993 in Beijing, I estimate that over 90 percent of lesbians and gay men in mainland China have lived as heterosexuals or bisexuals. Living like this places them under great stress and many leave their families to become drifters or commit suicide.

In addition to family pressure, Chinese lesbians and gays feel pressured to marry because of the housing situation. Most people's housing is assigned by the state, which acts on the assumption that people live with their parents or in communal dormitories attached to their places of work until they are married. Generally speaking, it is impossible to get individual housing assigned as a single person. In a situation where there is no recognition of lesbian and gay partnerships, this makes it very difficult for most lesbians and gays to form long lasting relationships where they can live together with their partner.

AIDS EDUCATION AND GAY CULTURE

Li Jianquan's story, given at the beginning of this article, illustrates the particular difficulties and dangers of pursuing gay issues under the rubric of human rights, which is the subject of great political sensitivity in China. However, as indicated above, scholarly work is somewhat safer, and so it is not surprising that AIDS education has emerged as a particularly fruitful site for the development of gay culture. Nonetheless, as my own involvement in this work illustrates, this is also not without its vicissitudes, which are a concrete manifestation of the contradictions and ambiguities operating in China today and outlined above.

In January 1991, a project entitled "Investigation into the Knowledge, Beliefs, Attitudes and Behavior of Gay Men and AIDS Education Research" was set up in the China Health Education Institute. This Institute is an organization under the command of the Ministry of Public Health, and I had been working there since my graduation from Shanghai Medical College in 1988. It was decided that the head of the

institute, Chen Bingzhong, would be in overall charge and would be responsible for social effects and all possible outcomes. I was to be second in charge, responsible for the design, implementation, and summing up of the project.

At the same time, the National AIDS Monitoring Center decided to launch research into the epidemic. Gu Xueqi of the Shanghai Health Education Institute volunteered to carry out surveys and distribute materials in Shanghai. Sexologist Pan Suiming took part in the early stages of the project. Sociologist Li Yinhe (one of the authors of *Their World*) volunteered to help mobilize people to work with us. The comrades in the Prohibitions Section of the Social Public Order Department of the Beijing Public Security Bureau (i.e., the police) offered their support and participation in our research.

Despite all this support and cooperation, I knew that this was a formidable subject to take on. In 1985, Da Dan of the Nanjing Railways Medical Institute had committed suicide because of his research concerning homosexuality, when he and two other researchers were asked to come in by the Public Security Bureau. In 1986, Zhao Min of East China Normal University in Shanghai had been subpoenaed six times by the Public Security because of his research into the treatment of homosexuality. The grounds given were that he had used videos in which people had appeared naked in the preparation of his treatment materials. At the end of 1990, I and Chen Yiyun had been criticized by a cadre in the Party branch for encouraging red light districts. This was because during our research into female sex workers, we had expressed sympathy for them and protested against crude crackdowns carried out against them.

Those of us working on the project had a few tacit understandings. We should not be gay, nor should we develop such a tendency during our research. We referred to gays as "them," and assumed that they were different from "us," alienated from society, that they might try to recruit "us," and that they were difficult to deal with. We assumed that our research project was in the public interest, and that it was also conducted with good intentions towards gays and, indeed, that it had to be in their interest. We discussed all kinds of research methods, but did not see gays as people who we could become friendly with. Our thinking was still caught between the new openness in China and the prejudices and fears of the past.

We also assumed that there were many secret police at gay meeting

places and amongst gay circles and that our work would run into difficulties. We assumed that we had to have the support of the Public Security Bureau or at least their tacit permission for this research and education project to proceed smoothly. We were probably correct on this point, but the question of how to secure the support of the Public Security Bureau was even more important. The police officer responsible for dealing with us was very welcoming, and he welcomed research into social problems. However, because we were not familiar with each other and had not worked together a lot before, the following mistakes were made.

In April of 1991, some of the people involved in the research project held a work meeting. When talking about how to make contact with the gay community, everyone seemed to hold back as though none of us were too familiar with the situation. Then the police officer spoke. He suggested the police should take the gay men in, and then the researchers could do surveys and take blood samples for testing. He said the officers at the Mintong police station in the eastern district of Beijing were particularly experienced in taking in "rabbits" (*tuzi,* Beijing slang for gay men), and he estimated that they could probably get a dozen or more in one evening.

This shocked me, because we were not allowed to harm our research subjects in the course of our research. This was already written into the report on our project, and it is a basic rule in social research. But it was difficult for me to reject this suggestion because I was worried about damaging our new working relationship with the police. Therefore, I asked the social psychologists taking part in the meeting whether or not this suggestion could be taken up. One scholar expressed satisfaction with the idea. He said there was no problem with this method, because the police were simply doing their public duty, and we were taking advantage of the opportunity it afforded us to carry out our research. It was not as though the police were taking people in because we wanted to do our research.

I will never forget that meeting for the rest of my life. I felt very bad. Our aim was to help people, not to harm them. We were eager, but because of our lack of experience and our equivocal attitudes, we blindly went along with the habits of the police. I rationalized it to myself, saying that although this action would harm people and have bad effects, at least we might gain a better understanding of the circumstances and establish a good relationship with the Public Security

Bureau. Between May and July of 1991, I went through two unforgettable months. I spent three nights every week during that period at the Mintong police station in the eastern district. We worked hard with great willingness to help people, but they were harmed. The first evening, I felt so bad I did not want to go on. At the end of the first day's work, two of our assistants resigned. These two social psychology students said we were being fascist. At the end of the second day's work, I also demanded that we stop. That evening, an engineer in his sixties who had been detained had knelt before everyone weeping and saying that he was worthless. I feel a deep responsibility for what happened and cannot forgive myself even now.

In September of 1991, the World Health Organization held an AIDS Social Research Conference in Jinan at which I introduced our work and started to call for equality for lesbians and gays. Afterwards, someone in my work unit attacked me for supporting sexual freedom and liberation, but we pressed on. In November of the same year, a National AIDS Advice Workshop was held in Beijing. I chaired it and took charge of editing and translating the teaching materials. Letters attacking me were written the central authorities, to the Ministry of Public Health, and to the Institute's leaders.

Institute head Chen Bingzhong gave me a great deal of support and greater powers to initiate work myself. In January of 1992, we established a small group to begin working on an AIDS hotline, which opened on April 7th. On May 24th, our AIDS hotline counselors went to Dongdan Park in Beijing to carry out AIDS education work, handing out leaflets and brochures. We did this again seven or eight times in August. At first, people did not understand what we were doing and were even afraid of us, but later they actively sought out our materials and chatted with us. All this was reported in a feature article by Guo Jianyan in *China Youth News*, which also said lesbians and gays were like other people and should be treated fairly (Guo, 1992). A great deal more coverage followed, and I began to write articles myself.

In October of 1992, we held five meetings of a discussion group for gay men as part of our AIDS hotline activities. Attendance was highly variable. We discovered that discussing AIDS was not an opportunity for gay men, but that they found that it placed pressure upon them and inspired despair. So, on November 22nd we held the first meeting of the "Men's World" discussion group for gay men. This activity was soon reported on Chinese national radio, and following that, by other

national and international media. For example, reports appeared in the *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), in *New World* (*Xin Shijie*) magazine (1993: 2), and on the BBC, Radio Australia, and Radio China. Other hotlines and discussion groups were set up in Shanghai, Kunming, and Shenyang in the following months. On February 14th 1993, Men's World held a Valentine's Day event at the Seahorse Ballroom at Xidan in Beijing. We distributed Valentine's Day cards and condoms. When this got into the media in March, the story was soon picked up and reported all over the country. Items appeared in *China Daily* on February 16, 1993, in *The Economic Evening News* (*Jingji Wanbao*) on March 31, 1993, and also in *Beijing Youth News* (*Beijing Qingnian Bao*), *The Consumer Times* (*Xiaofei Shibao*), *China Women's News* (*Zhongguo Funü Bao*), and in the reports of the China News Agency (*Zhongguo Xinwenshe*). This was probably the last straw for the authorities.

On May 10th of 1993, the Party organization in the Ministry of Public Health decided to stop my hotline work and to ban the Men's World discussion group. They criticized us for supporting homosexuality and human rights and for sympathizing with female sex workers in published articles, and they criticized Chen Bingzhong for having supported my work and my point of view. On August 10th, Chen Bingzhong was recalled from his position as head of the institute and asked to retire. During this time, the Central Propaganda Ministry criticized lesbians and gays and our work at several meetings, lumping lesbians and gays together with murderers, arsonists, poisoners, and drug pushers.

However, taking advantage of the new opportunities afforded by China's relative openness to the outside world and the development of autonomous non-governmental spheres of activity during the past decade and more, we had applied to the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation for support for AIDS work amongst gay men. In September of 1993, we heard that our application had been successful, and we were granted US$10,000 for our work. This proved to be a lifeline for me, too. For, in October of 1993, the new head of the Institute accused me of running up the flag of science as a front to carry out political activities opposing bureaucratism and corruption. He refused to sympathize with female sex workers and lesbians and gays, demanding to know what difference there was between lesbians and gays and murderers, arsonists, drug peddlers, and thieves. He demanded that I

change my position and act together with him to eliminate homosexuals. Of course, I refused. My wages were reduced to 40% of their original level. From February 21 to March 1 of 1994, I was sent to work in Kunming. No reason was given. I have heard an order came from the Ministry of Public Health.

I returned to Beijing to visit relatives in March, and, at the same time, the funds arrived from the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation. We began work, continuing the activities we had carried out before in the Institute, but now as a non-government organization. In May, our AIDS Action newsletter was set up, and its distribution has helped us to establish a nationwide network of contacts and co-workers throughout the country.

COMING OUT IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

From this previous section, you will have gathered that I had not publicly come out during my time at the China Health Education Institute. Indeed, my ability to carry out my activities there was dependent upon being in the closet. However, it went further than that. I was not at all sure of my sexuality at the time. So far, this article has focused on the public and material manifestations of gay culture in China and the various overdeterminations upon it, including a whole range of factors making it difficult for gay men and lesbians to come out or acknowledge their sexuality. However, it seems important to consider the personal and psychological effects of these unstable, contradictory, and rapidly changing circumstances. Therefore, I would like to close this article by recalling some of my own personal history.

For a long time, I did not seem to need to classify myself. In fact, it may well be that things really were like that. However, in a homophobic culture, this also made it appear that I was covering something up or that I lacked courage. I felt that refusing to classify myself was not helping me to stop thinking about my sexual orientation at all. In fact, it grew to the point where my personal life came to a halt, and I lost all capacity for happiness.

When I was studying in Shanghai in the early and mid-eighties, I was particularly eager to gain a better understanding of sexuality, partly due to youthful enthusiasm and partly because I was going through a great deal of mental anguish myself. Descriptions of homosexuality that I found were negative and medicalizing. In 1985, I

bought a copy of the *Handbook of Sexual Knowledge*, edited by Ruan Fangfu, and read it together with my classmates in the dormitory, totally disregarding our examinations.

Afterwards, I continued to develop my understanding of homosexuality through reading books and articles and in class. Much of the information was very well meant, saying that although homosexuality was abnormal or deviant, it was not evil and it could be treated. In 1986, a Shanghai newspaper disclosed the location of gay public meeting places in an article I happened to spot. I was very curious and wanted to go take a look, but I did not, nor did this cause me to think about myself. During 1989 and 1990, when I was working as a volunteer for a psychological advice hotline, I sometimes handled calls from lesbians and gays. At first, most of these conversations concerned how to correct homosexuality or how to avoid being drawn by one's feelings. However, later, we spoke about how loving someone could not be seen as the same as hating someone, so why was it necessary to change? However, to connect myself with homosexuality still produced terror for me.

As I have just explained, I started to deal with sex education for gay men in 1991. I did not see myself as a gay man and told myself I should not get involved in gay life while I was doing my research. However, while meeting with gay men, I was also analyzing myself. I discovered that I did have gay feelings, hoped to be able to get rid of them, and tried to persuade myself that I was heterosexual.

Later, when I had the opportunity to speak about more personal things with friends, I acknowledged that my feelings were bisexual, but with heterosexual feelings predominating. However, I still did not dare to speak of sexual experiences. Homosexuality was still terrifying to me personally, and I was very uncomfortable.

Finally, in mid-December of 1994, by which time I was working completely independently of the China Health Education Institute, I told someone else about my own homosexual and heterosexual experiences for the first time. The other person was an academic who was studying the lives of single people. He had asked to interview me, and I told him almost everything. After breaking the taboo, I told more people about my gay experiences and my terror. As I spoke, I found I changed.

THINGS ARE STILL FAR FROM PERFECT

A final note of caution. I remember an Australian friend's words at a seminar on homosexuality held in Beijing on September 8, 1992. "I'm very happy that the existence of lesbians and gays is being acknowledged," he said. "In fact, this is also inevitable. Or maybe I should say that although the enthusiasm of everyone attending this seminar may not necessarily reflect the general situation prevailing throughout China, it does make me feel that it is unlikely that any anti-lesbian and gay laws or severe punishments will appear in China." I still remember that time as one of great political tolerance.

In 1994, first in Tianjin, then in Shanghai and Beijing, large scale arrests and detentions of gay men occurred. In 1995, during the UN Women's Conference in Beijing, lesbians from all over the world held meetings, went on trips together, and celebrated together. But China's lesbians remained silent, and China's gay men continued to be harassed. In August 1996, a Beijing writer came to interview me prior to traveling to Australia.

> Everything that is happening in China at the moment is very worrying, he said. Maybe one day someone will speak out against lesbians and gays, attacking lesbians and gays, and they may even be defended and encouraged by people in positions of influence.

Indeed, I recall a fervent nationalist railing against lesbians and gays not long ago. He said, "We won't have homosexuality in China! We should eliminate homosexuals!" Of course, these nationalists also attack the protection of human rights, democracy, and freedom.

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