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# Tongzhi Culture

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*Rachel Leng reports on the broader significance of the Chinese gay rights movement*

In a Beijing restaurant, I sat down to lunch with two men and two women who have been married for more than three years. All four individuals are tongzhi in “sham marriages” (形婚xinghun) with each other in which gay men marry lesbians for the sake of public and familial appearances.

Kevin (all names have been changed), 29, and Paul, 35, met in 2005 and dated for more than three years before succumbing to family pressures to get married. Paul posted a message on an online forum for gays and lesbians to contact each other, calling for “sham wives.” Several lesbian couples responded, and after meeting with them, the men decided that Nancy, 26, and Anna, 28, would be a good fit. For five months, they went on multiple double dates to learn more about each other’s personality and lifestyle habits. Then they paired up for marriage: Kevin with Nancy, Paul with Anna.

By entering into sham opposite-sex marriages, all four individuals believed they could relieve family pressures and avert public suspicion about their homosexuality, but still secretly continue their same-sex relationships. They live with their same-sex partners, but meet their legal spouses once every few months to see family back in their respective hometowns. To them, this is a blessing, as it makes it less likely for their parents to make surprise visits.

Nonetheless, at personal risk of having their scheme exposed, the couples revealed their disillusionment. They complain about having to consistently lie about their “happy



marriage, and the frustration of not being able to legally live together as same-sex couples. In short, they resent that an intolerant Chinese society had pressured them into an undesired heterosexual marriage.

Given contemporary China's prejudice against homosexuality, it may come as a surprise that same-sex relations were widespread in Imperial China. A wealth of historical documents reveals that same-sex practices were accepted as part of social hierarchy in classical China's patriarchal society, where privileged males dominated their social inferiors, such as their wife, concubines, and servants. It was only since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 that the Communist Party tried to eradicate all non-marital relations, establishing the nuclear family as the bedrock of socialism.

The Chinese State saw non-heteronormative behaviors, especially sexual behaviors, as threats to their moral authority. Accordingly, homosexuality was pathologized and criminalized under the "hooliganism" law (流氓罪 liumangzui) in the 1957 Official Penal Code. Although numbers are uncertain, researchers estimate that more than 70,000 people, mostly men, suspected of homosexuality were convicted under the pretext of "hooliganism" and sent to prison, labor reform camps, electric therapy, or executed during the first six months of the Strike-Hard (严打 yanda) campaign in 1983.

Recent decades have seen some legal improvements: in 1997, the "hooliganism" law was abolished; in 2001, homosexuality was removed from the nation's list of mental diseases. Nonetheless, same-sex marriages or civil unions have no legal basis, and discrimination against homosexuals is still widespread.

Many gay and lesbian Chinese stay closeted their whole lives, marrying heterosexuals and having children. This phenomenon has become so prevalent that the wives of gay men have been termed "homowives" (同妻 tongqi) in colloquial slang, and sociologists estimate that there are more than 16 million of them in China.

"I have no desire to make my gay inclinations public knowledge," Paul told me. "I have seen other people suffer discrimination from their peers and employers for being homosexual, and I do not want to risk that. I have heard bad stories about people being detained and beaten up by the police, or being harassed, and that also deters me" from coming out.



meaning. tongzhi (同志) literally translates as “same will”, but means “comrade”, and is also slang referring to homosexuals. The term was first used in Imperial China to refer to people with the same ethics or ideals. It gained enhanced political connotations when Sun Yat-Sen, known as the national founder of China, used the label in a famous quote on his deathbed calling upon his followers to continue the revolution to overthrow the Imperial dictatorship. When the Communist Party came to power, they appropriated tongzhi as a general address term which all revolutionaries used to refer to one another regardless of class, gender, or other socioeconomic markers. During this time, “tongzhi” was made equivalent to the Soviet term, evoking the socialist ideal for an equal society.

In 1989, the organizers of Hong Kong’s first Gay and Lesbian Film Festival first re-appropriated tongzhi as a localized term referring to same-sex desire. This usage gained popularity and soon spread to Taiwan and Mainland China; tongzhi was considered a gender-neutral, desexualized, and culturally compatible term free from the stigma of homosexuality in Chinese societies.

In China, the appropriation of one of the most respectable titles at the heart of Communist ideology rendered Chinese homosexuals the ability to undermine government censorship and repression. Tongzhi established an indigenous social identity uniquely grounded in China’s cultural and political history. Tongzhi is now most commonly associated with homosexuals. Nonetheless, the term still resonates with the revolutionary intent for an equal society, and is regularly used in the state-run media as a title for Communist Party officials. The dual meaning of tongzhi highlights that while the term may specifically point to the homosexual community, it also implicitly refers to all Chinese people.

“Sham marriages” offer tongzhi a middle ground: by marrying each other, gay men and lesbian women can superficially fulfill the requirement of heterosexual marriage, yet still pursue their homosexual relationships. Today, it is common to find “sham marriage” sites like ChinaGayLes.com that unite gay men and lesbians.

To find a good match, tongzhi list information about their location, employment and/or financial situation, same-sex relationship status (whether they are already in a long term relationship), and whether they are looking to have a child. Nonetheless, the reality that many Chinese tongzhi have to resort to such conceit to conceal their homosexuality raises important issues with regard to sexual and human rights in China.



and too disgraceful, to think about coming-out in public, Paul warned. Even if I don't mind whether people look down on me, and even if my parents eventually accept my homosexuality because they love me, people will mock them. I can't put my parents through that shame... Even though a sham marriage is only a temporary and imperfect solution, it is better than coming-out."

Interestingly enough, the main advocates of pro-gay initiatives are typically the parents of gay children or heterosexual university students, rather than homosexuals themselves. In 2003, Shanghai's Fudan University offered China's first undergraduate gay studies course that was very popular and attracted an overflow in attendance. A China chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians And Gays (PFLAG) was established in 2007 and has been active in advocating for LGBT sexual liberalization.

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Several gay publications have sprouted up together with other gay-themed businesses, restaurants, and shops, increasing the visibility of tongzhi in Chinese popular culture and society. In recent years, the Mr. Gay China Pageant and the annual Tongzhi film festivals have also attracted widespread attention across contemporary Chinese society, particularly amongst youth.

In June 2012, the fourth annual Shanghai LGBT Pride festival was praised in an editorial by China Daily, a State-run newspaper, as a "showcase of the country's social progress." Although gay-themed events and venues still consistently get shut down by the authorities, the Shanghai Pride festival has been quite successful in increasing awareness of the Chinese homosexual community. Most local tongzhi do not actually take part in these gay pride events, and so the festival's relevance to the Chinese homosexual subculture remains contested. The festival primarily caters to and is attended by Westerners in Shanghai and university students.



before lamenting that it is just too risky to expose my homosexuality. Even if I participate and say that I am straight and merely advocating for LGBT rights, I think people will [be] suspect.”

\* \* \*

The heightened coverage of same-sex marriage debates in the U.S. has affected pro-gay marriage initiatives in China, but it is often the language of universal human rights that is most-invoked in the Chinese gay rights movement. Li Yinhe, a renowned sociologist and sexologist, has been an outspoken advocate for legalizing same-sex marriages, proposing several resolutions to amend to the marriage law during the annual sessions of the National People’s Congress in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, and 2008. These proposals appeal to the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights and Article 33 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, which stipulates that “All citizens of the People’s Republic of China are equal before the law” and that “the state respects and protects human equality.”

In 2012, Li launched an influential campaign that emphasized how the Chinese government should use the approval of same-sex marriage as evidence of its effort to protect human rights, gaining the upper hand against the United States. The main campaign slogan stresses that a “ban of same-sex marriage violates the constitutional principle of equality.”

In February 2013, more than 100 parents of tongzhi children signed a letter calling for the legalization of same-sex marriage to be made legal in China in response to two lesbians being harshly by a government official when they applied for marriage in Guangzhou. The letter, which was posted online, appealed to morals by framing a plea for acceptance of Chinese gays in terms of human rights.

An ongoing poll on Chinese portal Sina.com shows that a majority of over 71,000 respondents favor amending China’s Marriage Law to allow for same-sex marriage. Although Chinese Internet users are generally younger, more educated, and thus more liberal than the population at large, the opinions reflected in this poll are predictive of an emergent social trend supporting tongzhi rights in China.

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rapid rate of social and economic development in China ... homosexuality will become acceptable as good people in society, especially since the West is progressively embracing same-sex love.”

In an environment that marginalizes - at times violently - all non-heteronormative behavior, the mobilization of heterosexual support for gay rights in China has been an unexpected vehicle to channel broader discontent about civic and political rights in China. The trend of heterosexual youth involved in the tongzhi movement has become so widespread that the term zhi tongzhi (直同志) or “straight tongzhi” has been coined.

“All tongzhi realize that on some level, the government is the reason why gay love is currently socially unaccepted. It will be very progressive for the Chinese State to allow for homosexuality, and they don’t lose much political power,” Nancy said. “It is probably just a matter of time. It will no doubt be a huge achievement, not only for homosexuals but also for all the activists out there hoping to instigate change and more freedom in the Communist government. This will be a very positive step in that direction.”

In societies, as in psyches, what is repressed is eventually revelatory and manifest in highly visible forms. Academics have remarked that descriptions of social change in China are often associated with the metaphor of revolution. Gary Sigley, a scholar on contemporary Chinese politics and culture, holds that “China is in the throes of a new and very modern revolution, in the form of its own belated ‘sexual revolution.’”

In this view, the tongzhi revolution represents “a moment when Chinese citizens, especially the younger generation, embrace the ‘progressive’ sexual mores of the modern” and increasingly Westernized world. In the introduction of the Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance’s State of Sexual Freedom Report, Barnaby B. Barratt tellingly states that just as political liberalization implies enhanced political autonomy for citizens, so too does sexual liberalization presuppose that individuals will gain greater scope to conduct their sexual lives according to personal desires. The politics of China’s sexual revolution reach far beyond the bedroom.

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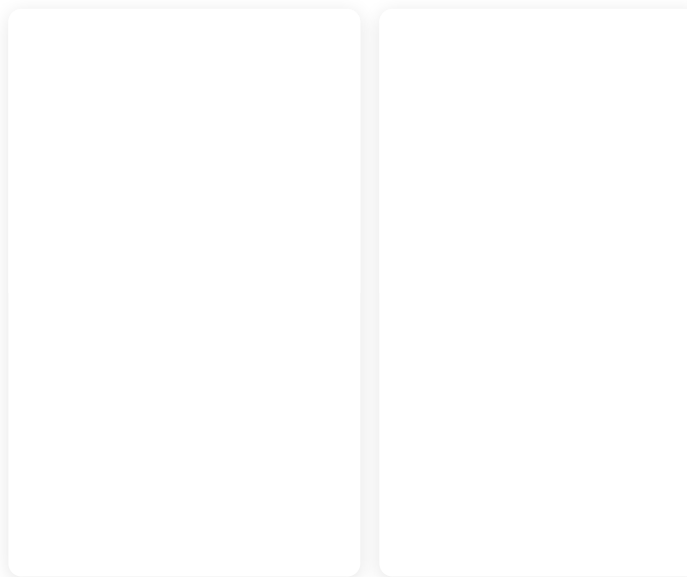
*Rachel Leng is a Master’s student in the Regional Studies - East Asia program at Harvard University. She is a 2013 25 Under 25 honoree of China Hands magazine. Contact her at [rleng@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:rleng@fas.harvard.edu).*



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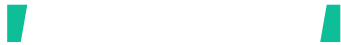
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