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Weddings and Funerals: The Paradox in China's Developing LGBT Community

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/08/12/weddings-and-funerals-the-paradox-in-chinas-developing-lgbt-community/>

GANG LI, AUG 12 2015

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

Translator's (Huili Meng) notes: Similarly to most Western countries' LGBT communities, Chinese gay groups are developing faster and stronger than their lesbian counterparts, because they have made themselves more socially visible in the mainstream media and society. Chinese LGBTs do not seem to be able to stand together under the flag of 'comrades' (a common and popular nickname for gays and lesbians in China) any longer, they are building individual and group identities in different ways, only thinking about their own agenda.

The academic perception is that AIDS plays an important role in the Chinese LGBT community, though it carries a very particular discourse. Along with this comes a distinct social visibility, which generates financial support from both Chinese and international organizations for gay individuals.

There is no longer a unifying purpose in the LGBT community and maybe there never has been. Although the disparate elements are trying to work together towards a common purpose, many of the younger people are forming individual radical factions.

In this article, as a senior volunteer in a gay NGO group, Gang Li, tries to take us to the heart of the discourse about disease and the real lives of gay men, discussing his own experience and problems from inside the community.

Z, An Ordinary Chinese Gay

14 June 2015. When I finish work and return home at 9 o'clock, the first thing I do is visit my sick neighbor with some antipyretic pills and a thermometer which I bought downtown. He's gay, under 30, single, and just moved into my community a couple weeks ago. He's resting at home, while ill.

When he gets up from his bed to open the door for my boyfriend Liangliang and me, Z still looks really unwell, with a low 38.6 degree fever. I call a friend who is a doctor and a transgender, to ask if the pills I bought are suitable. Over the phone, my friend asks me, "Does he have the 'basic disease'?" She explains to me that the varicella zoster virus, which Z has at the moment, isn't a common disease among young people. It is usually a sign of immunity deficiency caused through other complications. Even *she* uses the euphemistic term, but I know that 'basic disease' means HIV.

I tell Z he'd better go to the hospital when he feels able to. He replies, "I'll commit suicide if I get HIV." He knows very little about the virus, so I try to calm him down and explain some basic facts about the virus. "Dying is the easiest thing to do," I explain, "but it's the most cowardly behavior. Even when someone is infected with HIV, they will survive and will be able to have a normal lifestyle if they get the right medicine and treatment. It's not the end of the world." I shall go to the hospital with him later, and just hope he's lucky this time.

When Z learned that my friend is a transgender, he was quite surprised. He didn't know anything about transgenderism and found it very hard to understand. Therefore, I had to explain to him both what it means to be

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transgender, and the effects of HIV.

Z has very few friends to talk to, so he feels the need to talk about everything with us. He comes from a rural area, left home many years ago and wandered around the city. He had arguments and serious fights with three of his partners; some of the stories sounded very violent and crazy, but sometimes the reason was simple: they tried to stop him contacting his friends, or falling in love with others. Z admits he has neither skills nor knowledge about intimate relationship between two men. For him, and based on his own experiences, they tend to hurt each other under the name of love. In his words, he believes that heterosexuality is "normal" and normative, and that it is a model of relationship that needs to be followed. I stopped our conversation and tried to correct this point several times.

Z has never embraced any gay identity nor has he ever experienced enjoying life as a gay person, in the everyday world. He's never been involved in activities with an LGBT community. In our conversation sometimes, I've had to shift my role as a friend to one of a teacher or a consultant, just to instruct him some basic ideas about homosexuality and the LGBT community.

He has a very naive dream about love: an apartment with balcony in Shanghai, a dog, of course, also a man, two partners who can take care of each other.

Z is one of the Shanghai's ordinary 'comrades', who faces all kinds of pressures and stress on his own. He just wants a family and a better life for himself. For Z, AIDS, sexuality, LGBT, queer theory, and NGOs are in a different world, separate from his own. For a lot of Chinese queer comrades, sex is less cloaked than before, but nonetheless there is still a huge amount of stress when trying to talk about their sexuality with their heterosexual families, colleagues and friends.

In my mind, Z never thinks about death seriously, and at the same time, I'm sure that in the past, his sexual behavior has been unsafe. AIDS doesn't mean death any longer, but it still scares people who don't have enough knowledge or education on the subject.

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Jinxiong Zhang (in red coat and hat), a gay NGO worker infected by AIDS, and friends, after his lecture in Shanghai (Photo by Gang Li)

The funeral shouldn't have happened

In 2005, I joined Shanghai Leyi[1] as a volunteer, and had a chance to get to know other gays and launch exhibitions in popular places about gay groups. It's when I started really engaging with the LGBT community.

In China, sex workers are known as a 'bridge group' for AIDS, especially male sexual workers who service gay 'customers'. They are called a 'high risk population' in the social disease prevention system, also known as 'MSM' in medical terms: men who have sex with men.

Several years ago, I went to a gay man's funeral with Shanghai Leyi's director, Mr. Zheng. It was also the first time in my life that I went to the funeral of a gay person. The deceased was a sexual worker. Because of the size of his penis, people called him 'Number One', which also means a 'top' role in the sexual act between gays. I had never met him but I had heard about his story from other volunteers. People were told he died of encephalitis, but it's not true. I know he got AIDS and refused treatment. He fell into a coma after he was sick, was sent to Shanghai's Hospital for Infectious Diseases, which is located far from the urban center, and died there.

At the funeral I met his younger sister and her son who came from his hometown in the Henan province. When we saw the dead man's face, she told me her brother was a handsome man, he was very popular in their hometown, but there was no-one he liked. She never knew he was gay. He was always very careful with money, saved everything (somebody said over 20,000 pounds) to his sister and her son, but nothing for himself.

I don't know why he gave up the medicine and treatment, but I strongly wish that no more friends die of AIDS. It isn't a necessarily fatal disease in the medical field any longer, but it keeps on hurting the LGBT community, especially gays, even when it's invisible.

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The Shanghai PRIDE conference ceremony, organized by the Aishang (LGBT NGO group), supported by the Consulate General of the United States in Shanghai. (Photo by Gang Li)

AIDS, a challenge we must face

This last couple of years, I got some news from friends who have become infected by AIDS.

On the one hand, information about AIDS and safe sex is very easy to find, many groups and projects aimed at the LGBT community provide advice and help, many hospitals and groups have a free test service, but on the other hand, we are still living under the shadow of AIDS, suffering from social discrimination because of the connotations which come with it. As a result, we keep asking the question: Who's next?

One senior volunteer of the NGO groups from Beijing just told me he had to cancel his journey to Shanghai because he needs to look after a young man who has become infected with HIV. We later learned that a mutual friend who lives in Shanghai got infected too.

In China, fear and discrimination against AIDS is very common in every part of the society, including the LGBT community. For an infected man, telling other people the truth is even worse than coming out of the closet. So most of them choose to face the disease and pain alone, it's hard to share this secret with others. The number of known infected men is always going to be just the tip of the iceberg.

From 2010, as director of the Shanghai team of Aibai Culture and Education Center (ACEC), I started organizing some different topics for community activities, for example lectures and workshop about AIDS. In the Chengdu team of ACEC, they hold activities for people infected with AIDS. Based on this targeted group and projects, ACEC published *Active Life Handbook: HIV and my life*, trying to deliver comprehensive guidance to people with AIDS.

In China, there are a lot of groups and institutions working together towards the same goal: the awareness and prevention of AIDS. This gets a large state budget and plenty of public attention, and because of this I feel we should be wary of the success and efficacy of their work. In addition, from my point of view, this work can be quite negative. With recent medical advances, if patients follow their doctor's guidelines, even if they have been infected they can live a good and normal life. But there are those patients who have this education and still continue to expose themselves (and thus others) to AIDS and this is a serious problem that needs to be addressed.

Chinese gay groups went public about the AIDS issue in the last decade of the 20th century when more news stories about gays were reported through public and social media. A number of new relevant NGOs were founded, and more and more opportunities arose to engage in projects and research through official health agencies. In this period of rapid growth and developing community, some new attitudes and discourse began to appear. They disagreed with the stigma about AIDS, and began to campaign for gay human rights. But at the same time, awareness and preventing AIDS is still an important issue in the community.

At the beginning of this year, the well-known programme 'Legal Report' on China Central Television (CCTV) released a news story about gay groups and HIV infection through drug use and unsafe sex. In Wuxi, a wealthy and beautiful northern city in Jiangsu province, some gays raised these issues through social media, some of them had been infected by HIV through unsafe sex during parties.

Some NGOs for gay workers and the gay community's leaders called for a movement against CCTV, because in their mind this report was discriminating against gays and only chose to broadcast news about the dark side of the community. I understand their view, but I didn't support them this time, because our community needs some warnings about the dangers posed by drugs and AIDS. Critical words are always difficult but sometimes they are necessary.

The popular gay application 'Blued' declared their anti-drug stance after it was pointed out in the news. As this

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commercial software comes from the gay community it had to take a level of social responsibility. But it's quite hard to believe that they can promote casual sex through this online social network and at the same time act as a watchdog for participating in and promoting sexual safety.

Aibai, the well known Chinese LGBT NGO, promotes sexual awareness and safety advice for the whole community: for health reasons, everyone should treat every sexual partner as a suspected HIV carrier. But for most queer comrades who never dare to talk about AIDS, it's not an acceptable rule. They have few examples of people who have an active (sexual) life but take precautions about health safety. Fighting alone in the dark for years is an accepted fate for them. Recently though, this story has started to change although there are still a lot of trials and ordeals ahead.

How important is Gay Marriage?

The other day, a 'Lala' friend (a popular nickname for a lesbian in China) told me about a problem between her and her girlfriend. Her girlfriend broke down completely after she refused to go to America to get married (gay marriage isn't legal in China, some go overseas). She asked me "Is marriage is so important?" Of course not at all, I replied.

In June, there was a popular news story about a Chinese same-sex wedding, supported by Blued and Taobao (the biggest and the most popular E-commerce platform in China, similar to Ebay). There is an improvement in the situation for Chinese queer comrades, with some now expressing a desire for marriage. Even if an overseas wedding is just a symbolic act that isn't recognized by Chinese laws, it is still an attractive idea for many. Funnily, some supporters of same-sex weddings have gone to America for this 'show' even though they had only known each other for a few months.

While the value of 'normal' marriage is often seen as a legal protection only, this reason is sufficient for members of the LGBT community to fight for marriage rights. But critics hope that we can go a little further: marriage has a poor legal system, why can't we create a more interesting and advanced way of life with more imagination and courage?

Despite what the critics say, changing tradition and mainstream values is the hardest thing to do. The common trend is for queer comrades to follow the main social values of family and relationships of the heterosexual and patriarchal community. They need to stay outside of the status quo of traditional family values to be true to their sexuality.

Although I have been talking about gay weddings and funerals, this doesn't mean that I hold a negative feeling towards wedding ceremonies for gay couples. Rather, I want to remind ourselves that a beautiful wedding cannot erase the challenges in our comrade's society. A legal change would require support from both the political system and social norms. I wonder how many gays would marry if the same-sex marriage law didn't protect the LGBT group from discrimination?

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The media skills training camp for Huadong district's grassroots LGBT group, organized by Aishang (LGBT NGO group), supported by the Consulate General of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Shanghai. (Photo by Gang Li)

Let's work together within our multiplicity of culture

The LGBT community is in the same situation as the rest of the contemporary Chinese society: with diversified and chaotic values. For example in this article, I use gay, LGBT, comrade and other words and concepts together without any clear definition. Labeling is hard to avoid. Actually, multi-culture, LGBT, self-cognition, all come from the West. It's a sign of the growing relationship between the western and Chinese LGBT communities: we learn a lot of things from them, but at the same time we just follow in their footsteps. We're eager to learn theories, concepts and experiences from America, Europe but also Hong Kong and Taiwan. Gay politics, queer theory, feminism, they all seemed to be amazing and wonderful at the start, but have declined into a kind of fashionable rhetoric used by just a small number of LGBT groups and researchers.

The LGBT community is growing in size and in communication volume. But it's still a serious challenge to appeal to queer comrades to look after themselves, to seek a gay identity, and to protect, pursue and control their own lives. The old saying 'the priest from abroad has an easy time preaching' doesn't work this time; foreign theories are hard to explain when running a Chinese LGBT community, where even the community is a western concept too.

An American friend told me that when their gay people suffer from AIDS, their lesbian 'comrades' help them, internal arguments and differences don't break their joint political identity. But in China, LGBT groups are still divided, and there is no mutual support and agreement over key issues. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other marginal groups, rarely meet each other, and know very little about each other. In the gay men's groups, young men can't or won't see gays who are older than them; middle-class men ignore their queer comrades from the working class; and those who enjoy staying at home never meet the 'party animals'. Maybe we should question this in a different way: Is there a LGBT community? It seemed possible when I was at Shanghai PRIDE's ceremony, where queer comrades from different groups, countries and cultures worked together, but where are the rest? Community is based on communication, interactions and cooperation, it's not just a black word on the white paper.

For some people, a transplanted western concept is like a flag, queers become 'comrades' under it, fighting for the whole group's rights and future. But it's not true, the community can't exist without long-term exchanges and cooperation amongst the majority. It's the same in the new Chinese community, there are people who you say are individuals, families, but not community, because these people don't know each other, don't work together, they never talk or socialize with each other.

It's time to change. All queer comrades have to encourage themselves to 'come out' again, change from being isolated individuals, closed small circles, limited groups, into a real community, associating and cooperating with each other. During this period, more problems and contradictions will come out from the inside; questions and arguments can't be avoided, because understanding others is always more difficult than expressing themselves. It's the only way to achieve social development in the community.

Under China's current political environment, legal system, civil society, defending human rights and other phrases which integrate with the LGBT community's development are sensitive to government. It's also a big restriction in the development of the community. Using a revolutionary language, we'd unite all the forces that can be united, from the public good to the commercial area, from government to non- government. We'd promote cooperation among insiders, with outsiders through communication and cooperation by law, education, art, the academy and other ways: to break down the barriers and promote the common understanding of people in different areas, to jointly promote a Chinese society of tolerance, diversity and progress.

Note

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[1] Its current name is Shanghai CSW&MSM Center, a NGO group focusing on male sexual workers and the health issues of gays

About the author:

Gang Li is a journalist and a senior activist in the Shanghai LGBT community. He is notably a senior volunteer and member of the Council of Leyi Shanghai since 2005, he has been the Director of Shanghai Aishang LGBT since 2010, and was one of the main organizers of Shanghai PRIDE 2012. He occasionally acts as a project manager and a trainer in media skills for an LGBT grassroots activism organization in the Shanghai and Guangxi districts.