

Birthday in Beijing:

Women Tongzhi Organizing in 1990s' China

Research >
China

Up to the early 1990s, the word 'homosexual' (male or female) did not exist in the Chinese laws or media. In the medical literature and in dictionaries, homosexuality was explained as a mental illness or as a sexual perversion. Before the 1990s, many homosexuals, especially lesbians, did not know that there were other people with the same orientation; there was no one to share feelings with, and no place to find same-sex partners. Many homosexuals got married (heterosexually), while hiding their same-sex partners from their families. Because of the almost complete lack of information on the issue, many homosexuals were not even sure themselves about their own sexual orientation. (A woman, who was married and had a child, had never heard of, or even thought about homosexuality until she came across the English word 'lesbian' on the Internet, and discovered that she herself was one.) Conversely, people who had no doubt whatsoever about their homosexual orientation still did not dare to be open about it.

By He Xiaopei

(translated by Susie Jolly)

I began to participate in homosexual activities in the early 1990s. I once took part in a discussion session where psychiatrists, volunteers from the Women's Hotline, and a few individuals discussed homosexual issues; there were no homosexuals who took part as such. One meeting was held in a factory on a Sunday afternoon, under the label of 'mental health research'. In the main, the attitude of the psychiatrists and social workers was characterized by sympathy, albeit mixed with non-recognition and a lack of understanding.

The psychiatrists spoke of the homosexuals who had come to the hospital to be cured, who were unhappy and sometimes suicidal. Encouraged by this atmosphere of debate, one man 'came out' about his homosexuality. Afterwards, he and I started to use a different language, different experiences and feelings, to demonstrate that not all homosexuals live lives of tragedy and suffering. I met a few homosexual people at that meeting. We realized that we needed our own space to discuss and share our experiences, and help each other.

By the mid-1990s, two or three people began to organize the first homosexual (or *tongzhi*, the word most commonly used nowadays) activities in Beijing. During the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the activist Wu Chunsheng organized a lesbian dancing party for both Chinese and foreign women. It was held at the

'Nightman', a disco where many homosexuals still like to go. Two coaches full of women came from the Women's Conference, and over a dozen Beijing women participated as well. However, openly organizing activities in the name of homosexuality attracted the government's attention. That evening the disco was full of plain-clothes and military police, and afterwards Wu was detained. Also, in 1998 and 1999, two activists were searched at customs when entering China, and all materials that they were carrying related to homosexuality were confiscated. Yet, the Chinese homosexual movements have continued to develop, slowly but steadily, over the years.

Tongzhi spaces first appeared in Beijing in the summer of 1995, when a Chinese man, the aforementioned Wu Chunsheng, and Susan Jolly, an Englishwoman, began to organize *tongzhi* get-togethers every Wednesday evening at a non-*tongzhi* bar. To counter the general hostility toward homosexuals, the Wednesday gatherings incessantly changed locations. Initially only men *tongzhi* came to the meetings, since women *tongzhi* faced more barriers to taking part in nightlife. But women-*tongzhi* activities also began, involving small-scale private get-togethers, with a few people eating together and dancing at someone's home. We were very relaxed about who could join us, and did not stipulate sexual orientation as the criterion for participation. In the beginning, the activities were mostly organized by Susan Jolly, and took place at her foreign residents' compound. Later, activities were organized by Chinese women and were held in Chinese people's homes.

In 1996 there were still no homosexual bars in Beijing. An activity was organized by Susan Jolly and Wu Chunsheng to commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall riots.* To avoid police attention, we told all the people we knew to go to a very quiet bar in a small lane, for a 'birthday party'. We even bought a birthday cake. Sixty people came, among them eight women. This was the first time that this many women *tongzhi* had ever turned up in a public place. Wu whispered to me that there were plain-clothes police in the bar. We thought of a way to get around them. We sang 'Happy Birthday' and cut the cake. I announced: 'Can you guess whose birthday it is today? Come and whisper it in my ear, and if you get it right, you get a present!' (which consisted of

wrapped up condoms and sweets). Everyone started to ask each other whose birthday it was. Those who knew about Stonewall told those who did not, who then came and whispered the answer to me: 'Today is the commemoration day of the American gay movement.' A young man, having just heard the Stonewall story for the first time, ran over to me and whispered, 'I know! I know! Today is the birthday of all of us!' I then whispered what he had said to other people: 'Today is the birthday of all of us.' I thought, that is probably what the *tongzhi* movement ultimately means – we are united; we have a common birthday. From that day on, that bar became the first homosexual bar in Beijing.

Through mail networks, the *tongzhi* pager hotline, the Internet, the *tongzhi* bars and discos, and also through an Asian lesbian email network set up by a Chinese woman in America, an increasing number of women *tongzhi* came to know each other. Our activities also gradually increased and became more regular. From just going out to eat and dancing together, we began to organize sports events and discussion sessions. We elected a 'Discussion Commissioner', an 'Eating-out Commissioner', a 'Sports Commissioner', etc., and assigned the respective organizational responsibilities. We also gave our informal organization the name of 'Women Tongzhi'. 'Women Tongzhi' neither had a fixed leadership nor fixed participants in its activities. It also had no fixed place.

In the summer of 1998, after the First National Women and Men Tongzhi Conference, I invited four women participants to come to my house. We were still very excited and felt there was much more to talk about. When I suggested we organize a national women-*tongzhi* meeting, agreement was nearly unanimous. We established a six-person organizational team. One Beijing woman had a list of about thirty women *tongzhi* living in the rest of the country. These were contacts she had gathered through a letter-writing network over the years. We decided to invite all those women to the meeting. I was in charge of organizing a fundraising party at a club. To avoid police attention, it was officially my farewell party. We meticulously designed and printed the invitations, which we gave out in all *tongzhi* spaces as well as on the street. On the invitation it said 'Collecting donations for the First National Women Tongzhi Conference'.

The first National Women Tongzhi Conference was held in Beijing in October 1998. Altogether about thirty women *tongzhi* participated. After the Conference, a board of five members was established, and an internal magazine, *Sky*, was initiated. Since then, women *tongzhi* have started to use both international and national funds to organize their activities. ◀

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* The riots exploded when the police raided a bar (the Stonewall) in New York's Greenwich Village in June 1969, and gays fought back. The riots lasted for a week, but their impact was powerful and long lasting – within less than a year gay liberation groups sprouted in over three hundred cities throughout the US, and a political movement began in support of equal rights for sexual minorities.

Editors' note >

This paper is part of a chapter in Hsiung Ping-Chen, Maria Jaschok, and Cecilia Milwertz (eds), *Chinese Women Organizing*, Oxford: Berg (2002).