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Homosexuality in India: Past and Present

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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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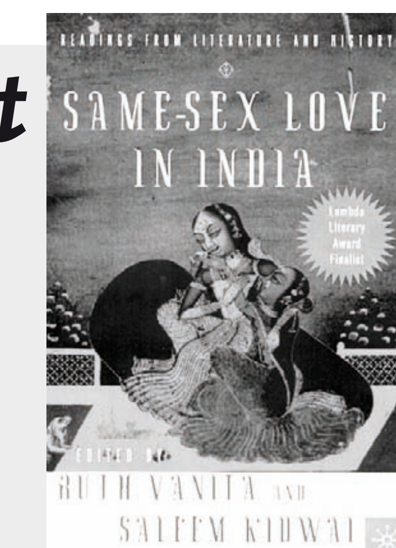
Note >

* 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).

Homosexuality in India: *Past and Present*



Research > India

When I was active in the women's movement in Delhi from 1978 to 1990 as founding co-editor of *Manushi*, India's first feminist journal, homosexuality was rarely if ever discussed in left-wing, civil rights, or women's movements, or at Delhi University, where I taught. Among the earliest newspaper reports I saw on the subject were those about female couples committing suicide, leaving behind notes declaring their undying love. In 1987, the wedding of two female police constables, Leela and Urmila, in central India, made national headlines and led to a debate on lesbianism. The women married each other outside the ambit of any movement and with the support of Urmila's family.

By Ruth Vanita

In 1990 the magazine *Bombay Dost* (Bombay Friend) appeared, and in 1991, AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (Anti-AIDS Discrimination Campaign), known as ABVA, published its pioneering report *Less than Gay*. In the 1990s many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) organizations emerged in urban areas. Several of them publish newsletters; many now receive foreign funding, especially those that do HIV-prevention work. *Sakhiyani*, Giti Thadani's short book on lesbian love in India, appeared in 1996, but is flawed by its erasure of medieval, especially Muslim materials.

The popular belief persists that homosexuality is an aberration imported from modern Europe or medieval West Asia, and that it was non-existent in ancient India. This is partly because same-sex love in South Asia is seriously under-researched as compared to East Asia and even West Asia. With a few exceptions, South Asian scholars by and large ignore materials on homosexuality or interpret them as heterosexual. As a result, in his introduction to *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* (1995), editor Claude Summers claims that the silence of ancient and medieval Indian literature on this subject 'perhaps reflects the generally conservative mores of the people'.

Saleem Kidwai and I had been separately collecting materials for two decades, and in 2000 we published *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, a collection of extracts translated from a wide range of texts in fifteen Indian languages and written over a period of more than two millennia. We found that same-sex love and romantic friendship have flourished in India in various forms, without any extended history of overt persecution. These forms include invisibilized partnerships, highly visible romances, and institutionalized rituals such as exchanging vows to create lifelong fictive kinship that is honoured by both partners' families.

We demonstrate the existence in pre-colonial India of complex discourses around same-sex love and also the use, in more than one language, of names, terms, and codes to distinguish homoerotic love and those inclined to it. This confirms Sweet and Zwilling's work on ancient Indian medical texts, Brooten's recent findings from Western antiquity, and Boswell's earlier argument that same-sex desire as a category was not the invention of nineteenth-century European sexologists, as Foucault claims it was. We also found evidence of male homoerotic subcultures flourishing in some medieval Indian cities. Like the erotic temple sculptures at Khajuraho and Konarak, ancient and medieval texts constitute irrefutable evidence that the whole range of sexual behaviour was known in pre-colonial India.

British nineteenth-century administrators and educationists imported their generally anti-sex and specifically homophobic attitudes into India. Under colonial rule, what used to be a

The Remaking of a Cambodian-American Drag Queen

Research >
Cambodia

They returned to Cambodia to find family members they hoped had survived the Khmer Rouge purges. They went to meet their *khtəəy* counterparts, the term used in their first language to describe those men (or women) who adopt the dress and comportment of the opposite sex. And, stuffed between the anti-malarial drugs and the Imodium, they packed their American sequin dresses, make-up, wigs, and lingerie to make their debut as 'drag queens' in Cambodia.

Karen Quintiliani

The Cambodian Americans (shown with their faces concealed) pose with their Cambodian 'sisters'. The photo illustrates the various ways in which Cambodian men who adopt the role of the *khtəəy* present themselves. However, the young man on the far right is considered an eligible bachelor and occasionally socializes with the *khtəəy*.

By Karen Quintiliani

For five Cambodian-American men the journey home in 1995 transformed their gay identities – identities imagined through the collective activities and memories of a Southern California Cambodian gay group they helped to establish. 'Real *khtəəy*' in this group – or those who adopt transvestite lives – socialize with men who have sex with men exclusively as well as married men who have clandestine sexual relations with other men. However, the group members (like those taking the journey home) who successfully adopt a male appearance, work in male professions, attract (primarily) Anglo-American partners, and resist family pressures to marry, are the ones that define drag as the cultural equivalent to being *khtəəy*, thereby legitimizing their unique gay identities. During drag performances, the members of the group depict Cambodian and American feminine cultural symbols – the traditional Cambodian Apsara dancer and Miss America – to temporarily embody their feminine selves. They also utilize drag performances to initiate 'closet' Cambodians into the group, and to educate non-Cambodians about the cultural role and (tacit) acceptance of being *khtəəy* in Cambodian society.

The trip to Cambodia provided an opportunity to show their Cambodian 'drag queen sisters' how in America they can transform themselves while maintaining the 'heart' of a woman. I went on the trip as the 'real woman' of the group, a designation that describes my role as a confidante and researcher in the gay group since 1992. However, being a real woman travelling with five Cambodians who appear to be men, provided a critical view of the expected separation between men and women's sexual worlds in Cambodia and the power held by Westerners in a country in the grips of poverty. The events that unfolded during our trip changed how these self-described gay Cambodian men saw themselves, and how the group members expressed their being *khtəəy*, as they saw videos and heard accounts about the conditions of their *khtəəy* counterparts in Cambodia.

In Battambang, the second largest city in Cambodia, the Cambodian Americans discovered how their *khtəəy* counterparts carve out social positions and sexual spaces. Shifting between gender representations and sex roles – like drag requires – blurs the boundaries and the discreet way sexual relationships between men occur in Cambodia. Three of the *khtəəy* live in a brothel and cook and clean for the women, only occasionally taking customers themselves. Mai Chaa, which means 'the old mother', is divorced and has grown-up children. He abandoned his family to fulfil his desire for male companionship. He is poor, homeless, and ostracized for having left his family, but not necessarily for having sex with other men. The other two *khtəəy* live in the temple compound and have taken a vow of celibacy in order to serve the monks and honour the loss of partners during the Khmer Rouge years.

Sexual relationships between single men and *khtəəy* in Battambang are either arranged or take place through random meetings; in either case the *khtəəy* provides the young men with money or food as well as sexual gratification. The Cambodian Americans played the role of *khtəəy* through the sexual exchange system, rather than as Cambodian-American drag queens. Before they left Battambang, they gave up their 'womanhood' by giving their sequined gowns and accessories to their *khtəəy* counterparts, realizing that '[the cost of] one dress could feed a family for a year [in Cambodia]'.

The Cambodian Americans also reunited with a long-time Anglo-American gay friend running a social service agency in Cambodian villages in and around Phnom Penh, the largest and most urbanized city in Cambodia. Their friend offered the Cambodian Americans the choice of any 'macho' Cambodian man at the agency. The Cambodian Americans bristled at their friend's offer when they were told by some of the Cambodian men that they feared losing their jobs or access to English language classes if they did not agree to engage in sexual liaisons. Their friend appeared to exploit the men's poverty and to misinterpret a social system that allows for male intimacy without the homosexual label common in contemporary Western societies.

Until these Cambodian gay group members could travel to their homeland, they imagined being *khtəəy* through a set of social and cultural symbols available to them. When they returned to the USA they no longer held drag events as a way to portray their identities as Cambodian and gay. Rather, being *khtəəy* became a social responsibility to financially support family members they reunited with in Cambodia, to sponsor HIV/AIDS fundraisers for Cambodia, and in some cases to return to their homeland and to nurture relationships with Cambodian men they met on their first trip home.

Stuart Hall (1990) describes identity as a 'production' constantly in flux as individuals and communities reinterpret experiences in diaspora and from the homeland. By understanding identity as Hall suggests, we gain an insight into how sexualities in Cambodia and in diaspora are influenced by transnational relationships and the conditions of poverty. <

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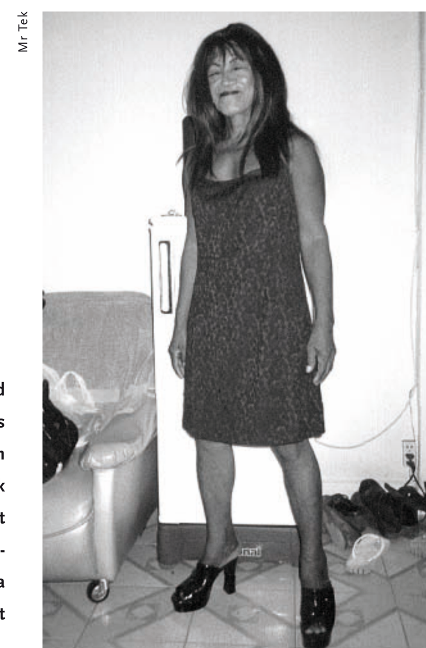
Mr Tek



Mai Chaa, the 'old mother', feels awkward in high heels and the black sequin dress, but enjoys the opportunity to dress as a woman for the first time in her life.

minority puritanical and homophobic voice in India became mainstream. The new homophobia was made overtly manifest by the British law of 1860, Section 377, Indian Penal Code, still in force in India, whereas homosexuality between consenting adults was decriminalized in England in 1967. Section 377 penalizes 'unnatural' sexual acts with 'imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.'

A campaign currently being waged against it and ABVA's petition to declare it unconstitutional is pending before the Delhi High Court. Though there are few convictions under the law, police use it to terrorize and blackmail gay men, many of whom are married to women and cannot afford public exposure.

More positive pre-colonial narrative traditions persist alongside the new homophobia, and are visible in some fiction and in popular cinema, which from its beginnings has displayed an intense interest in same-sex bonding. From the late 1980s onward, openly gay and bisexual writers like Suniti Namjoshi, Vikram Seth, Firdaus Kanaga, and Bhupen Khakhar drew worldwide attention. The Indian media in English, having developed a pro-human rights stance from its origins in the national independence movement, generally reports positively both on Indian and international LGBT movements. Today, there are many gay celebrities and there is much play with gender and sexuality in the performing and fine arts, and in the worlds of fashion and design.

Scholarly and journalistic interest in the field has accompanied the growth of LGBT movements, as is evident from Kripal's work on homoerotic mysticism and the recent anthology of scholarly essays, *Queering India*, examining homosexuality from multidisciplinary perspectives. An anthology of writings by contemporary lesbians, *Facing the Mirror* (1999), and one of writings about gay men in the twentieth century, *Yaraana* (1999), have been well received in India.

The silence has been broken in the Indian academy too. In the last couple of years, courses on homosexuality in literature have been taught at Delhi University; the law school at Bangalore held a conference on LGBT issues; and a premier women's college in Delhi held a lesbian and gay film festival.

Oral histories of gay people are being documented by gay and gay-friendly film-makers and on television talk shows. Civil rights and women's movements have become more open to discussing LGBT issues. The huge controversy in 1998, when the right-wing Shiv Sena attacked the film *Fire* for its lesbian theme, enabled a public debate on homosexuality. For the first time, lesbian and gay organizations, identified as such, demonstrated in the streets along with civil rights groups. Nevertheless in 2001 national women's organizations refused to allow lesbian groups carrying banners with the word 'lesbian' to march in the 8 March International Women's Day rally in Delhi. Ironically, the government-sponsored Women's Day fair allowed the lesbian groups to set up a booth and use the word.

The visible LGBT community has grown exponentially in the cities. Lesbian and gay phone helplines and online chat groups have been set up; regular parties and picnics, and meetings for parents of lesbians and gays are also held. These types of community life fit in well with Indian cultural mores, which historically have fostered the play of different kinds of eroticism, affectional links, life arrangements, and fictive kinship networks. <

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