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Whose comrades? Gay festivals in China

Beijing, 16 December 2005, 3pm. Two hours before Beijing's first Gay and Lesbian Culture Festival, organisers are making final arrangements at On/Off, a well-known Beijing gay bar, when policemen barge in. Despite organisers' fervent defence of the festival's innocuous nature, the officers insist the event is illegal without prior official consent. After finding an expired fire extinguisher, the police force the owner to close his bar for a week. The first attempt to launch a major cultural event featuring the Chinese gay community is stymied.

Remy Cristini

In China, freedom of assembly is restricted by meticulous regulations aimed at safeguarding 'homeland security', 'social stability' and 'spiritual civilisation'. Any assembly that might wield social or political influence must have government approval. In their discussion with organisers at On/Off, police officers stated the problem was not the festival's subject matter, but the organisers' failure to apply for authorisation. The first part of this statement may sound surprisingly liberal, but should not be interpreted too optimistically. The organisers had actually considered requesting authorisation but were advised not to do so by Aizhi (爱知, 'Love Knowledge'), a largely foreign-funded, government-approved NGO dedicated to safe sex awareness and gay rights' issues. In Aizhi's opinion – presumably substantiated by earlier experiences – an application for authorisation would most probably have been turned down.

The first Beijing Gay and Lesbian Culture Festival was supposed to focus on a broad range of issues touched on in two more modest Beijing gay and lesbian film festivals, in December 2001 and April 2005, respectively, which had also met with official interference but were not called off altogether. It was almost certainly the larger scale of the first Beijing Gay and Lesbian Culture Festival that drew government attention. The festival programme had been announced well in advance by online newsgroups and a website; the publicized presence of eminent guests and speakers from China and abroad, as well as an impressive list of media, probably triggered police intervention.

Comrades-in-culture...

Nevertheless, during the three days the festival would have lasted, several 'underground' meetings took place. Strengthened by the degree of organisation within the gay community, expressions of support by both gay and straight would-have-been festival visitors and increased media interest, organisers seemed confident that a similar festival *with* official consent could be possible in the near future. As early as the day after the police crackdown, Reuters and many newspapers, including some in Hong Kong and Korea, reported it. Some mainland-Chinese media reports considered possible reasons why police had intervened, while others reported that the festival actually did take place and hailed it as a significant step in the gay emancipation process. Notably, both types of reporting seemed to sympathise with Chinese gays, who interpreted such positive media attention (as opposed to disparagement or ignoring it altogether) as conducive to an open-minded attitude towards homosexuality in Chinese society. And although the police consistently monitor the festival website – from which they learned about it in the first place – at this writing it is still online. This is all the more remarkable because it prominently features reports of the crackdown, including citations from foreign media.

One of the discussion topics originally scheduled for the festival was 'comrade culture'. The term *comrade* (同志, in Chinese, literally meaning 'of the same intent' and broadly used in communist discourse) is preferred over *homosexual* (同性恋) by Chinese gays and lesbians to signal consciousness of themselves as an organised social group. Thus it has become a common form of address within the gay community and given rise to such terms as *comrade literature*, referring to works of fiction with gay themes, a genre that has flourished in recent years through the internet. Occasionally, mainstream media also adopt the term to refer to gays.

Comrade culture is not synonymous with a cultural subset to which all Chinese gays, defined as men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women, automatically belong. Comrade is a more complex social concept, partly based on sexual identity (ie, homosexuality or non-straight sexuality) but also attesting to the mechanism of identity politics as an auto-descriptive and group-empowering term. Although the comrade concept bears some similarity to the sense of 'queer', the terms are not interchangeable. In fact,



there is a Chinese translation of 'queer' (酷儿) that is used in terms such as *queer theory* and *queer nation*, but it generally corresponds to international discourse in the field and is hardly ever employed to refer to the Chinese gay community. That said, drawing parallels between 'queer' and 'comrade' helps conceptualise the latter term.

...become Comrades-in-politics

Based on Foucault's theoretical legacy, referring to links between (sexual) identity and discourse as the 'discursive effects of available cultural categories' (Jagose 1996:82), queer theory contests the essentialist perception of sexual identity as something innate or fixed and defines sexual identities (eg, gays and heterosexuals) as social *constructs*. Queer as an alternative, auto-descriptive term for non-heteronormative sexual or gender identities emphasizes this (post-) structuralist awareness, and has developed against a social background of sexual emancipation in the West in the 20th century. An unmistakable correlation between the western gay community's adoption of 'queer' and the Chinese gay community's adoption of 'comrade' – as opposed to using the pathologizing



term 'homosexual' – is that it reflects increasing self-awareness within these communities.

Another Foucauldian concept that is central to Queer theorization, and that might also apply to the Chinese situation, is the 'tactical polyvalence of discourse' (Foucault 1990:100). The fact that people are socially labelled, although perhaps involuntarily at first, can have an empowering effect. In China, the socially oppressed gays of the 1980s became a more coherent and self-conscious community in the 1990s through new networking possibilities offered by the internet. Adopting the term *comrade* demonstrates group empowerment and signals, in the light of identity politics, that the gay community controls the naming of its identities.

The importance of self-identification in relation to sexual identity is also specifically emphasized by queer theorists. *Comrade* emerged out of the Chinese gay community itself, and was subsequently adopted as a conscious identity marker. Hence, with reference to gay festivals and similar events, it makes more sense to speak of comrade culture than of Chinese gay and lesbian culture; the former shows that we are dealing with expressions of a self-conscious social group rather than attempting to encompass the doings of all Chinese gays.

Cultural articulation

In what sense, then, do gay festivals articulate comrade culture? An obvious answer would be that the festivals themselves are *manifestations* or *statements* of – that is, by – comrade culture, referring to both the festivals' origins and their subject matter. In this respect, it is especially interesting to note that, while both festival organisers and participants include people who identify themselves as comrades, both groups also include a fair number of people who don't. How do the latter relate to comrade culture? On the one hand, they are referred to *ex negativo* as 'non-comrades' (非同志). On the other hand, they can arguably be seen to affirm the notion of a comrade culture by partaking in the festivals as visitors or being involved in their organisation; that is, non-comrades in their turn articulate a perception of gays as not just people with a non-standard sexual preference, but as a community with a shared identity that manifests itself in social and cultural ways (comrade culture) within society at large. By participating, non-comrades demonstrate a tolerance for coexistence and might even find common ground between comrade culture and their own 'heterosexual' cultural perceptions in terms of lifestyle (eg, individual expression) or interests (eg, artistic taste).

If non-comrade participation in comrade culture demonstrates tolerance, what are we to make of the increased positive interest of the mainstream media? It leaves us with an important but as yet unanswerable question: does media interest signal a growing readiness in Chinese society to acknowledge the notion of a comrade culture – even if it is not (yet) widely referred to as such? <

Works cited

- Foucault, Michel (trans. Robert Hurley). 1990. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Jagose, Annamarie. 1996. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: NYU Press.

Online resources

- www.aizhi.org/ (Aizhi website)
- www.bglff.org/ (website of the 2nd Beijing Gay and Lesbian Film Festival)
- www.bglcf.org/ (website of the 1st Beijing Gay and Lesbian Culture Festival)

Remy Cristini studied Sinology at Leiden University and now works at the library of the Chinese Department. He is pursuing PhD research on articulations of comrade culture (gay scene, comrade literature, films, festivals/events, and scholarly and popular discourse).
www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/dachs/leiden/tongzhi/rvc.html
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