

Case Study of Lesbian's Health Hotline in Peripheral Chinese City¹

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Abstract

This article examines the telephone hotline health services for lesbians in one of the mainland China's peripheral cities, Kunming. It examines the socio-cultural situation of Chinese lesbians, identifies a blind spot in indigenous feminism discourse on lesbian issues, and proposes a rethinking of that discourse. It probes the value that dialogue has for lesbians by examining their participation in the hotline service, and explores how lesbians in China can enter social struggles for equality with the support of public policy organizations. This case study seeks to contribute to debates in Chinese scholarship on lesbian issues from a reflexive, critical feminist perspective.

With the greater openness to international influences that followed the reforms of the 1980s, Western feminism has had a profound influence on scholarly research in China. The Beijing Conference on Global Women in 1995 exerted enormous influence on the rapid development of feminism in China. Most of the feminist discourse in China, however, focuses on liberating women from hetero-patriarchy with emphasis on gender equality, especially on issues concerning marriage, family, employment, and politics. As a result, Chinese feminist scholars have neglected the oppression of lesbians. The research of Li Yinhe stands out as a singular exception; however, Li's work (Li, 1996, 2003) examines the situation of lesbians from a sociological perspective and does not focus on communication issues, per se. Because Chinese feminists and lesbians do not share a common agenda, each has gone their separate way. As a result, there has been little public discussion of lesbian issues. In mainland China, there are very few studies of lesbians and public policy or of a lesbian social movement.

The situation is very different in Taiwan. Under the framework of "culture analysis," Wang Yage, a Taiwanese scholar, has investigated women's liberation, civil rights struggle for racial justice, Tongzhi equal rights², anti-war, environment protection, and so on (Wang 1992, pp. 103-131). With the same

¹ This research is one of the achievements under the research topic "Shanghai Women's Hotline and the Construction of Metropolitan Harmony Society", project serial number 2007BXW004. At the same time, much gratitude is owed to Dr. Wang Ming, Director of the office for China-UK HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care Project, for her generous assistance, as well as to Hotline volunteer, Ms. Yangguang and the other lesbians participants.

² The term "tongzhi" is now a common way of addressing homosexuals in the Chinese speaking world, implying to some degree that the Chinese group transcends the meaning of homosexuality defined by the Westerners. As described by Zhou Huashan: "The term 'tongzhi' (comrade) does not involve 'sex'. It refers to a noble as well as politicized idea which means 'of the same will' or 'the sharing of the same belief,' with the expectation of achieving a society of common volition. It does not contain the negative implications of 'excessive sexuality,' 'sexual abnormality,' or 'femininity tones,' which are so frequently found in conventional discourses on homosexuality. The term 'tongzhi' de-sexualizes the homosexual relationship, hence forcefully rejecting dominant media representations of gays and lesbians. But the term does not thoroughly deny the sexual affair involved, as the term still keeps the character 'tong' (homo) which is also the same character in the Chinese term 'tong xing lian' (homosexuality). By echoing Sun Yat-sen's famous saying "Revolution has yet to succeed and all comrades (tongzhi) must still work hard," the term signifies a noble and moving political ethos. The term 'tongzhi' originally referred to the Party members who sacrificed their blood and life for the revolutionary cause. Nowadays, this original noble meaning has been displaced. The character 'zhi' (will) has turned into something like 'homosexual crowd should not be discriminated' and 'homosexuals could still share true love'" (Zhou 1997, p. 362). "As a

method, he has examined the Taiwan homosexual phenomenon, known as Tongzhi, from three perspectives: promoting positive media representations, establishing Tongzhi communities, and supporting individual Tongzhi 'coming out.' That is, he provides a template for an equal rights movement for Tongzhi (the Chinese euphemism for gays and lesbians), which includes broadly based cultural transformation (Wang 1999, pp. 247-251).

Lai Yulin, the general secretary of Taiwan's Tongzhi Consulting hotline, examined the problems involved in institutionalizing Tongzhi movement's objectives, including the Consulting hotline, an association that was founded in 1989; building upon the work of McAdams and other social movement researchers, Lai cited three elements necessary to the success of social movements, "political opportunities, mobilizing structures and framing processes". Lai's study found commercial enterprises and products served as avenues to building Tongzhi communities and the Tongzhi association, specifically shared consumption of goods provided by Tongzhi commercial corporations, including Tongzhi's Bars, saunas, bookstores, restaurants and websites (Lai 2003, pp. 79--114).

Although they developed under very different social conditions, the lesbian movement in mainland China shares some common cultural bonds with the Taiwan Tongzhi Equal Rights Movement, which distinguish them from Western gay and lesbian movements. Because of the divergent historical, economic, and political origins of the Tongzhi movements, theories informing studies of Western lesbian movements and public policy have little relevance to studies of the Chinese gay and lesbian movements. The cultural context of the Tongzhi experience needs to be studied on its own terms, from the ground up, in order to establish the continuities and discontinuities between Tongzhi movements and the international gay and lesbian movements.

To that end, this article undertakes a pioneering study of Tongzhi experience from a communication perspective by examining lesbian discourses communicated through the health hotline in Kunming. It identifies some of the distinctive features of indigenous experiences in China, draws some tentative links to international research in communication, and offers some reflections on the Tongzhi lesbian movement and public policy in mainland China. The Kunming health consulting hotline offers a socially significant venue for a case study of the existential position of Chinese lesbians for the following reasons. First, it illustrates a persistent blind spot in indigenous Chinese feminist discourse in relation to lesbian issues. Second, it probes the value of participation in the hotline dialogues, which are supported by public policy organizations, in lesbian efforts to join struggles for social equality. The case study seeks to contribute to

conscious political practice, the term 'tongzhi' transcends the terrain of sexual orientation, be it heterosexual or homosexual, and represents a subjectivity of counter-identity and counter labeling. It is a political strategy which could only be implemented through a definition and redefinition by living experience. It transcends the conventional duality between "homo vs hetero," thus speaking to a political identity that epitomizes a world of common wellbeing." (Zhou 1997, pp. 363).

the debate on lesbian issues, from the perspective of a reflexive Chinese approach to critical feminist communication studies.

Designing this case study posed some unique methodological challenges. Data gathering through survey research was ruled out when initial contacts with prospective participants indicated discomfort with and reluctance to participate in a questionnaire based study. Instead we used a combination of research techniques to develop the case study. We began by visiting the Office for China-UK HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care Project, under the leadership of Yunnan Health Education Institute. There, we conducted observations and in-depth interviews. With the help of Doctor Wang Ming, director of the office, we were able to gain access to the volunteers of the lesbian health hotline and obtain all of the records of the hotline. This allowed us to undertake a content analysis of the samples of hotline records, ranging from July 16, 2003, the first record of the hotline to February 7, 2007. Although these records were extremely valuable, the information they revealed was still somewhat superficial as they did not provide insight into the social significance of the content or to the emotional experiences of individual lesbians. Qualitative study proved essential to understanding the social context of Chinese lesbian identity and the use of the hotline. Following the advice of Miles and Huberman (1984) that "Participant feedback is a means to learn more about the site, as well as about the relevance of inferences" (quoted from Zoonen 1994, p. 146), the authors shared a preliminary draft of this article with participants in the study and invited their feedback in order to assess the accuracy of our account and to solicit further data through the feedback process. Participant feedback proved very valuable, adding considerable depth to our understanding of the social significance of lesbians' use of the hotline. We incorporated this feedback into a revision of our article; we then asked the participants to read the revised account. The second round of participatory feedback affirmed the conceptualization of the case study and its conclusions; and participants agreed that our revised account closely resonated with their experiences with and understandings of the social and dialogic functions of the hotline.

Origins of the Hotline

Yunnan Province, which is located in the southwestern frontier of China, adjacent to the "Golden Triangle," the biggest zone of drug production in the world, has developed at a comparatively slow pace socially and economically. The province's political centre, Kunming, is a multi-national city (26 nationalities have dwelt there for generations), with a highly mobile population of 1.2 million –transients outnumber the permanent population by a ratio of 4 to 1.

In 1989, 146 cases of HIV were found among groups of vein-injecting drug addicts in the frontier region of the Yunnan Province. By 2000, the total number of HIV infected patients, cumulatively reported for the entire province, was up to 7,973; 448 cases of AIDS were reported, with 326 of them resulting in death. The total number of HIV cases was estimated at 50 thousand by the end of 2000 (Duan 2006, p. 1). The data from Yunnan Province Center for Disease Control and Prevention shows that the epidemic rate of HIV in Underground-FSWs was 0.5 percent in 1995, with an increase of 1.5 percent during 1996 and 1997, and then fluctuated between 2.0 percent and 2.9 percent from 1998 to 2003, with the increase reaching as much as 7.6 percent in some regions. The increase of HIV infection in Underground-FSWs and among pregnant women has led to an increase in the proportion of female infectors. Infection through sexual contact has become the fastest-growing form of infection, accounting for 20.8 percent of cases while infection through drug use has decreased to 51.4 percent; another 21.7 percent of infections have undetermined causes, but are thought to be of sexual origin.³

Given the severity of the situation, the central government launched the first transnational governmental cooperative project involving Yunnan Province and Sichuan Province in September, 2000: China-Uk HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care Project in Yunnan Province. The project ran from September 2000 to August 2006 with funding of about £ 340,000 (RMB 4,411,000 Yuan). The average investment was more than 100 million Yuan annually in each province; however, the annual funding of prevention and cure for the Yunnan province was only RMB 4 million Yuan (Duan 2006, p. 14). China-Uk HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care Project in Yunnan Province is conducted by Yunnan Health Education Institute, supported by three funds: Publicity and Education, Provincial Challenge, and Application Study. The public was also invited to propose projects in order to arouse social support to prevent and cure AIDS. Six years of effort by numerous staff, experts and officials produced significant progress in intervention as well as care and support to people living with HIV/AIDS. Leaders from the Ministry of Health in China, State Minister of UK, Director-General of DED, director of China Office, all praised the project's HIV/AIDS interventions. The Yunnan project pioneered the development of policy on HIV/AIDS prevention and control in China. Colleagues from many other provinces, the China Care Project, Global Fund Project, China-UK Strategic Support Project on HIV/AIDS, health/family planning, and the HIV/AIDS control project of China/U.N. Population Fund, and other organizations visited Yunnan to study the experience of HAPAC⁴.

The Yunnan Male Tongzhi Health Hotline, which first opened on August 13, 2002, was part of the project, specifically its outreach effort in the "Implementation of Three Fields and Outcome" for "Prevention and

³ All Data was provided by Yunnan Province Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Yunnan CDC), and obtained by the authors in December, 2006, while doing field work in Kunming, Yunnan province.

⁴ The above-mentioned material comes from the authors' in-depth interviewing of the director of the project office in December, 2006.

Treatment STD and AID for high-risk Population. The purpose of the hotline is to address "Health, Communication, Concerns" by providing the intervention for MSMs, relief for mental anxiety, opportunities for communication and emotional support, health information, consultation on AIDS and other sexual diseases, and to publicize available services. The service was provided by volunteers from MSMs, most of whom have been on duty since the hotline opened. The hotline operates for limited hours only two days a week: Tuesday and Thursday from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. From August, 2002 to the end of April, 2006, the hotline received a total 1,457 calls; they addressed such topics as STD and AIDS, psychological and emotional stress, family and social relationships, sites of Tonghi social activity, the services provided by the project, and other related topics. Callers were from a wide geographical area extending beyond Kunming, and including other parts Yunnan as well as other provinces (Duan 2006, p. 79).

Yunnan Female Tongzhi Health Hotline

In June, 2003, the project expanded its services by opening the Yunnan Female Tongzhi Health Hotline because lesbian volunteers offered to staff the hotline, which would operate from 7:30 to 9:30 one night a week, with each call limited to no more than 25 minutes. Due to a lack of adequate publicity, the hotline received no calls in June. The earliest hotline record is for July 16, 2003, when two lesbian volunteers serviced the hotline.

Currently only one volunteer, Yangguang, staffs the hotline. She has been on-duty since November 2004. Her personal story illustrates the isolation that many lesbians experience in mainland China. Yangguang came out to her parents in 2005, after having endured more than 10 years of struggle. She had been forced to seek psychological counseling because of her Tongzhi identity. She attributes her knowledge and confidence in her homosexual identity to her reading of *Dear Daddy and Mommy*, which was published in Taiwan. She also became an active participant in publicizing AIDS prevention and treatment information during her college years. Her enthusiasm, determination and strong work ethic have been crucial to the survival and maintenance of the Yunnan Female Tongzhi Health Hotline.

The hotline office is located in the building of Yunnan Health Education Institute. It uses the same telephone number as the Yunnan Male Tongzhi Health Hotline, with a monthly telephone bill of less than 100 yuan. The Yunnan Health Education Institute organizes monthly meetings as well as annual meetings for volunteers, as well as are some free dinner parties and training activities during the period⁵. Volunteers

⁵ The above-mentioned materials is from the authors' field work between December, 2006 and February, 2007 in Kunming.

receive some support to cover their travel to from the the hotline office: 25 yuan prior to 2006 and 30 yuan since then.

The samples for our study of the Yunnan Female Tongzhi Health Hotline were obtained through the cooperation of the Project Director's office; it consists of all phone call notes from July 16, 2003 to Feb. 7, 2006. Table 1 and Table 2 are compiled based on these records.

Table 1: Statistics based on note from 242 callers

Gender	Caller's Locations	Marital Status	Age
Male : 94 (38.84%) Female : 144 (59.50%) Unknown : 4 (1.65%) Samples total : 242	Kunming : 71 (29.34%) Other areas in Yunnan : 44 (18.18%) Other provinces : 65 (26.86%) Unknown : 62 (25.62%) Samples total : 242	Single : 53 (21.90%) Married : 7 (2.89%) Divorced : 2 (0.83%) Unknown : 180 (74.38%) Samples total : 242	16-25 years old : 46 (19.01%) 26-35 years old : 68 (4.96%) 36-45 years old : 12 (4.96%) Unknown : 116 (47.93%) Samples total : 242
Sexuality	Butch-Femme	Source of Info	
Gay : 39 (16.12%) Lesbian: 84 (34.71%) Bisexual : 7 (2.89%) Unknown : 112 (46.28%) Samples total : 242	T : 14 (5.7%) P : 3 (1.24%) 8%) Unknown : 225 (92.98%) Samples total : 242	Internet : 13 (5.37%) <u>Friend-Exchange</u> (journal) : 5 (2.07%) From friends : 3 (1.24%) Radio : 3 (1.24%) Newspaper : 1 (0.41%) Unknown : 217 (89.67%) Samples total : 242	

Table 2: Major Topics on the Consulting Hotline (Samples total: 274)

Topic	Samples	Details
ADIS	20 (7.30%)	Asking about symptoms of AIDS and its prevention
STD	7 (1.09%)	Requesting info on sexual diseases, symptoms and prevention
Emotions/Mental	79 (28.83%)	Pressures from families; whether to come out; worry about its identity will be revealed ;recognition of homosexuality; to arrange pseudonymous heterosexual identity and marriages; how to maintain sustaining homosexual relationship
Dating	77 (28.10%)	Requesting information concerning the locations for gathering; where to find female partners
Medical treatment of sexual diseases	3 (2.55%)	Diagnose of sexual diseases; locations for CDC
Others	88 (32.12%)	How to provide assistance for homosexuals; inquiries about similar hotline services for gay; the recognition of spouse's homosexual identity

Note: Some calls involve more than one question, so the actual category number is actually larger than the total number.

Based on the number of phone calls and the working hours of the service, we can hardly describe Yunnan Lesbian's Health Hotline as "hot." Every Wednesday the service received on average only one call, which usually lasted between 5 and 25 minutes, with only rare cases going beyond the time limit. The gender was subjectively determined based on a caller's voice, but we did not have records for 4 callers, thus we could not decide the gender of these 4 callers. Among all callers, 59.5 percent were identified as lesbian, 38.84 percent as gay or men in a heterosexual love affair. The hotline did not use Caller ID service and hotline staffers did not initiate questions about callers' personal information. If a caller chose not to disclose his/her personal information, the service was unable to determine the location where the call originated. There were, however, callers from Beijing, Shenzhen, Chongqing, Xi'an, among other cities or areas well beyond the Yunnan Province. Based on the statements made by callers, it was clear that they chose to use the Yunnan service because they either wanted to preserve the confidentiality of their identities locally or because they were not aware of the availability of similar services in their own locales. For example, a gay caller from the city of Guiyang claimed that he was not sure if Guiyang had such services. He had been involved in a relationship with another gay, but the affair was discovered by his partner's mother. Although he is a doctor, specializing in psychology, he could not find effective means to communicate with his partner's mother. He called seeking another doctor's (Zhang Beichun's phone number)⁶, so that he could ask Dr. Zhang to serve as an intermediary, on his behalf, with his partner's mother.

Yunnan Provincial Government published the hotline numbers on the web so that more people were able to get access to the consulting resources. In order to help people understand the homosexual communities, the project team began working jointly in 2004 the One Plus One Midnight Program, which was affiliated with Yunnan People's Broadcast. The purpose was to facilitate discussion on issues related to homosexuality and to publicize the hotline numbers during the programs. Among the 217 callers who did not disclose their sources for the hotline service, we assume some callers have obtained the hotline numbers through such means.

Our analysis of the issues addressed by the calls indicate that 7.3% of calls could be categorized as seeking AIDS-related information, and 2.55% sought STD information. These calls were mostly from gay

⁶ Zhang Beichuan, a dermatologist of Qingdao University affiliated hospital, set up the Alternative Publication---Friend Exchange (which is collected by Harvard University and Berkeley University of California University) for homosexuals in health education and AIDS prevention in 1997. This project obtained long-term support from American Ford Foundation. His medical skill, moral standing, and the publication itself enjoy high prestige within the lesbian community. Judging by the statistics, Friend Exchange really plays the part of a gay and lesbian supporter.

or the heterosexual males who had sex with people most at risk for these diseases; they had engaged in this risky activity without being aware of the danger and became concerned about possible infection afterwards.

Callers aged 16-35 years-old accounted for about 53.97% of the calls. Among the lesbians in this group, the issues raised focused on dating, identity recognition, disclosure of sexual identity, as well as strategies for dealing with their heterosexual parents and family members. These issues are represented in the data columns indicating dating, emotions/psychology, and other issues. Callers' requests on these issues account for 89.05 percent of total calls. Related statistics which from one of Beijing Lesbian's Association indicates that, in Beijing, 81.8% of the lesbian's perceived social pressure comes from marriage, child-bearing, interpersonal relationship and self identification, which is similar to our qualitative research results⁷. For example, one 21 year-old lesbian very cautiously inquired about the hotline services. From her nervous voice and her guarded tones, we could feel her anxiety about maintaining the confidentiality of her lesbian identity. Another 20-year-old girl who was preparing for an exam confessed that she was very lonely and depressed. Except for the distraction offered by logging on the Internet, she said that the only thing she was thinking about was suicide. She hated her current sexual identity, and she even considered having sex-change surgery as a possible solution. At the same time, she was worried that her classmates and parents would discover her lesbian identity. One 25 year-old lesbian said that in order to minimize conflicts with her parents, she deliberately found a gay man, and asked him to pose as her boyfriend and so that she could take him home to have dinner with her parents. This did help ease the troubled relationship with her parents, but it was not long before her parents began urging her to marry her gay friend. She felt she had lost all her confidence that she could lead a meaningful life.

Some lesbian callers raised the question of whether it would be practical to arrange a simulated heterosexual marriage with a gay partner to relieve the pressures on women to follow conventional family roles. In the context where parents force marriage, this usually works as a tactical option. The lesbian movement in Taiwan is more highly developed than its counterpart in mainland China. Taiwan lesbians often utilize such marital tactics to deal with parents who force their children to get married (Zheng 1997). A considerable number of lesbian callers sought advice on how to make their identities public. They wanted to participate in lesbian activities, including working as volunteers for the association. Unless they acknowledged their lesbian identities, they had few resources or channels of access to support services. They felt they could not socialize with other lesbians. In families, disguised as heterosexual marriages, especially a lesbian was married to a heterosexual man, the marriage was frequently unhappy and

⁷ Data from "Report on Beijing Lesbian ' Health Condition Survey", conducted by Beijing Tongyu Lesbian Working Group in 2005.

unstable. One depressed 31-year-old lesbian confided that she had just undergone a divorce procedure and now felt more relaxed. At the same time, however, she felt at a loss and troubled as she thought that future prospects looked dim. She sought advice from the consulting service about what to do when she felt bored and listless. She looked to the hotline for advice on sociability and entertainment, saying she wished that volunteers at the hotline service could recommend some good movies on lesbian subjects.

The hotline service does not function as a mediator among people seeking partners. But the calling notes indicate that some lesbians sought such services and posed the question specifically. They even solicited the names and personal information of the staff members answering their calls, professing a desire to socialize with the volunteers working at the consulting hotline. These requests were tactfully declined by the volunteers. Seeking social contacts is an issue that all gay and lesbian hotline services deal with on a frequent basis. Many clients would like the hotlines to provide match-making services. This demonstrates the very limited opportunities and resources available to gays and lesbians who are seeking partners, friends, and a sense of community in mainland China.

Western feminists (Millett 1969, Rubin 1975, Rich 1980, Bunch 1987, Wittig 1992) have done comprehensive studies on heterosexual hegemony; however, Cheshire Calhoun (1994) took the analysis of sexual hegemony further by addressing the distinctive impact that heterosexual hegemony has on lesbians. She called for separating lesbian theory from feminist theory (Calhoun 1994, pp. 558-581). This makes her work especially relevant to the study of Chinese society, with the caveat that both the special value of reproduction in Chinese culture as well as its distinctive approach to sexual ethics must also be considered.

A famous saying in a work of ancient Chinese literature, *Mensius, Li Lou, Part 1*, warns, "There are three ways to be unfilial, the worst is to not produce off-springs." It best describes Chinese women's primary role and value; her first duty is reproduction. "Getting married when you are at age" (also an old Chinese saying) is considered a must for youths as they approach adulthood. In addition to reproductive obligations Chinese homosexuals owe to their families, their familial relationships are also informed by traditional Confucianism ideology and the Chinese patriarchy that is derived from it.

Chinese feminism has not, however, yet probed the implications of these cultural constraints with the necessary theoretical depth, and has not investigated their special onerous for lesbians. In China, under the dominance of compulsory heterosexuality, lesbian experience has been regarded as a form of deviant behavior, a breach of the ethical norms that govern women's lives. Lesbians are viewed as gender deviants. Under the terms of heterosexual hegemony, Chinese lesbians have no public visibility and lack access to channels for socializing with one another. At the same time, most feel powerless to resist the

traditional marriage expectations, and have no choice but to go along with societal pressures to conform to a heterosexual marital life.

They do not have any safe social space to voice their concerns. Even though they suffer from a strong societal homophobia as well as personal pressures exerted by their heterosexual families, most lesbians know little about the homosexuality. Chinese feminist theory and activism has offered little solace to lesbians because it has focused almost exclusively on advocating the achievement of female equality by means of opposing male hegemony; that is, Chinese feminism has only addressed hetero-patriarchy's oppression on women. It has not overtly acknowledged that lesbian and heterosexual women constitute different sex categories. Consequently, they have done little to address the different roles of butch-femme and S/M practice among lesbians.

Lesbians do not merely face oppression from the patriarchal system, but a more serious form of oppression that stems from institutionalized heterosexual hegemony. The heterosexual system thoroughly denigrates and rejects homosexual men and women, and deprives them of a legitimate space in social life. Butch lesbians use their feminine body to demonstrate their masculinity and sexual desire for women; this is regarded as abnormal gender performance.

Lesbian sexual desire and homosexual marriage are illegal in China. They deviate from the norms of the heterosexual system. So lesbians' sexual orientation must be kept secret. Coming out would mean punishment by the heterosexual system. Lesbians have to find their position within the heterosexual system by dragging and passing. Consequently they must live a lie. Therefore, if Chinese feminism, as currently conceived, succeeds, it will do little to alleviate the social inequality of gays and lesbians. It will only replace patriarchal hegemony with heterosexual hegemony. Women may gain greater freedom and opportunity, but lesbians and gay men will continue to be oppressed.

The pain, social inequality and invisibility that lesbians experience as a result of forced heterosexual marriages (for the purpose of hiding their homosexual identity) will not be solved by a feminist movement that only targets the patriarchal system. The tenor of conversations on the health hotline clearly demonstrates this blindspot in Chinese feminism. In China, the goal of the lesbian liberation movement should be aimed at the full legalization of lesbian sexuality and same-sex marriage.

Hotline, Public Policy and the Indigenous Lesbian Movement

Although in China homosexual relationships have been formally de-criminalized and de-pathologized⁸, the gay and lesbian communities still linger in the shadows of the heterosexual communities. Lesbians, in particular, remain invisible. Homosexuals in mainline China live with the social pressures of the stigma of being affiliated with "high disease-prone groups" and seek ways of hiding their sexual orientation. Gays and lesbians and those family members who are aware of their sexual identities, all live within a tightly closed "canopy," which is becoming increasingly fragile as the public becomes more aware of health-related risks of homosexuality as well changes in public policy, law, and social consciousness of sexual identity issues. Yet under the current social climate, the airproof tightness of the canopy still remains in effect because social concern for homosexuals can only be conveyed publicly as a concern about AIDS.

Consequently, the legalization of the homosexuality is ultimately a very ambiguous process involving mixed messages about discrimination, stigma, AIDS, counter-AIDS, de-AIDS (Cao 2006). Because of the importance of public health campaigns urging male homosexuals to practice safe sex, gays have received considerably more public attention, visibility, and social support than lesbians. This difference does not only reflect pragmatic public health concerns, it is also an extension of Chinese cultural values, which traditionally place many more ethical limits on women, emphasizing the primacy of their procreative and child-rearing functions, leaving little or no room voice for women to express alternative sexual identities. Indeed, before the 1995's World Conference on Women, lesbian discourses were invisible, indeed virtually unknown, in Chinese culture; and heterosexual society was naïve about and indifferent to the concerns of lesbians.

Since 1995, lesbian associations, publications and websites have emerged. Especially after 1998, commercial lesbian bars have become more active and visible. International funded programs in support of the lesbian activities have also become more available and diverse. However, these resources have mainly been available in large, international, metropolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Elsewhere lesbian associations find it difficult to organize because of lack of continuous financial and public policy support. Moreover, the lesbian movement and its associations lacks a sense of urgency and momentum for long-term planning for achieving social equality; as a result, the lesbian movement functions mostly as a friendship-building activity.

Since 2000 both international organizations and the Chinese government has displayed growing concerns about health care in the border areas; this has included concerns about the problems of lesbian in the

⁸ In 1997, the new "Criminal law" in China canceled the punishment for certain homosexual acts as hooliganism. This was considered another indicator of the de-criminalization of homosexuality in China. In April, 2001, "Chinese Mental Disorder Classification and Diagnostic Criteria" removed homosexuality from the list of psychosis, which means China has achieved the non-pathology of homosexuality.

cities of western China. The China-Uk HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care Project was launched under the auspices of the Yunnan government and interested professionals. It was not part of the original 2000 Projects plan. The "Yunnan Lesbian's Health Hotline" only received official public recognition after lesbians volunteered their time and effort to support the project. The service belonged to the secondary section, subordinated to the third part of the main project (under the name of "High-frequency Crowd of AIDS and its Protection"). The third category was under the title Intervention for MSMs; and the Yunnan lesbian hotline services was only a minor function of the third category. Furthermore, the hotline service time for lesbians was shorter than the time for gays.

This differential reflected the degree that lesbian issues are ignored by the government and by society. The homosexual movement in Chinese society is usually epitomized by the gay movement, while the difference between male and female homosexuals is generally overlooked. Patriarchal values and attitudes continue to shape public policies on lesbian issues; consequently the lesbian movement needs to critique and challenge patriarchal dominance if it is to achieve recognition and equitable allocation of resources by policymakers. In this regard, lesbian and feminist politics overlap, yet there are also significant differences and conflicts in their policy agendas. To avoid reconstructing a new form of heterosexual hegemony, which provides social equality to heterosexual women but preserves repression of lesbians as sexual deviants, public policies related to lesbians and the lesbian movement itself must remain separate from the indigenous Feminism movement and resist being submerged within its discourse.

As a result of the China-UK project, the "Yunnan Lesbian Health Hotline" has been validated by Yunnan Health Education Institute and Yunnan province government because of its contributions to promoting a more harmonious society. It still provides services to lesbian, and continues to reform the power structures of resource distribution and to challenge the hierarchical geographical divide that has favored metropolitan areas. This not only affirms the emergence of a lesbian social identity (the subjectivity of counter-identity and counter-labeling) and the movement's resolve; it also preserves the movement's access to media.

It is therefore clear that the establishment of health care hotline, as a result of the efforts of both professionals and lesbian volunteers, and the subsequent institutional legitimation of this work, has made substantial inroads in combating the prejudices of the dominant heterosexist culture and the unfair policies these prejudices have supported. This is an important milestone for the Chinese lesbian movement. It demonstrates that lesbian volunteers, drawing upon aid from international sources, and establishing alliances with the government is an effective strategy for advancing public policy concerns as well as the social movement.

The hotline consulting service was a tactical move that fit within the framework of the larger project HIV and AIDS prevention. The goal was to provide consultations for lesbian on health issues, with a service geared to promoting public well-being rather than profit, and thereby combining medical education with genuine concern for the personal welfare of the users of the service. All volunteers who were working with the consulting service hotline were well-trained professionals and well-equipped with skills as telephone operators. Although the consulting volunteers were all professionals with the rank of officers in-charge of medical and health issues, their services nevertheless had non-hierarchical and non-commercialized foundations because they were also strong lesbian activists. They encouraged dialogue in negotiating decisions, and promoted equal participation in these dialogues by those using the service. The hotline volunteers avoided cold, mechanical lecturing on medical science, and the condescending verbiage often found in the general science and educational journals. They also carefully guarded against disclosure of user identities: a practice that is not always observed in Chinese medical consulting clinics.

As David Lester (1977) has pointed out, hotline telephone services are a classic example of communication that combines the intimacy of telephone chatting with anonymity (Lester 1977). Since the start of the new millennium, similar consulting service hotlines have appeared in many large cities throughout China as a result of material support from various funding sources and AIDS projects. In a society in which people care a great deal about their self-image and dignity --their "face" in Chinese terms-- these consulting hotlines provide unique and timely channels for the gays and lesbians to chat and share their inner feelings.

Although hotline services are institutionalized by the government as means to solving social problems, the relative anonymity of the interactions they promote do nonetheless provide a kind of freedom and autonomy to lesbians who are still constrained by the pressures of their families and by societal values. Hotline volunteers directly challenge the dominate gender ideology and hegemonic discourse. The most effective part of the Yunnan hotline services is its anonymity, which protects callers from having to publicly disclose their sexual identities.

Callers accomplished what might be described as a "collective coming out," giving voice to a discursive resistance to heterosexual society and contributing to the momentum of the movement for social equality. Participation in these discursive struggles strengthened callers' self-identities as lesbians; and it helped build and solidify the determination of this previously unseen and unheard community to seek public legitimacy. This approach differs from the popular public demonstrations by various homosexual groups in the Western societies where individual homosexual identities are publicly exposed and displayed. Compared with the vigorous and dynamic movement by Western homosexual groups, the Chinese strategy, which preserves anonymity but builds upon the individual's autonomous search for help, may be

a more effective tactic, under current circumstances, in mainland China. The professionals, who volunteer their time to service the hotline, use sympathetic and understanding tones, and answer questions with care and concern. These services seek to create an ideal communication situation that allows democratic negotiations and personal emotional sharing. This contrasts dramatically with the vilification, exclusion, and disregard that heterosexual society generally shows lesbians who come out publicly in China. It also provides a refuge from the distorted communication cultivated by mainstream media representations of lesbians and gays. The Yunnan hotline service has operated as an effective means for lesbian women, as a minority group, to develop the resolve needed to resist and counter discrimination; its organizers see it as an ideal way of encouraging harmonious communications among people in an effort to build a new and better world where freedom and equality can flourish. The communication model pioneered by the Yunnan hotline was, however, developed in a relatively small setting, devoid of external societal pressures – conditions that are rarely found in debates and discussions in public forums. The Yunnan hotline service has built a successful platform, which has facilitated dynamic interactions and communications among lesbians in mainland China, who have few other communication outlets, to find some release from discrimination and oppression.

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