



## Unfinished Revolution

An Overview of Three Decades of LGBT Activism in China

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*This essay offers a feminist political economic analysis of the development of Chinese urban-based LGBT activism since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. First, it meditates on the gendered politics within LGBT activism; second, it explores how LGBT groups' NGO-isation process in the context of transnational movements is playing out vis-à-vis the Party-State's attempts to eliminate organisations linked to the 'imperial West'. According to the author, the onset of a new era of precarity is calling for Chinese LGBT activists to come up with urgent and creative strategies for survival and care.*

[1] LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) is an umbrella term for sexual minorities. In this essay, LGBT is used when referring to LGBT activism as it is deeply influenced by Euro-American identity politics. Queerness is used when referring to communities of sexual minorities and is preferred to the vernacular *tongzhi* (同志, a revolutionary term for 'comrades' appropriated by LGBT activists), as *tongzhi* narrowly includes only gay men and 'lalas' (women-identified persons with same-sex desire). In addition, queerness aims to deconstruct the stableness of the identity categories of LGBT.

Stonewall campaign translated into Chinese, Spanish, French, Swahili and Russian. PC: (CC) Liang HH, Flickr.com.

In the past three decades, China's civil society has gone through a series of ups and downs in the context of shifting national policies and geopolitics. The Fourth World Conference on Women that was held in Beijing in 1995 was a watershed moment for transnational feminism and LGBT activism.<sup>1</sup> It not only introduced the nongovernmental organisation (NGO) form as a legitimate organisational platform endorsed by the Chinese state to organise around and work on women's rights and LGBT issues, but also brought into mainland China ideologies, frameworks, and funding related to human rights issues. Feminist and LGBT activists took advantage of these new opportunities by founding a number of gender equality NGOs and LGBT rights NGOs, as well as establishing national and transnational feminist and LGBT networks. In the following decade, the Wenchuan earthquake of 2008 was widely seen as marking 'year one' of China's civil society and volunteerism, as thousands of Chinese citizens joined disaster relief efforts and formed volunteer initiatives (Kang 2018). As funding from different sources poured into the domestic NGO sector, the domestic philanthropic industry also began taking shape. However, as feminist and LGBT

rights initiatives seldom receive domestic funding because their mission is not among the priorities of prospective funders, they remain heavily dependent on international donors, which has led them to be considered politically sensitive. In the past decade, human rights activism—including activism for LGBT rights—has gradually withered away due to the draconian suppression by the Chinese Party-State, which has targeted activists and organisations seen as being linked to and influenced by imperialist agendas of ‘the West’.

In the past few years, the Party-State has used various means to rein in China’s burgeoning civil society: it has coopted some NGOs by offering them state funding, regulated the sector by drafting new laws and restrictions, and eliminated those organisations it viewed as ‘corrupted’ by foreign imperialist agendas. Besides facing increased censorship and repression, LGBT NGOs are also in danger of losing the only funding they can get from transnational partners. The shrinking space for activism not only sends a strong signal to those working on politicised agendas, but also influences the decisions and livelihoods of those who, on the surface, seem more benign to the Party-State.

This essay traces the trajectory of evolving urban-based LGBT discourse and projects since the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women. Although the ‘NGO-isation’ process grounds Chinese LGBT activism in transnational LGBT movements, the difficult negotiation between ideals aligned with Euro-American identity politics and Chinese national values of familiarity continue to trouble local LGBT activists who are caught in between. Here, I highlight LGBT activism’s gendered troubles—namely, the contention between gay activism and lala (women-identified persons with same-sex desire) activism—due to its varied relations to gendered histories, local governments, and funding resources. On the one hand, the quest for social and political rights breeds a new generation of LGBT human rights activists; on the other, the increasing hostility of the Chinese Party-State towards entities with foreign connections makes these NGOs targets of state surveillance and violence. These movement politics and dilemmas are intensified by the political and economic precarity of NGO activism, allowing little space for the survival and

proliferation of LGBT activism in China today. In the discussion section, I expand on the pragmatist and reformist approaches currently adopted by mainstream LGBT activists in China and meditate on the politics of care that centres on the affective dimensions of social movements.

## NGO-isation and Gendered Troubles

Chinese LGBT activism emerges as a distinct cultural, social, and political product in a modernising China with increasing transnational connections in the wake of market reforms. Starting from the 1990s, gay bars and lala bars proliferated in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, along with virtual platforms such as online forums and chat rooms. These important social spaces allowed queer people to embark on a quest for self-identification and same-sex romances that was largely informed by the already established Euro-American LGBT movement and knowledge systems. However, negotiation with the singular global gay identity, as Lisa Rofel (2007) argues, is fraught with Chinese gay men’s visions of globalisation and becoming ‘desirable’, by imagining, performing, and constructing the meanings of sex, desire, and sexual identities. In their endeavour to become ‘differently modern’, as argued by Elisabeth Engebretsen (2013: 160) in her research on the Beijing lala community, lalas engage in ‘difficult processes to seek out ... new spaces and articulations of selfhood that balance dominant and somewhat desirable pressure to conform and be normal, and a newly emerging possibility for tacit intimate transgressions and lala sociality’. Chinese queer people’s painstaking negotiation with the Confucian values of familiarity, the desire to be recognised as good and ‘normal’ citizens, and the deepening influence of global circuits of LGBT activism led them to search for their own versions of ‘being gay’ in China.

The pursuit of safe spaces was what first brought gay men and lalas together, forming their circles (圈子) of *tongzhi* (Wei 2007; Engebretsen 2013). Those who were not content with limiting them-

selves to crafting out semi-public spaces for queer people increasingly turned to rights-based activism to advocate for the social and political rights of LGBT people in China. It was at the Beijing women's conference in 1995 that a US-based LGBT human rights NGO—then known as the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and now called OutRight Action International—set up a lesbian tent as part of the NGO side events, gathering more than 100 Chinese and international lesbian activists to voice their long-repressed discontent towards the marginalisation of sexuality in the mainstream women's movement, putting forward the issue of difference in the 'women' category (Wilson 1996). The lesbian tent inspired a new generation of Chinese lesbian and bisexual women activists to interrogate their particular situation in China. Many of them later established their own grassroots NGOs with the facilitation of international funding and within the framework of LGBT rights. Around the same time, the inception of the work on AIDS bred the establishment of key gay organisations and a well-developed AIDS prevention industry in China with abundant national and international funding (Ye 2021).

After 1995, while lala NGOs in China more frequently adopted the human rights discourse to solicit funding and conduct projects, the mainstream gay organisations remained closely associated with public health initiatives sanctioned by the state. AIDS outreach in China is less politicised as it emphasises the prevention and control of HIV/AIDS without valorising the political rights of those infected. The different trajectories shape how their work is being perceived and regulated by local governments. While gay community organisations can help generate economic revenue locally, lala organisations are deemed less 'useful' in the eyes of government officials (Hildebrandt 2011). These NGO projects, predicated on either a rights framework or state-sponsored public health programs, produce distinct gendered and sexual subjectivities. The lala activist leaders are mostly educated women well-versed in English, feminist queer theories, and rights rhetoric. Gay men are often critiqued by lala activists as holding on to essentialised understandings of sexuality, lacking gender perspectives, and more easily coopted by

the government because of their shared interests in keeping up AIDS-related work.

Although China has a long history of same-sex eroticism primarily concerning male homosocial relationships, women with same-sex desire are often written out of the history books as they have been considered mere properties of patriarchal lineage (Sang 2003). The historical visibility of gay male homosociality and the global public fear of HIV/AIDS attached to gay men generated unprecedented stigma and attention. Lucetta Kam (2013: 92) suggests a 'silent, non-physical repression of non-normative sexuality enacted within the family' is indeed a violent form of symbolic erasure, which is misread as cultural tolerance. This symbolic erasure is also gendered, as same-sex relationships between women are perceived as non-threatening to the patriarchal lineage and reproduction, thus undeserving of attention. The gendered erasure of lesbian visibility is a cross-cultural phenomenon. Lesbian-led groups and organisations have been struggling to access funding resources in both local and transnational contexts (Saleh and Sood 2020). The difficulty in framing this type of violence and in claiming the needs of lala women poses an existential challenge to many grassroots lala groups, which consist only of volunteers and have no source of income. This analytical perspective foregrounds the ways in which the contemporary transnational LGBT movement and politics remain dominated by white gay male leaders due to colonial and patriarchal legacies.

While it is crucial to lay out the historical and strategic differences between gay and lala activism, the political-economic analysis of what shapes the forms and politics of LGBT activism must be considered. The contentions between gay activism and lala activism do not lie only in gay men's and lalas' educational backgrounds or the embodied knowledge of being queer. The divergence of strategies between and even hostility towards each other can also be explained by a conflict of interests between the two groups as they compete in the NGO industry for more funding and resources. NGO-isation is the process that sees 'social movements professionalize, institutionalize, and bureaucratize in vertically structured, policy-outcome-oriented organizations that focus

on generating issue-specific and, to some degree, marketable expert knowledge or services', and in which 'emphasis is placed on organizational reproduction and on the cultivation of funding sources' (Lang 2013: 64). National and local politics, as well as funding sources, are key factors that influence the processes of NGO-isation. Donors (be they state actors or foundations) define and shape NGO agendas in their framing of program calls in ways that establish specific norms while marginalising others (Smith and Grønbjerg 2006).

The NGO-isation of LGBT activism in China is clearly tied to transnational LGBT networks, funding resources, and evaluation metrics. On the one hand, the mainstream developmentalist thinking in Euro-American societies regards LGBT people in the Global South as in need of 'saving' from their authoritarian governments and/or religious and corrupt environments. New forms of colonialism and neoliberal thinking persist in philanthropic giving by valuing and funding projects that are politically oriented, such as legal advocacy, rather than community-oriented programs that are harder to evaluate. On the other hand, Chinese LGBT activists are contending with the unequal giving relationships in their own ways. Organisations like Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (同性恋亲友会, PFLAG) adopt a pragmatic approach aligned with core national and family values by valorising narratives of family inclusion and social tolerance, and solicit funding from the parents of gay men and lalas. Grassroots gay men's and lala groups, as well as LGBT groups in colleges, are keen to organise community events and provide HIV testing services. A few queer organisations focus on arts and culture. For instance, in its 10 years of operation from 2005 to 2015, *Les+* produced print magazines, plays, and exhibitions that engaged in critical analysis of LGBT movements locally and transnationally, as well as pioneering queer cultural productions emerged in utopian politics that disrupt mainstream reformist LGBT agendas (Huang 2017). As NGOs with education and language privileges seek funding from transnational human rights networks, in the past decade, a plethora of rights-based LGBT NGOs has been founded by activists who are motivated by the

rhetoric of human rights and the legal inclusion of LGBT people in China.

## **LGBT Human Rights Projects as Battlegrounds**

The terms 'LGBT', 'sexual orientation', and 'gender identity' are relatively new discursive constructions that did not appear in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but nevertheless are being taken up and fiercely debated in transnational and national contexts. Participants in human rights projects are required to possess advanced English writing and speaking skills, as well as to master administrative and strategic aspects of human rights knowledge, including the framework and methodology of documenting human rights violations, writing shadow reports, and advocating in international spaces such as the United Nations, while also coordinating domestic advocacy. In reality, only a few NGOs are equipped to receive such funding. The regional differences in education levels and proficiency in the English language contribute to the unequal distribution of human rights funding to large and elitist groups in relatively cosmopolitan cities such as Beijing and Guangzhou. The regional lala organisation for whom I worked in Guangzhou from 2016 to 2018 organised a series of human rights training sessions aimed at equipping grassroots activists with the knowledge needed to utilise the international mechanism of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Law professors and experienced feminist activists were invited to train the queer activists. As most grassroots activists were not professionalised and were still struggling to balance their full-time jobs with unpaid activism, many showed no interest in international advocacy. At best, they contributed data on human rights violations to a large and elitist group who could then access these international venues. This way, regional inequality is reinforced as professionalised NGOs gain greater reputation in the international space and receive more funding as a result of their advocacy efforts.

Nevertheless, even though rights-based projects often result in hierarchical and unequal receptions of the global to the local, and the privileging of elite voices and participation, some scholars argue the process could still be regarded as productive as it enables educated elites with resources to make political use of their privilege and translate it into crucial institutional openings for minorities' civil society organising (Zhang 2009). Chinese feminists and LGBT activists have been particularly mindful of the role of international advocacy in pressuring the Chinese Government to implement its gender equality policies and to acknowledge LGBT issues at home. Even though the promises made by the Party-State are not necessarily actualised, activists still consider these commitments a success for future advocacy. One such moment that Chinese LGBT activists cherish as an achievement came in 2018, at the Thirty-Eighth Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, when China's UN representative Jiang Duan specifically mentioned China's opposition to discrimination and violence on all grounds, including sexual orientation. His remarks were in response to the report by sexual orientation and gender identity independent expert Victor Madrigal-Borloz (2018) documenting two successful cases of antidiscrimination litigation in China. These two cases pointed to the existence of effective legislative measures to ensure the human rights of LGBT persons in China. The first case was an affirmative verdict against a company in Guizhou Province that had discriminated against an employee due to their sexual orientation; the second case was a court ruling against forced conversion therapy in Henan Province. In both cases, local LGBT NGOs had coordinated to provide legal aid to the individuals to file lawsuits against unfair discrimination and violence.

## **Illegalisation and Precarity**

In the past decade, LGBT human rights advocacy has achieved some success on the international stage, making Chinese LGBT communities visible globally. On the other side of the coin, however, the

close association with transnational human rights organisations has made LGBT NGOs targets for state censorship, surveillance, and violence, especially after China began tightening its grasp on civil society organising after Xi Jinping's administration took power in 2012. A new national construction project embedded in the slogan the 'Chinese Dream' (中国梦) has replaced the 'socialist harmonious society' (社会主义和谐社会) of the previous administration, emphasising the revival of the Chinese nation under the sole leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Controlling and disciplining civil society organisations and liberating them from foreign influence are crucial steps in making the 'Chinese Dream' come true.

The 2017 Foreign NGO Management Law is a clear attempt by the Chinese Party-State to quell the influence and impact of foreign NGOs and foundations, as well as to rein in domestic organisations with close transnational ties. The law has had a chilling effect on this part of civil society, as their 'illegal' activities have now become punishable by law. This clearly indicates that these domestic and international organisations are first and foremost a public security concern to the Chinese authorities. If LGBT NGOs lack official recognition and status, it is primarily because of the strict registration requirements and their inability to find a supervisory unit to represent them (Unger 2008). This leaves many organisations with no choice but to register as commercial enterprises with no tax benefits, which makes them susceptible to political crackdowns. Under the new law, LGBT NGOs lose the only funding they could previously get—that coming from their transnational partners. As these groups continue to receive funding from overseas organisations unregistered in China, and thus remain 'illegal', they are put in even more danger. This could be seen, for instance, on 9 January 2019, when, with no official reason given, the Guangzhou Civil Affairs Bureau announced a list of 'illegal organisations' (非法组织) to be banned from the city. For the first time in the country, two organisations working on LGBT issues were listed.

Illegalisation is at once material and symbolic. By making NGOs that do not comply with official mandates illegal, the Party-State sends a strong signal to the rest of civil society about the limits of

what is permissible under its rule. This divide-and-conquer strategy works well to further disaggregate and demoralise the NGO community. NGOs become hesitant to voice oppositional opinions or organise collectively when other organisations face danger or harassment. Meanwhile, local governments take advantage of NGOs' fears and their desire to survive, turning them into apolitical entities fulfilling governmental welfare services at a low cost. In recent years, several LGBT groups have successfully turned themselves into social work organisations working on adolescent and community issues. These mainstream topics enable them to apply for government funding and programs. Altering their mission has been painstaking, but their ultimate plan is to secretly integrate concepts of gender diversity in the work they do.

NGO work is greatly devalued by local governments, as they expect these organisations to perform to the fullest with the least amount of monetary compensation. NGOs strategically abide by these unfavourable conditions because they regard it as the first step towards accessing rich government resources and gaining approval at a later stage. As the political spaces keep shrinking, these tactics are being reevaluated by their fellow LGBT activists. Instead of suggesting that these organisations have been coopted by the government, LGBT activists are also experimenting with other strategies that they see as viable paths to ensure the survival of their groups in today's China—for instance, turning LGBT NGOs into social enterprises specialised in market-oriented products such as LGBT-friendly psychological training courses. However, it is still too soon to evaluate whether these approaches will enable LGBT NGOs to survive and continue their founding missions.

## Towards a Politics of Care

Chinese LGBT NGOs have come a long way, their journey fraught with tensions due to unequal transnational collaborations, hostile state interventions, and internal splits. Informed by Euro-American

identity politics, mainstream LGBT activism in China actively negotiates with the Chinese national constructions and ideals of family and normativity, conjuring up pragmatist politics of social tolerance and acceptance, as well as a reformist approach aligned with their Western counterparts, including marriage equality campaigns and other human rights advocacy efforts. In such a context, the widely discussed issues of *'tongqi'* (同妻), which is the practice of gay men tricking heterosexual women into marriage (Zhu 2018), and cooperative marriage (形式婚姻), which is a negotiated heterosexual marriage performed and practised by gay men and lalas (Engebretsen 2013; Kam 2013; Wang 2019), are regarded as legacies of the underdevelopment of the Chinese queer community, which would be ameliorated as long as the rights of queer people were guaranteed by the state.

This linear and developmental mindset still haunts Chinese queer people in their attempt to 'catch up' with 'the West'. As an activist and practitioner in urban-based LGBT activism for more than 10 years, I consider neither the reformist rights agenda nor the inclusion of LGBT rights in the new 'Chinese Dream' to be the ultimate answer for queer people in China, though both steps are very much needed and commendable. Critical analysis of the NGO-isation process, the human rights projects, as well as the gendered troubles prevailing in the sector requires expansive imaginations of social movements that are centred on community care. Other than prioritising economic and political notions of precarity, meditating on the affective dimensions of social movements foregrounds the intimate and felt experiences of activism. More often than not, this tells a richer story of why activism does or does not reach people's hearts, why sexual harassment, labour disputes, burnout, and trauma remain very much silent topics in the activist community, and the necessity of investing in alternative imaginations of queer politics under precarious conditions. ■