Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Mainland China

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Through a unique circumstance described in the text we have 60 letters (of which 56 were from a gay population) concerning homosexuality in contemporary China. Though the sample is not randomly selected it is the first of its kind. An analysis of these letters shows some interesting results and patterns. Among these are (i) a widespread distribution of gay people in China in terms of their geographic locations, ages, and occupations; (ii) the pain and mental anguish they suffer from being unable to openly and legally seek homosexual partners and the contradiction experienced from living in two worlds; (iii) their wishes and demands for a better and more reasonable treatment, and (iv) their hope that they will be provided a place or some mechanism so that they can converse and interact freely. To better reflect what they think and feel about themselves, their problems, and their hopes we have used quotations from these letters extensively. It is our belief that at this initial exploratory stage of the study on Chinese homosexuality, it is best to let the respondents speak for themselves.

KEY WORDS: male homosexuality; homosexuality; China; contemporary China; sociology of sex.

INTRODUCTION

There have been numerous records, including some that glorified homosexuality in the traditional Chinese literature (Pan, 1947; Van Gulik, 1961; Chou, 1971; Bulloch, 1976; Ruan and Tsai, 1987). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that gay life exists in China today. However, the existing literature on gay life in contemporary China is scarce. In Weinberg and Bell's (1972) 550-page book, Homosexuality: An Annotated Bibliography, for example, not a single study or recording on Chinese homosexual life is found.

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listed. In Parker's (1971; 1977; 1985) three-volume edition of bibliography on homosexuality in which a total of 9924 items were included, only two articles from gay publications on Chinese homosexuality were listed.

This scarcity of literature on Chinese homosexuality is due at least partially to the prohibition and treatment of homosexuality, especially among male homosexuals in contemporary China. Gays are frequently punished and treated as "sodomites." They understandably cannot reveal their identity. As a result, it is extremely difficult to obtain realistic and objective information on gay life in China today.

Through a unique and unexpected circumstance, the senior author obtained 56 letters from the gay population in China recently. In these letters were descriptions about life, problems, and personal confessions and aspirations about Chinese homosexuality. Though hardly a random and representative sample, we believe this is the first and only information of this kind on contemporary Chinese gay life ever obtained by any scholar. As can be seen later, these 56 letters represent all walks of life from all regions of China, indicating substantial amount of variance. A sociological analysis on these letters should fill in some of the void on contemporary Chinese gay life.

DATA AND METHOD

Since 1949, data on homosexuality are almost nonexistent in the People's Republic of China. Despite some of the changes and improvement on gay rights throughout the world in the last 20 years, information about gay life outside of China was rarely reported inside China. On the rare occasions when gay lives of the outside world were reported, there were primarily used to propagate the "decline and the evil of western civilization."

In 1985, the senior author using the pen name, Jin-ma Hua published an article titled, "Homosexuality: An Unsolved Puzzle," in a widely circulated health magazine in China, To Your Good Health, outlining the fact that homosexuality exists in all nations, all social strata, and all historical periods in human history. It pointed out that in some countries in some historical periods homosexuals were severely punished and prosecuted even with the death penalty. The article stated that this perhaps was an example of how majorities subjugated minorities in human societies. The article went on to editorialize that homosexuals should not be prosecuted for failing to reproduce; that the number of homosexuals in a society was substantial and more than lay people expected; that homosexuals' problems should not be ignored and that their status should be a reasonable one in society; that homosexuals were no different from heterosexual people in intelligence, physical strength, creativity, etc.; and that two homosexuals can love each other and maintain a stable life and relationship as well as other couples and therefore should not be punished (Hua, 1985).
The publication of this article attracted a great deal of attention and social response. Specifically, two things happened. First, many of the readers of *To Your Good Health*, mostly gays, wrote to the editor of the magazine responding to the article. Second, 5 months after the publication, the most popular and widely read magazine in China, *The Reader's Digest*, reprinted the article almost in its entirety. By April 1986, a total of 60 letters were received and forwarded to the senior author through the editor of *To Your Good Health*. Judging from the fact that gay life is prohibited by law and morally and socially condemned in China and is held in strict and utmost secrecy, this response rate, though small in number, is substantial. Many of these readers actually revealed their real names, geographic locations, and even current occupations.

The following is a report of a content analysis of these 60 letters. For convenience of reporting the results of the analysis and to maintain anonymity of these people we use a number, for example, letter #25, to indicate the source of a statement, a quotation, etc. The major focus is to provide a collective portrait based on these letters. We hope that through this analysis we will provide some initial insight into gay life in contemporary China.

**RESULTS**

For ease of presenting results, we have grouped them in several aspects. The purpose is to provide some profile and is not meant to be a representative sample of the population.

**Approval Versus Disapproval**

Of the 60 letters received, 56 came from gay people. They all approved the editorial of the article for obvious reasons and thanked the author, Dr. Hua, the senior author of this article. Of the remaining four letters, two disapproved of the article's editorial position; the third suggested a way to convert gays back to heterosexual life; and the last letter was written by a transsexual. Since all 60 letters were written by men, our report is limited to males only. The following samples of opinions were expressed by these authors.

Hua's article on homosexuality provides me with a soothing sense of relief never before experienced in my life. It also gives me hope about my life and my future. (11)

I am extremely grateful to Hua's objective, humane, scientific and fair critique on homosexuality. (#24)

The publication of this article is a great event to medical field. It is a salvation of thought, a fruit of progressive advancement. To homosexuals, it is a true "good news." We admire your courage and scientific attitude toward this matter. (#25)
This article is truly great. It gives us, a small number of homosexuals, a spiritual uplift. It gives me the second life and takes me to the spring of my life. (#28, a college student who attempted suicide as a result of his homosexuality)

Two letters disapproved of homosexuality. One came from a medical college in the northwest region of China (#57) and the other came from a teacher in a factory training center in northeastern China (#58), who wrote the following:

Hua's article is attempting to legitimize homosexual life and is not an objective treatment of the subject matter. (#57 and #58)

Homosexuality is an evil product of capitalistic society. Homosexuality brings with it bad influence on our socialist society. It is our obligation to point out our view in stopping this product of spiritual pollution. (#57)

Speaking in the same critical tone as during the period of the Cultural Revolution, #58 stated:

We should absolutely prohibit homosexuality . . . . Widespread homosexuality will lead to epidemic deterioration of our racial spirit and destroy our society . . . . The reasons why people despise, prohibit, punish and persecute homosexuals are precisely because the behavior is evil, ugly, anti-human morality, an insult to human dignity, promoting crime among youth, ruining their mental and physical health, leading to the destruction of our race and civilization . . . . It is imperative that we not only expose homosexuality lest it create a flood sweeping away our marital, moral, legal and customary dam and destroy our socialist civilization. (#58)

Sociological Analysis

The following analysis, based on the 56 letters, reflects part of the true picture of male homosexuality in contemporary China. We begin with a description of some demographic characteristics of these people.

Of the 56 letters, 34 indicated the writer's age. Among these 34, 3 are 20 years or younger, 25 are between 21 and 30, 3 between 31-40 years, 2 between 41-50, and 1 between 51-60 years.

Forty-six letters indicated geographic locations. It seems that Shanghai has the highest concentration. However the letters have come from almost every region of the nation.

Judging from the writing style, it appears that all have at least some high-school education. Eleven indicated that they either are attending or have graduated from college, one is pursuing a master's degree, and one a doctoral degree.

Among the occupations listed are college professor, instructor, high school teacher, actor, soldier, factory worker, government bureaucrat, student in high school, college, and graduate school.
Gay Life and Its Pains

As indicated earlier, homosexuality is prohibited and condemned morally and socially. However, to our surprise, 43 gays indicated their true identities. It was a general sentiment that they trusted the editor and the author of the article. Thus, one stated that "if the magazine and the author are courageous enough and willing to risk the consequences . . . speaking for homosexuals in a fair and objective manner . . . they would not double cross us" (#52). Twenty solicited names and addresses of other gay people. They apparently thought that the magazine and the author could serve as their go-between or facilitators of their network. Generally, they asked the editor and the author to protect their confidentiality. "Please keep this in utmost secret. I would not know how to face others if my identity is known" (#19). "If this is known by the public my future would be ruined" (#24).

Twenty-two indicated their marital status: 12 were not married; 8 were currently married including 6 with children; 2 were divorced. Among those who are currently married, all indicated that they married because of family and social pressures. They are not sexually interested in their spouses. Sexual relationships with their wives seldom occur. They are still strongly homosexually oriented. They see no choice but to live in lies. Their wives have absolutely no knowledge of their sexuality. They feel extremely guilty over not being able to truly love and give love to their spouses. They are constantly under tremendous pain as a result of living in two worlds at the same time. They resent their hypocrisy. For example, #1 writes:

I am a 29 years old young man . . . . I am not interested in the female sex at all. I do not even want to have any physical contact with them. However, among the men that I encountered some of them would occupy my body and soul . . . . I am particularly interested in one of them and my love for his is beyond description. He is a little smaller than I but I fall for him in every respect I can think of. This feeling deepens every day. It has been ten years but my feeling for him has not been changed. Of course I wish I could live with him, be with him even just sitting quietly with him, I would be very happy. Of course I wish to have a sexual relationship with him but my mind stops and controls me from doing this. I regard him as my spiritual supporter. I obtain my spiritual satisfaction through him. Frequently when I thought of him I would masturbate to fulfill my sexual desire. This strong persistent monogamous and inner directed everlasting devoted feeling toward him for over 10 years is unmatched even among normal heterosexual relationships . . . . During the last 10 years or so, my life had an interesting twist. When I was 25 years old, a woman fell deeply in love with me. I could not tell her about my true feeling. She insisted on marrying me no matter what. I could not do anything to discourage her. Finally I gave in and married her. I was living in a completely different world. I seldom had sexual relations with her. But on one of those very rare occasions I impregnated her. She knows nothing about my deep secret. This relationship has created pain in my heart and my life. I have been in love and devoted my love for him all these time. I think my love to him will never change for the rest of my life. However, the love is a deep secret. He would not understand nor would he be aware of this. My heart
is full of contradiction and pain. I pretended to be happy in front of others but when I was alone I cried with pain.

Those who are not married seem to suffer from the same deep-seated pain.

The pain that homosexuals suffer most lies—not in homosexuality—but in their inability to find suitable lovers. All homosexuals lock their feelings in their heart. They are so afraid of being discovered that it makes it impossible to live their life. (#10)

In this vast world where can I find that 5 to 10% true heart? (#47)

I am longing to love others (homosexuals) and to be loved. I have met some other homosexuals but I have doubt about this type of love. With all the pressure I was afraid to reveal myself and ruined everything. As a result, we departed without showing each other homosexual love. As I am growing older my homosexual desire increases. This is too troublesome and too depressing for anyone. I thought about death many times. When you are young you cannot fall in love and when you are old you will be alone. Thinking of this makes the future absolutely hopeless. (#8)

To the gays in contemporary China, the source of their pains derives from the fear of societal punishment, including arrest, sentence, labor reform camp, and prison terms. The mental pressure and anguish for fear of their true identity being found out is often unbearable. Those currently in prison serving their sentences for homosexuality cannot possibly have a chance to read Hua’s article, much less the responses from gay population to this article. However, letter #22 described a prison inmate’s testimony about being jailed as a homosexual. This prisoner was a very fine physics teacher and was the director of academic affairs in a high school. This inmate’s homosexual relationship was voluntary and was initiated by others. He was arrested in September 1983 and sentenced to a 5-year prison term for his homosexual acts. Since the publication of Hua’s article, his colleague and friends and relatives were reported to have changed their negative view toward him. His superior actually went to the prison to see him, but his prison term remains unaltered. Today he is still serving his sentence.

The social pressure and pain exerted on homosexuals have led to numerous attempted suicides and constant inner conflicts among gay people. Of the 56 letters received 15 mentioned suicide attempts. One related his suicide experience:

I am an agriculture college student. I will be graduating this year. In 1981 I fell in love with a senior student. I was only 17 then and had no understanding at all about homosexuality. The mental anguish was so unbearable that I was eventually diagnosed as having a “reactive psychosis.” I took a year’s leave of absence. In 1983 still quite confused about homosexuality I mistakenly overdosed myself with sleeping pills and was hospitalized for four days before getting out of danger. (#28)

Wishes and Demands

Generally speaking three types of wishes and demands stand out. One is the human rights issue: that society should accept homosexuals and their
right to express their sexuality and that they should not be persecuted legally and morally. The second is the issue of freedom to interact with other homosexuals. They wish that society could provide them with mechanisms to facilitate contacts and relationships. The third is the wish that objective and scientific studies be done to improve societal understanding of their life and treatment. Seventeen letter demanded protection of homosexual rights. Statements such as the following reflect their common sentiments:

There should be open discussion about the issue (of homosexual rights) and homosexuals should be given legal status. (#10)

A special column should be established to discuss the homosexual problems in comprehensive and in-depth fashion in order for society, especially the public security, judicial departments, party and governmental propaganda organizations, to have an accurate perspective and provide a more reasonable treatment for the homosexuals. (#25)

Homosexual sex is one form of sexual behaviors. Because of the problem of population explosion we are facing today, homosexual sex is one effective way of population control. Why do we insist on having a homosexual man marry a woman? Without love marriage is a mere reproductive machine. Mentally one suffers from the constant disharmony of family life. Physically, one is constantly confronted with the unpleasant experience of contradiction. Without a homosexual companion how can one have motivation for his career? Homosexuals should be granted the same right as heterosexuals to fulfill their sexual needs. We are a very populous nation; we need to improve homosexuals' status and be concerned with their problems and pains. (#32)

Twenty letters wished that the magazine and/or the author, Dr. Hua, could help them establish a network for homosexuals. In the article, two cases of gay life in Hubei and Shanghai were described. Those 20 letters' authors all requested the real names and addresses of these two in order to establish contact with them. They expressed their wishes in a very earnest manner. For example,

The greatest pain for us, the homosexuals, is our inability to express our deepest inner sorrow. We have to hide our feelings in front of others. I therefore beg you to fulfill my wish by giving me the names and addresses of other homosexuals. This may help me to want to continue my life. The pain in my heart makes me extremely despair. (#43)

I hope to contact other homosexuals through your magazine in order to work out ways to deal with our future. (#10)

I hope you can become homosexuals' go-between and provide a bridge for the great many homosexuals (to contact one another) and bring them hope and happiness. (#25)

Some letters hoped to establish a club-like organization although the word for club was not used. For example,

I fantasized that there would be a place where homosexuals can converse and interact freely. I fantasized having a lover. But fantasy is not real. In reality, homosexuals do not automatically love all other homosexuals. They choose their partners just like heterosexuals. But where can I find them? In this wide world all homosexuals hide their true identity. It is so much more difficult for a homosexual to find his
ideal partner than a heterosexual. I sometimes was tempted to openly seek a homosexual friend. But how can I? I do not think a homosexual person will do any harm to the country and other people. But why can’t we openly discuss this (homosexuality)? We should provide ways for exclusive homosexuals to contact one another. I sincerely wish that our country and related governmental agencies could openly show their concern about our problems. (#8)

There were 18 letters stressing the wish that studies on homosexuality be carried out. Twenty-one letters asked about ways to heal their problems (signifying that half of these homosexuals wished to be converted to heterosexuality to lessen their dilemma). Four letters mentioned some of the “underground” (not open or approved) studies being done about homosexuals in China. One 24-year-old indicated that he helped a 60-year-old professor, who had been gay over several decades, at a university in Beijing to collect data on homosexuals. As part of his work he had traveled to 18 cities and provinces throughout China. He found homosexuals everywhere he went. Thus, he stated:

Among those places, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Nanjing, Shenyang, Fuzhou, Changsha were most notable (in having a large number of homosexuals). Among those (homosexuals), intellectuals seemed the most numerous. Others include workers, public security officers, etc. It appeared that the number had increased substantially in the last few years. . . . many of those were unfamiliar faces. (#26)

A reader from Jiangsy wrote:

I hope you (the magazine) could invite famous sociologists, doctors, even homosexuals as a team to do an in-depth study on the extent and current condition of homosexuals in our country and to find reasonable ways to deal with them. If you want my humble service on this I would be more than happy to do my best. (#25)

**Sexual Psychology and Sexual Behavior**

There were very few discussions about concrete sexual behaviors in their letters, but some did relate some personal experiences.

I am a genuine male. I am 27 years old. I have been seeking homosexual love for many years. I have yet experienced heterosexual love and am not interested in it at all. When I saw some healthy bearded men (I myself am bearded) my member would automatically erect. I was always tempted to touch others’ penises in a crowded bus, in a dark movie theater, a bath house. . . . but my rationality stopped me. . . . In those lonely and sleepless nights I wish I had a strong man lie right next to me. (#27)

I am a 16-year-old masculine-appearing high school student. I am not into girls at all. However, I am very moved by males, especially those handsome and strong ones. When I talked with one of them I was so happy. When I was with one of those I liked I would be elated. I would snuggle up to him. When I saw a suitable man in movie, television and even in a picture magazine I would experience the elating experience of the pre-ejaculation state. (#36)
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I am 26 years old. I have been married for two years and have a child. But I only like muscular, well-built men. I love to see their well-built naked bodies. The more I see them the more elated I get. Sometimes I reach an orgasmic state and ejaculate. This orgasmic feeling was quite clear and was much better than with my wife. My wife is very tender to me. She often rubbed my body very softly while we were in bed and sometimes until I fell asleep. She could not arouse my sexual interest in her. During sexual intercourse with my wife I sometimes got erected by thinking of some beautiful young man I met but frequently I had to stop half way. (#54)

I am a 29-year-old man. When I was 15 I was a very nice looking man. Many people liked me. There was a 17-year-old man I met. We fell in love. We kissed, embraced, and finally we had sex. I played the woman's role. We met everyday and frequently had sex. I felt great and ejaculated myself. (#1)

There is a man from Shichuan province who has a nickname, "cute little fellow" and was sometime called "buttocks queen." In his letter he introduced homosexual health-hygiene knowledge. He felt that with proper hygienic attention homosexual sex was safe. He related his own experience in the following manner:

I am a male homosexual. I like the well-built and deeply tanned young men with large members. When I saw them I felt like they had already entered me. I felt extremely elated and eventually erected and ejaculated. I dreamed about this dream often. My buttocks had been entered more than 1000 times by more than 200 men. (#32)

Some letters express their displeasure about women. For example, a homosexual from Hunan province states:

I was forced to marry a woman partially because of the obligation to have a child and partially to stop the gossip. I have a child but I have been seeking homosexuals for more than 20 years. I felt very distasteful toward some women's bad behaviors such as irrationality, gossiping, cursing, dependency, etc. I dislike sex life with women. (#41)

A homosexual from Beijing relates his story:

I first felt homosexual desire when I was 16. I had had several homosexual encounters. In 1984 I got married. I thought this marriage would gradually change my sexuality but it did not happen. I seldom initiated sexual relations with my wife, if and when I did it was to comfort her. In reality I resent any part of a woman's body (including breasts). Their (women's) body shape and muscles are not as beautiful as men's. It has been more than a year (since I got married) and I am still yet to feel anything while having sex with a woman. (#35)

DISCUSSION

Although there is no specific statement concerning the status of homosexuals in the current Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China, homosexuals face an extremely difficult position in their everyday life. Criminal Law No. 106 states: "All revolting behaviors should be subjected
to arrest and sentence." The homosexual behavior, sodomy, has been included in "revolting behaviors."

One of the most famous attorneys in China today, Mr. Dun Li, was asked to express his opinion concerning homosexuality and stated:

Homosexuality though exists in different societies and cultures, with some minor exceptions is considered abnormal and disdained. It affects social order, invades personal privacy and rights and leads to criminal behavior. As a result, homosexuals are more likely to encounter and be penalized administratively and criminally (Ruan, 1985, p. 186)

One of the common reactions toward homosexuality in China is to deny its existence. Thus, for example, a newspaper reporter-editor of a famous magazine in China, Mr. Z. G. Liu, who is quite familiar with how Chinese authorities deal with special problems, and who after 2 years of study in Chicago published his book, Two Years in the Melting Pot, had the following to say:

One group on campus, calling itself the gay and lesbian Illini, met every week. I was enormously curious about this group which concerned itself with issues of homosexuality, but I never ventured to go to any of their meetings. I inquired of friends, however, to find out who these people were and what they did. One of my friends argued that love between those of the same sex is natural and has existed throughout history—during the Roman Empire, it was even made legal, he said. I disagree, saying that wouldn’t be good for society to open up this issue. In old China, homosexuality was practiced by a few rich people, but the general public didn’t approve. (Liu, 1984, pp. 93-94)

This we think is a typical Chinese interpretation. This clearly is contradictory to the facts and is not based on any objective research. It is dogmatic. The quotations presented throughout this paper should make explicit that homosexuality does exist in contemporary China, among the rich as well as the poor, the young and the old, and among people in all walks of life.

Some letters with rigorous ideological overtones, such as #57 and #58, consider homosexuality a corrupt Western behavior, an imported "spiritual pollutant." A formal testimony to this appeared in an official newspaper, Beijing Daily News, which equated homosexuality as one of the "Western social diseases." It declared that homosexuality was originated from "Western ideology and thoughts" (United Press, Feb. 4, 1987, from Beijing). These people appear quite ignorant of historical facts. We had pointed out in our previous article (Ruan and Tsai, 1987) that even during the glorious days of west Han Dynasty all 10 of the emperors had at least one homosexual lover or had a homosexual tendency, including the well-respected Emperor, Han Wu Ti.

Homosexuality clearly is not imported from Western capitalistic civilization. Many of the letters quoted in this paper came from those who were
under 30 years of age, who were born after the socialist revolution in 1949. They are clearly native products of China.

This paper has let these gay people speak for themselves through their letters. There is little doubt that further study needs to be conducted to present a more complete picture of homosexuality in China. It is not clear how representative these letter writers may be as far as the gay population in China is concerned. Although the diversity in terms of age, geographic distributions, and occupations gives us some confidence about the sample, it is possible that many of the less educated and illiterate may not be represented in this group. We have not learned anything about the relationship between sociocultural background and sexuality. As we know more about the Chinese case we may be able to move one step further to compare the Chinese gay experience with that of other societies. It is our hope that we have made the first step toward this goal.

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