

Opening Up: Articulating a Same-sex Identity in Beijing

by

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This paper aims to give a glimpse of the findings that I obtained from my field research into the articulation of a same-sex identity in Beijing, between March and June 2004. It is important to stress that these findings are not identified to represent the social reality of the gay men and lesbians living in Beijing. Thus, these findings are necessarily selective and merely illustrate dominant trends and themes that are suggested by this fieldwork and other research. They focus on:

- how cosmopolitan gay/lesbian individuals in Beijing reconcile with their sense of identity,
- how they engage with others of different backgrounds and,
- their voices, silences, and spaces.

In this paper, I argue that the sense of same-sex identity in Beijing is articulated by a material reality of *kaifang*, which is further complicated by a presence of transnational gay practices and ideologies. The significance of the paper lies in its effort to present a balanced picture of an emergent and divergent same-sex community of Beijing, where a growing number of gay men and lesbians embraces the momentum of *kaifang*, mainly because *kaifang* is in their general interest.

### ***Kaifang* / Opening Up in China**

According to *Ciyuan* (1987: 1762) *kaifang* has been used historically to denote a range of meanings: liberate, set free, release, expand, blossom, come loose, or be open to traffic or to the public. In modern Chinese, *kaifang* is usually used as in lifting a ban or restriction, opening up or being open-minded. In some sense, *kaifang* has been, and is still being used, to stretch its dictionary definitions. It is used diversely to

indicate a sense of being “modern”, “open-minded”, “receptive to change”, “westernised”, “materialistic” or “morally loose”. Further, in line with the social and political contingencies in mainland China, *kaifang* has been used together with *gaige* (reform) since the early 1990s (Gamble 2003: 18). Government authorities and *laobaixing* (common people) speak of *gaige kaifang* with particular reference to rapid social and economic changes in China.

### ***Gaige kaifang* / Reform & Opening Up**

Jos Gamble’s research (2003: 16-63) reports that *gaige kaifang* is used indiscriminately “in all forms of state propaganda” and is promoted as a national policy to make China a modernised nation, but without a clear definition. Deng Xiaoping’s description of *gaige kaifang* points to his own lack of a clear sense of direction, as Gamble (2003: 18) suggests. Deng draws an analogy between *gaige kaifang* and *mozhe shitou guohe* (crossing the river, feeling the boulders) (Gamble 2003: 17). The analogy seems to take *gaige kaifang* as a process of exploring opportunities, anticipating risks, and finding one’s bearings. On a social level, *laobaixing* use *gaige kaifang*, and especially *kaifang*, in many different ways and sometimes in radically different senses.

In general, *laobaixing* comfort themselves with the belief that contemporary Chinese society is becoming more and more *kaifang*. They believe that the opening up of China has brought about “westernisation”, “capitalism”, “civilisation”, “democracy”, and “the rule of law”. All of these are regarded as a direct reflection of its openness and as a vehicle for its national empowerment. As Xiao Gongqin (2003: 64) reports, the opening of Chinese market has also promoted a new materialism--a

preoccupation with material desires. There is a renewed stress on materialism in contemporary Chinese society where people seem to look towards money (*wang qian kan*), and its whole population goes into business (*quanmin jingshang*) (Gamble 2003: 20-1; 49). Equally significant is that *kaifang* embraces the spirit of change. This is in resonance with Deng Xiaoping's call for Chinese people to change their thinking (*huan naozi*), literally changing brains (Gamble 2003: 23).

*Kaifang* does not mean that Chinese society is open to all foreign practices or changes, but rather, to possibilities and opportunities, which refer primarily to allowing “an inflow of foreign capital, technology, expertise, and goods and to promoting export of the latter” (Gamble 2003: 18). In practice, *kaifang* operates as “the official politics of economic, social, and cultural liberalization that have governed China since the late 1970s”, as James Farrer (2002: 25) and Jos Gamble (2003: 18) report. In effect, China's recent history of reform and opening has witnessed tensions between leftists and reformists. As Xiao Gongqin (2003: 60) and Jos Gamble (2003: 8) informs, the leftists are mainly Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bureaucrats who adopt a traditional communist approach to *kaifang* so as to preserve their privileges and material interests. Thus, the policy of *kaifang* is at times criticised as producing “fat officials, but skinny *laobaixing*” (*guanfei minshou*). In a nutshell, growing tensions between opening up and guarding the door are coupled with an interaction between conservatism and liberalism. Both leftists and reformists are questioning to what extent and at what pace Chinese society should open up to the outside world.

### ***Xingkaifang*/Sexual opening**

Furthermore, the rhetoric of *kaifang* is pervasively used to suggest new sexual attitudes. The Chinese phrase *xingkaifang* (sexual opening) is often used to describe certain permissive attitudes and is tinted with decadent foreign influence. According to Chou Wanshan's *Tongzhi* (2000) and James Farrer's *Opening Up* (2002), *xingkaifang* often points to stereotypes of foreigners as decadent or promiscuous. *Xingkaifang* also suggests how sexual globalisation is invading Chinese homes and wombs, something which is at times accompanied by a strand of nationalism. I argue, together with Cui Shuqin (2003), that the question of sexuality, especially female sexuality, has become a dominant narrative of national building in modern China. Foreign invasion is certainly at the heart of Chinese representations of *xingkaifang*.

Recent research by Pan Suiming (2004), Li Yinhe (2002), and Liu Dalin (2000) imply that people's sexual ethics and behaviours have been undergoing enormous changes since the opening up of China since the late 1970s. For example, Pan reports a "sexual revolution" (*xinggeming*) in all major cities in China during the early 1980s. He said that there were practices of orgies, "family dance parties" (*jiating wuhui*), "dancing in the dark" (*heidengwu*), and "face-to-face dance" (*tiemianwu*). These practices were considered to be foreign vices being imported through the opening up of China. *Xingkaifang* manifests itself in many different forms: extramarital sex, casual sex, multi-partner sex, swinging, and the liberation of gay movement, as Fang Gang (2004: 1) reports generally. One-night stand (*yiyeqing*) is now one of the most popular subjects of online discussion in contemporary Chinese society, according to Mao Yanling's study (2005). As Mao (2005) points out, since

the publishing of *Tianliang Yihou Shuofenshou*, a Chinese book featuring one-night stand stories of 19 women, it has generated heated online discussions from nearly 40,000 netizens within a month of 2003. Opening up to private enterprise has allowed sex shops to mushroom in China, an unpublished source indicates. According to this source, there were 200 to 300 sex shops nationwide in July 1999, and just over one year later there were about 200 sex shops in Beijing alone.

### **Opening up to same-sex relationship**

Wan Yanhai, an HIV/AIDS worker, reported in a Human Rights Forum in 1997 that Chinese society has become less prejudiced against gay people since the era of opening up. To quote Wan (1997): “The topic of homosexuality had remained a taboo till the ‘open-door’ policy was adopted around 1980.” Lisa Rofel’s research (1999) shows that more individuals have identified as gay or lesbian, and that more gay venues in Beijing have become visible than a decade ago. During my field research, I noted that some gay people have started to tell stories about themselves and to one another, particularly in gay bars, parks, and on the internet. Notably, some of them show their “openness” to tell stories to researchers on tape.

### **Key findings**

One of the most interesting findings from this fieldwork is how different gay/lesbian individuals negotiate their sense of identity. In Beijing, an increasing number of people who are attracted to the same-sex refer to themselves as gay or lesbian rather than *tongxinglian* or *tongzhi*, the Chinese versions of a gay man and a

lesbian. (Chou Wahshan's *Tongzhi* (2000) and Tze-lan D. Sang's *The Emerging Lesbians* (2003) are important works problematising the terms *tongxinglian* and *tongzhi*.) These people would put it this way when identifying themselves as being attracted to the same-sex: "wo shi ge gay", meaning I am a gay man; or "wo shi ge lesbian", meaning I am a lesbian. Notice that the people who use this mix of Mandarin and English for self-identification are usually in their early-thirties, university-educated, financially stable, middle-class, and internet users. Most of my interviewees may be described as such. They feel that *tongxinglian* and *tongzhi* are somewhat medicalised and stigmatised, which is why they prefer the terms gay and lesbian. They also say that the local identities of *tongxinglian* and *tongzhi* are limiting their freedom of sexual expression. There are two important implications here. The hybridised discourses of *tongzhi* and *tongxinglian* are further hybridised. The local identities are assimilated more strongly than ever by transnational ideologies of gayness, which are at the same time being renegotiated and reappropriated within dominant narratives of opening up. Fran Martin (2005) argues that the notion of hybridity is central to understanding an increasing globalisation of gender identities. Hybridity, as Martin explains, is "the basic condition" of both eastern and western cultures, amid "the concurrent processes of decolonisation and the globalisation of economies." There is also an expression of a westernised gay/lesbian identity in Beijing, which is based on the assumption that the West is a centre of sexual modernity, a perspective that postcolonial scholarship has criticised.

Despite this westernised gay/lesbian identity, the Chinese gay men and lesbians have their own terminology for self-identification. For example, they are:

*tongxinglian* (same-sex love/a gay person), *tongxingai* (same-sex love, a term which is promoted by Zhang Beichuan), *tongzhi* (a gay person), *nantongzhi* (a gay man), and *nutongzhi* (a lesbian). All these terms have the meaning of partnership, sharing or bonding. Chinese lesbians are commonly referred to as *lala*, a modern term which comes from a character of a Taiwanese novel (Cui Zien 2004, pers. comm., 15 March). “*Les*” is also used and represents an abridged form of Chinese lesbians. *T* stands for a tomboy lesbian. *P* stands for a “pure” girl or a feminine lesbian. *Bufen* stands for a bisexual woman. Notice that *T*, *P*, and *bufen* are used to describe an individual’s sexual role, characterised by a degree of self-stereotyping. The English term *money boy* is used in China to refer to a rent boy. In Chinese gay men jargon, the numbers *yao* (1) and *ning* (0) describe a sexual act, in which whether a man chooses to take on the penetrating (1) or penetrated (0) role. A cruising ground is known as *yu chang*, or a fishing ground in English. A one-night stand is *yiyeqing* and is pronounced as *siyaojiu* (four one nine) in numbers. It is taken as a homonym “for one night” in English. According to Remy Cristini’s research (2005: 35), this kind of coded language, for instance, *siyaojiu*, initially emerges on the Chinese internet as a result of government’s prohibition against the use of sexually explicit language in chat rooms. Nowadays, this coded language is commonly used by the gay men and lesbians in China.

At the same time, there are resistances to both local and global same-sex identities. It is speculated that a significant number of gay people in China resist both local and global conceptions of gayness. In Beijing, these resistances are prominently manifested in two groups: the underprivileged and the elite gay men. These groups tend to articulate an identity which is neither indigenous nor transnational. The

underprivileged gay people whom I mostly meet in Dongdan Park and Sanlihe are generally skeptical of my research. They seem to hold the view that their voices cannot be heard, or that they will always be marginalised. For some elite gay men, they are critical of local and global gay networks in a different way. They refuse to take on an identity solely based on their feelings or sexual preference. They reject any associations with the gay rights movement. They question the existence of the same-sex “community”. They are skeptical of cross-cultural misrepresentations of same-sex experience in China. They consider their sexual preference to be very private. They also do not subscribe to coming out.

While there are resistances, a growing exposure to the transnational gay scene via the internet is also significant: Notions of “coming out”, “gay rights”, “same-sex marriage”, “freedom of sexual expression”, and “individualism” are increasingly exposed to the cosmopolitan gay men and lesbians in Beijing via the internet at a raging pace. For example, I have identified 27 popular Chinese gay-oriented websites. Among these websites, I had an interview with the webmaster of *gaychinese.net* and *soyoo.com* in Beijing, and *tianjincool.com* in Tianjin.

In general, the Chinese gay-oriented websites display these characteristics:

- There is a degree of self-censorship. According to the gay website organisers that I interviewed, they steer clear of three main subjects: pornography, anti-government speech, and politically sensitive material (such as Falungong). To this end, some websites, whether gay-oriented or not, have links to *jubao*, or to report in English. The presence of the *jubao* links is to encourage local

residents to report to authoritative bodies, if they catch others browsing through websites featuring any obscene or subversive material. Some websites also scrutinise their own contents in order not to get into trouble. For example, certain words are disallowed in the BBS and chatrooms. No offensive pictures or images are shown. Websites containing “pornographic” pictures do exist, but they are often shut down very quickly if they are hosted in China. This partly explains why some gay-oriented websites are set up in overseas countries, mostly in the United States.

- In addition to covering gay themes, these websites also contain a wide variety of topics: local and international news, education, gay literature and short stories, travel, business, entertainment, sport, showbiz, networking, fashion, and so on. Notably, they have an answer-and-question corner where gay people can seek professional help with regard to counselling, legal matters, sexual health, and general enquiries. This corner is formed on a voluntary basis, mostly by academic, legal or medical professionals; some of them are based in overseas.

According to Zhu Chuanyan’s survey (2004: 28) into how the internet shapes Chinese same-sex identity, many Chinese gay people are making use of an online environment to look for a sense of community, not only in China, but also outside China. The growing exposure to the international gay scene has created confidence of being identified as gay. In particular, the manifestation of individualism through self-assertion as a gay person in contemporary Chinese society has been on the rise. Jos Gamble (2003: 60) writes: “The rhetoric of individualism has re-emerged in the

reform era.” Individualism is gradually seen less as a challenge to social norms, but seen as a sense of freedom presenting alternatives. This is in line with Li Yinhe’s *Subculture of Homosexuality* (2002) in which Li makes a plea for social acceptance of same-sex relation as an alternative lifestyle. At the same time, the internet has manufactured certain myths and stereotypes about western gay practices and lifestyles in the mind of many Chinese gay men and lesbians. The dominant image of western gayness in Beijing revolves around the Mardi Gras Gay Parade, gay rights, gay marriage or coming out.

In addition, there is a development of a new Chinese literary genre, the Comrade Literature (*tongzhi wenxue*), on the internet. Remy Cristini’s (2005) research shows that Chinese gay people began to find a refuge on the internet in the late 1990s, creating a genre of online Comrade Literature. As Cristini (2005) informs, Chinese gay netizens show great appreciation for literary artistry. They also make a distinction between established and amateur Comrade Literature by looking into originality, literary comments, and the popularity of an author’s collected and fine works. Many of these online gay stories are set on university campuses, implying that gay students tend to meet one another on a (university) BBS or in a chat room (Cristini 2005: 82). The significance of this genre lies in its representation of changing social conditions of mainland China and the growing self-awareness of same-sex experience.

Another finding from this fieldwork is the diverse and fragmented nature of the same-sex communities in Beijing. As a general rule, there are divergent views

within any (gay) groups. Nevertheless, there is seemingly internal rivalry among gay groups in Beijing. Such conflict is complicated by a competition for foreign funding and international representation among local same-sex networks. Each one of them is organised as a unit and seems to work for its own interest. There are only few links among them. Qiu Renzong expresses in an interview that there is severe conflict among members in Beijing Sisters, a local lesbian group. Qiu is of the general view that there is a lack of solidarity (*bu tuanjie*) in the same-sex networks in Beijing. One reason is, according to Qiu, that there seems no mature and selfless leader in the community. Besides, a gay activist, whose name I have to suppress, does not think that there is a *tongxinglian* community in Beijing, either. According to this activist, there is much “bitchiness” among gay groups, something which is partly caused by fierce competition for overseas funding in order to promote the welfare of their own groups and making a living. Pan Suiming points out that this lack of solidarity (*bu tuanjie*) within the community is also characteristic of the Chinese race. According to Pan, this is a kind of *wolidou* (fighting among themselves), in which the greatest enemies of the gay people are themselves. Despite this internal conflict, there is a degree of gay activism in and outside China to fight for the interest of the Chinese same-sex communities. This activism is carried out both by Chinese living abroad and by the key players in mainland China. For instance, they are Zhang Beichuan, Wan Yanhai, Cui Zien, Beijing Gender Health Education Institute, Chi Heng Foundation, the overseas group CSSSM founded by Wan Yanhai, and so on. However, Chinese gay activism cannot entirely be understood in western terms. There is no legislative body representing individual gay rights.

This lack of legal representation is, to a degree, responsible for the emergence of a heterosexual marriage between a lesbian and a gay man. This heterosexual marriage is formed purposefully in public for them to live a gay life in private. Many of my gay contacts see this practice as a strategy to reconcile their gay identity and respect for the family. According to Fang Gang (2004), these gay/lesbian couples choose to live far away from their parents and relatives in order to avoid their surprise visits. Nor do these couples use a fixed phone line. They all use a mobile phone in order to avoid problems of picking up the phone by the wrong partner. A serious problem occurs when these gay couples face the question of reproduction and raising children. There are some advertisements posted by gay people looking for this kind of gay and lesbian marriage on the internet. On an associated note, as told by gay participants, a small number of same-sex couples have held public, marriage-like ceremonies to celebrate their partnership in Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities in China.

On the other hand, a pink economy is emerging in Beijing. Gay bars in Beijing are becoming visible. According to the gay bar managers of Half & Half and On/Off, there is unrealised substantial growth potential in the pink economy in China. In addition to gay bars, I identified a paying hotline for gay people during fieldwork. A self-identified gay man, also an interviewee of mine, has been running a profit-making hotline for 11 years. This hotline answers gay-oriented enquiries of various kinds, and caters for those who prefer to verbalise their concern. This gay man wanted me to introduce gay men from Australia to him in Beijing, I speculate, for an acquaintanceship or for a relationship. He also wanted to make a profit by providing opportunities for overseas gay men to meet Chinese gay men in Beijing. A Beijing

lesbian group, with whom I conducted fieldwork, was making plans to set up a social club exclusively for gay people. In my conversations with the key members of this group, they expressed that the commercial future of a gay club was promising. Besides, male same-sex trade contributes a part to the pink economy. During fieldwork, I went from Beijing to Tianjin to have an interview with a self-identified gay man, who was a brothel manager of male same-sex trade.

### **Keeping the door ajar**

Opening up is a fact of life in mainland China that most people, whether gay or not, embrace. Gay men and lesbians in Beijing, especially those who are informed of transnational gay practices, are now relatively “open” about their sense of identity. However, their openness is strategic. They are open only to the extent that their traditional and public identities are protected from intolerance or oppression. The sentiment in support of opening up, or *kaifang*, is sincere and is shared by both government authorities and *laobaixing* (common people). In practice, opening up operates as a much-cherished foreign characteristic of progress and modernity. Opening up is thought to have changed people’s attitudes and behaviours, allowing Chinese society to be more tolerant of same-sex practice. Perhaps, it would be more accurate to speak of opening up to same-sex practice as a long-term goal.

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