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The cultural, historical and socio-political differences between Hong Kong and the West leads to a very different reality for lesbian and bisexual women. Sexuality, in a western sense, has not been highlighted in Chinese "his"tory. There is not much emphasis on the concept of sexual identities, but rather on sexual behavior. This makes it hard to mobilize lesbian and bisexual women for a socio-political movement or even to organize around issues of human rights and women's sexuality.

By looking at some aspects of the early stages of the lesbian and gay movement in Hong Kong, we can see some of the dynamics of the situation of lesbian and bisexual women and their current issues.

DECRIMINALIZATION

Homosexual acts in private places, between consenting male adults age 21 and above, were successfully decriminal-

ized in Hong Kong in 1990-91. Buggery, gross indecency, and charges of nuisance and injustice have since then been abolished. In many respects, this legal reform is inadequate. Love motels are not considered private places, and the age of consent for sex between gay men (21) is higher than that for heterosexuals (18). Further, these changes decriminalized homosexuality, but did nothing to protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Finally, throughout the entire process, lesbianism was marginalized and treated as if it were nonexistent. Yet the significance of the legal reform should not be diminished, according to Julian Chan, the activist behind the lobbying process.

Chan recalls the period of the '70s-'80s as a time when homosexuality was a social taboo and gay meeting places were often raided by the police. Social bias linked homosexuality with decadence, perversion, immorality, deviance, and caucasian dominance. Incidents such as the suicide of an expatriate British gay officer, the homicide of a local gay businessmen, and the discovery of a substantial gay population in the civil service made decriminalization a public issue. It took until 1988 to get decriminalization on the legislative agenda, and public opinion was divided on the issue. The Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing in June 1989 increased turmoil in the public mind and diverted attention from the issue, but by 1990-91 the decriminalization bill was finally passed due to the strength of human rights arguments.

Acknowledging human rights and privacy as aspects of homosexuality is one step toward gradual social acceptance. In the wake of decriminalization the lesbian, bisexual, and gay community has been more expressive. Apart from the social scene—gay pubs, saunas, discos and karaoke—the activist arena has seen the growth of lesbian and gay advocacy and social clubs, such as the Hong Kong 10% Club and Horizons.

Lesbians have been empowered by the formation of lesbian sub-groups within these groups. Critics have argued

from the beginning that the battle for decriminalization has totally neglected lesbians. To be sure, the British legal system (Hong Kong remains a British territory until 1997) is patriarchal in its historical construction, and decriminalization is merely a remedy to mitigate injustice in laws concerning buggery and gross indecency; lesbianism has never been forbidden because it has been understood to be "nonexistent" as a legal problem. Yet even so, the spill-over effect of decriminalization can still provide the basis for lesbian organizing to take off.

QUEER ORGANIZATIONS

There were no groups specifically for lesbians or bisexual women in Hong Kong until 1994. This may give some indication of the male dominance in the "gay" liberation movement. The Hong Kong 10% Club, Horizons, and the Sat-sanga are the only three mixed lesbian and gay groups in Hong Kong. Horizons has a lesbian subgroup, but it does not amount to much since very few women attended their functions. The other two groups want to have equal participation of lesbians and gay men, and therefore have not instituted special lesbian subgroups. However, there was a lack of awareness among the group's members of the special needs of women within this patriarchal society, and therefore lesbian activities organized by these groups have not really been successful.

Then came the XX Gathering (started in mid 1994), primarily made up of dissatisfied women members of the Hong Kong 10% Club and Horizons. It began as a nonpolitical all-women's gathering held each month, and soon turned into a specifically lesbian and bisexual gathering, where lesbian and bisexual women's issues were discussed. This new group was greeted warmly by women in the community and now has an attendance of 30 to 90 people every month.

Queer Sisters was established in early 1995. It is the very first group in Hong Kong to directly address queer women's

sexuality and politics (that is, issues that concern not only lesbians but all women who challenge heterosexism, including bisexual women, transgendered women, and women who are single by choice). This new group plans to deal with social and political issues, providing referral services for legal, medical, and other needs. These activities will hopefully lead to campaigns to educate the public about queer women's issues. The group's first task, however, is to conduct a queer women's survey, the first ever in Hong Kong, and the results of this survey will be presented at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and the Third Asian Lesbian Network conference, which will take place in Taiwan in August 1995.

"There are mutual benefits for the solidarity of both groups."

— Rose Wu, Hong Kong Women's Christian Council

WOMEN'S/FEMINIST GROUPS

Hong Kong's women's groups and feminist groups are heterosexual and family-oriented. Lesbianism and women's sexuality more generally have not been part of their agenda. According to Rose Wu, the founder of the Hong Kong Women's Christian Council, the only aspects of sexuality that women's groups deal with are sexual violence and the

representation of women in the media. Sexuality and sexual orientation are not issues considered at their meetings. Their main focus has been on women's equality and such issues as child care, sexual abuse, and maternity leave, and they have not really been aware of the fact that lesbian and bisexual women constitute a minority within a minority.

Although the most radical feminist group in Hong Kong—the Hong Kong Association for the Advancement of Feminism—held a couple of “meet the lesbians” workshops with the Hong Kong 10% Club in 1991-92, nearly all cooperation came to a halt later. The Hong Kong Women's Christian Council (HKWCC) is, at the present time, the only group that views women's sexuality positively and cooperates with lesbian, gay, and queer groups. During the consultation period for the Basic Law (which will govern Hong Kong after 1997), the HKWCC took the lead in suggesting “sexual orientation” in the law for women's rights, and alliance with lesbian and gay groups became the council's policy thereafter. HKWCC has co-presented religious and feminist workshops with the Hong Kong 10% Club since 1994, and the organization started to work in cooperation with the newly established Queer Sisters beginning in 1995. “There are mutual benefits for the solidarity of both groups,” says Rose Wu. “The experiences were new and important for us as we can re-read and re-think the Bible and our religious beliefs with them. To side with marginalized people is Christianity.”

MEDIA

There are no magazines or newspapers by or for lesbian and bisexual women, and no mainstream media that creates a strong positive attitude toward lesbian, bisexual, and gay issues. Only a few TV programs and radio programs offer positive views of lesbian, bisexual, and gay issues or visibility for lesbian and bisexual women. Radio Television Hong Kong had one radio production focusing on these issues, but it lasted only four months. The first positive radio program

dealing with lesbians and gays to appear on Commercial Radio II began in 1992, but it too lasted only a few months.

There are no mainstream movies dealing positively with lesbians. Lesbianism—or, more accurately, sex between women—mainly appears in pornographic films such as *The Wife's Lover*. Lesbians in other films such as *He and She* and *He's a Woman, She's a Man* all turn straight in the end. In the mainstream press, magazines such as *East Week*, *Next Magazine*, *Easy Finder*, *Oriental Sunday*—all of which have very wide circulation—sometimes contain feature articles on lesbians which appear to be done by reporters who take a voyeuristic point of view and don't really discuss lesbian issues.

As a result, people concerned with lesbian and bisexual women's issues have tried a number of different strategies. Some have gotten into the mass media themselves by writing articles, taking the power of interpretation back into their own hands instead of being manipulated by the heterosexism of the well-known vehicles of the press. They usually write in more liberal and open newspapers (*Hong Kong Economic Times*, *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, and *Ming Pao*) and magazines (*Marie Claire*, *Crossover Cultural Magazine*, *Elle*). Others have turned to alternative media and create independent space for the voices of lesbian and bisexual women—writing, for example, for the newsletters of lesbian and gay groups (*Hong Kong 10% Club* and *Horizons*) or feminist groups (*Hong Kong Women's Christian Council*). There are also two independent magazines; one (*Tung Chi Hau Long*) is a monthly press cutting summary of lesbian and gay issues, and the other (*Nufengliu*) is a bimonthly magazine about women's issues.

The Hong Kong Arts Centre has organized the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film/Video Festival for five years. This year it has over 80 films and videos, including local productions. Categories such as *When a Woman Loves a Woman*, *Bi-the-way*, *Labels Kings and Queens*, and *Big Girls Don't Cry* are designed to explore different issues. This is a big event

every year because people can see programs not purely for entertainment but also to get information about lesbian and bisexual women and their issues in other parts of the world.

Recently, books on lesbian bisexual and gay issues have begun to appear. *The Coming Out of Queers in Hong Kong*, edited by Anson Mak, Danial Kwong and Chou Wah Shan, was published in February 1995.¹ It contains separate chapters for lesbians and bisexuals, and it is the first book about local people "coming out" to be published in Chinese. Two other books published in 1995 are *Queer Theories* and *Queers' Theology*, both written by Chou Wah Shan. They are the first books in Chinese about western queer theories.

The resources and power of the alternative media are still limited, as the distribution network is small and the circulation ranges from a few hundred to somewhat under 3,000 copies in Hong Kong's population of six million. Women's issues are still overshadowed not only by heterosexual society, but by the patriarchal values which allow gay men to be perceived as the entire queer population and leave women out of the spotlight, particularly in the mass media.

THE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES BILL

In 1994, Legislative Council member Anna Wu proposed the Equal Opportunities Bill, which would address nine types of discrimination and set up an independent Human Rights Commission as a statutory body to foster arbitration and settle disputes with tribunal power.

Under the proposed legislation, discrimination, harassment, and vilification on the basis of sexual orientation would be unlawful in employment, education, access to places and vehicle, provision of goods and services and facilities, accommodation, land registered clubs, and government programs.

Societal Reaction to the Bill

The bill has stirred up heated controversies. Many organi-

zations support the bill in its entirety, including feminist groups, a support group called Movement Against Discrimination, lesbian and gay groups, such as Hong Kong 10% Club and Horizons, and activist trade unions. Some religious groups claim no objections per se to the bill, but nevertheless have reservations. Conservative and religious groups approve "the protection of basic human rights" but have expressed concern about the inclusion of an "influential minority culture." They have expressed reservations in particular on issues of homosexuality and bisexuality.

Hong Kong Monitor, a political concern group, holds the view that the society is not yet prepared for a comprehensive equal opportunities law, and that issues like same-sex marriage and tax allowances for queer couples similar to those afforded to married couples, should be subject to further public debate.

However, the most negative view has been expressed by a pro-China newspaper, *Wen Wei Po*, which stated in an editorial that the "Equal Opportunities Bill is an attempt to preserve the immoral and sick tradition of the expatriates, in particular the British." It claimed that homosexuality was "shameless perverted behavior" of the British and that it was ridiculous to allow homosexuals to seek damages if they were discriminated against by "normal people."²

The Legislative Council members, after two internal hearings of the bill, held the view that they could support protection against discrimination only on the grounds that are most commonly recognized, such as gender and disability. This view is generally supported by the business sector representatives and the Liberal Party (a middle of the road political party). Furthermore, the Governor has rejected the proposal for setting up an independent Human Rights Commission.

A Critique of the Bill

In spite of the "great leap" of equal opportunities awareness in Hong Kong fostered by the proposal of the bill, the

bill itself is not free from flaws. Because of its failure to set up a Human Rights Commission, the effectiveness of the bill remains doubtful. The possibility of independent grievance procedures in settling disputes on issues of discrimination is, in the near future at least, effectively destroyed.

Moreover, lesbian and bisexual women's participation in discussions of sexuality has been absent from the debate on the bill. Feminist groups have dealt only with gender issues and not with sexuality. At the same time, the notes, statements, and examples quoted by the Equal Opportunities Bill proposal and the Hong Kong 10% Club cover only gay male cases. In so doing, they once again render lesbians invisible. Further, the situation of bisexuals is noted in the bill, but has not been highlighted in the campaigns by lesbian and gay groups to raise public awareness of equal opportunity for women of different sexual orientations.

The proposed protection of sexuality is not comprehensive. In the bill, "Sexuality means heterosexuality, homosexuality (including lesbianism) or bisexuality" only. Other voices, such as those of transsexuals, are erased, rendered invisible in the political context.

Finally, the amended version of the bill happens to group sexuality together with age and family responsibilities. Because it does not deal separately and specifically with issues like same-sex marriage; donor insemination of lesbians; adoption of children by lesbian, bisexual, and gay parents; and the tax and housing allowances that married heterosexuals receive, the bill does not encourage new policies that would generate positive and accurate attitudes toward lesbian and bisexual women.

The third hearing of the bill in the Legislative Council was scheduled to take place in July 1995.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the community's variety and vigor, lesbian and

bisexual women in Hong Kong have never been the subject of discourse. Decriminalization, which had its roots in English notions of "buggery," did not directly address lesbian sexuality or well-being. The lesbian subgroups affiliated with a gay-dominated homosexual group (and subordinated to gay patriarchy) did not flourish. More recent independent women's/queer groups are either social groups that are "in the closet" or they are too small to be politically influential. Mass media has always been preoccupied with vulgar stereotyping and the issues of lesbian and bisexual women have often been the subject of ridicule rather than positive discussions about lesbianism as a sexual identity. Even the Equal Opportunities Bill, although undoubtedly progressive in its inclusion of sexual orientation, nevertheless treats lesbianism as a subcategory of homosexuality, rather than as a separate identity like bisexuality. One positive piece of news is that at least one academic institution, the University of Hong Kong (a state university), is in the process of putting forward its own code of sexual ethics that would protect anyone on the campus against discrimination on the basis of sexual identity. This suggests the possibility that guidelines on harassment can be implemented in a variety of institutions.

NOTES

1 Anson Mak, Daniel Kwong and Chou Wah Shan, eds., *The Coming Out of Queers in Hong Kong*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Queer Culture, 1995).

2 Wen Wei Po, 28 October 1994.

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