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Advocating at the Margins:
Women's NGOs in China

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Abstract

The development of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China has been unprecedented in the past fifteen years. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) and parallel NGO Forum in Beijing, China, opened the door for the first time for the establishment of women's NGOs in China. This paper examines the development of Chinese women's NGOs with a particular focus on two organizations in Beijing for marginalized female populations: one focusing on lesbians and the other helping women with HIV/AIDS. I examine the structure and growth of each NGO; however, on a more personal level and perhaps more importantly, I use the interviews I conducted with volunteers and clients of both organizations to analyze the importance of such organizations for lesbians and women living with HIV/AIDS. How have the lives of these women changed as a result of these particular organizations? What is their view regarding the support for lesbians and female HIV patients in China? These two case studies will shed light onto lesbians and women with HIV/AIDS in Beijing and the significance of such NGOs which function as the only support channels available for these two socially taboo communities.

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Introduction

When I first met Chen Li in the summer of 2007, she acted happy and confident. She joked with the other interviewees in the group interview and did not seem apprehensive of the topic on which I was about to interview her for: being HIV-positive. Seeing the way she carried herself in China's relatively conservative society, one would not suspect she has been a victim of HIV/AIDS for three years. When she first discovered she was HIV-positive in 2004, Chen Li felt very much alone and in despair, and was convinced the disease would plague her health. She experienced discrimination from her family and was not emotionally stable. However, in the ensuing years, she was transformed from a desperate soul to one actively participating in society. This difference in her outlook came about through the action of a non-governmental organization (NGO) targeted to a specific group in society. What happened to Chen Li is a dramatic example of how women's lives are being changed by NGOs.

The development of NGOs in China has been unprecedented in the past fifteen years. The journey which led me to meet Chen Li and other women living with HIV/AIDS began in the fall of 2006 when I wrote a paper titled "The Role of Women's NGOs in China." In writing that initial paper, I gained an appreciation for the significance of women's NGOs in Chinese society. As I anticipated writing my senior thesis the following year, I came to realize the overwhelming number of topics that could potentially stem from the study of women's NGOs. For example, some organizations officially register with the government while others are not even acknowledged by the state. Some groups focus on providing legal aid to Chinese women while others dedicate their time and energy to training migrant women in vocational skills. Some operate in an office building while others are run from a personal residence. A number of NGOs only assist their local communities and have a staff of less than ten people. Others cater to

women across the country or collaborate with sister-organizations to execute various programs. Clearly there is an assortment of women's NGOs that I could address.

I decided to focus on lesbians and females with HIV/AIDS during the summer of 2007 when I interned at the Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University (the Center), an influential NGO based in Beijing. At the Center, issues involving a variety of women's groups were addressed. On the basis of these experiences, I decided to narrow my thesis proposal from the broad idea of the development of Chinese women's NGOs in general to an examination of women's NGOs with a more specific target. Doing so would permit the in-depth examination of specific issues posed by defined women's groups. In particular, this will permit me to study unique groups of women who are different from those commonly addressed by NGOs such as migrant women and those requiring psychological help. In the rapidly evolving society in China today, marginalized women are frequently ignored. This is partly due to the fact that society is not fully aware of such populations. While women have historically been regarded as subordinate in society, there are groups within the female population that have been even further marginalized. Among these groups are lesbian women and women living with HIV/AIDS in particular.

I was first introduced to a lesbian NGO, Common Language, that summer in June when representatives of the lesbian organization visited the NGO where I was interning. As a result, I became familiarized with Common Language and Beijing's lesbian community. I had grown up with an understanding that homosexuality was taboo in Chinese culture, and thus questions about Beijing's lesbian circle filled my head. Were there many out-of-the-closet lesbians in Beijing? How open and comfortable with themselves were lesbians here, compared to those in the United States? Why was there such limited knowledge regarding this community? What sorts of

activities or agendas did Common Language have? As I chatted with and got to know a few lesbians that summer, I realized the importance of the organization and its influence on lesbians in the capital city. I came to better understand the needs of Beijing's suppressed lesbian population, and thus, I decided to choose Common Language as one of the NGOs to focus on for my thesis.

While I contemplated what other marginalized population to bring to light, I thought of the HIV/AIDS community. HIV/AIDS is a major health issue worldwide, and patients afflicted with AIDS are discriminated. In a conventional society like China, it is likely that HIV/AIDS patients would experience similar difficulties which prevent them from leading normal lives. Among AIDS patients, it is not known whether female patients differed from male patients. Did these women have different needs than men? In order to understand this better, I visited several HIV/AIDS NGOs. Fortunately, the first NGO I visited was Mangrove Support Group, an organization that had founded Smile, a smaller group exclusively dedicated to assisting women with HIV/AIDS. Xia Jing, the founder of Smile, enthusiastically introduced me to six women with the disease. Through these encounters, it became evident that there is a need for additional support groups devoted to women HIV/AIDS patients. With Xia Jing's help, I was able to carry out my research on Smile, the second NGO I decided to highlight.

Mainstream Chinese society rarely addresses unconventional topics including homosexuality and major health issues such as HIV/AIDS. Therefore, both Common Language and Smile are under the public radar. Many ordinary citizens are not even aware of the lesbians or women with HIV/AIDS living among them. Even if they are conscious of these women, most citizens do not know how to treat these populations, and as a result, lesbians and women with HIV/AIDS are subject to discrimination. Globalization and China's recent opening up to the

world have played significant roles in shedding light on these two specific populations in China. While lesbians existed in China, they were not positively acknowledged until the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. AIDS, on the other hand, is a more complicated issue because it entered China as a consequence of globalization and one foreigner's sexual encounter with a local Chinese. However, international AIDS groups have since brought international attention to the HIV/AIDS issue in China and have motivated China to take action.

Groups such as Common Language and Smile are rare in Beijing. The interviews I conducted with members of both organizations constitute the only information I obtained regarding the number of NGOs for lesbians or women with HIV/AIDS in Beijing. It is possible that other NGOs like Common Language and Smile exist. The fact that the lesbians and women with HIV/AIDS I interviewed were only aware of Common Language and Smile, respectively, suggests that these organizations are rare. By conducting original research on stigmatized groups such as lesbians and women living with HIV/AIDS, I hope to shed light on populations that have not yet been fully understood by the public.

In order to fully understand China's lesbian and female HIV/AIDS populations, it is necessary to first contextualize them in history. Through the course of Chinese history, women have been required to behave according to very strict social boundaries. As a result, women have never been free to craft their own behavior. In traditional China, women were required to be obedient and submissive. Confined to traditional household duties, they did not exercise authority, or publicly participate in society. During the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Mao Zedong introduced an alternative way to thinking of women's role in society. Gender equality was emphasized and women were viewed as major contributors to the betterment of the nation. However, gender inequality resurfaced, and women found themselves back in the domestic

sphere with Deng Xiaoping's reforms. Movements to ameliorate the situation commenced in the 1990s and since then, women have exerted efforts to achieve equality. By briefly examining women's history in China, it is evident that women have experienced a swinging pendulum of events, with each swing altering their priorities and concerns.

Although women in general have been forced to accommodate society's changing standards, lesbians and women with HIV/AIDS are challenged even more. Until 2001, homosexuality was considered a mental disease by the Chinese Psychiatric Association, and because of this, lesbians were either not acknowledged or even indirectly targeted. Lesbians generally remained in the closet, for they feared discrimination from mainstream society. This lack of support for lesbians has created a need to address the existence of lesbians and establish lesbian support groups in China's conservative society.

The first case of HIV/AIDS appeared in China in the mid-1980s as a consequence of China's efforts to globalize. Due to the disease's relatively recent arrival, the public is largely ignorant about the nature of HIV/AIDS. The shortage of educational materials from the government on HIV/AIDS has contributed to a growing stigma attached to those living with the disease. Even though the government's health department has acknowledged the severity of the situation, and has initiated programs to address this issue, they have primarily focused on the high-risk population of gay men. Women with HIV/AIDS exist as a smaller (but growing) community and are generally being overlooked. This has led to their increased demands for additional attention especially since they are stigmatized as carriers of the disease. In order to properly take care of themselves, women living with HIV/AIDS need channels in which they can freely release their emotional tensions and obtain more information regarding the disease.

The situations of both lesbians and women living with HIV/AIDS began to change when people started to realize the need to organize and provide support to these particular populations. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, hosted by China, in Beijing exposed Chinese to global views and attitudes toward lesbianism. Since then, NGOs and groups have initiated efforts to provide assistance to lesbians and to raise people's awareness of their plight. Among these, Common Language plays a major role as a support network for local lesbians. Without the organization's establishment in 2005, the lives of many lesbians and volunteers would be radically different. I examine two volunteers, Eva and Xiao Cao, and their chance encounter with, but endless dedication to, Beijing's primary lesbian organization.

The government does not consider women with HIV/AIDS as part of the high-risk HIV/AIDS community. As a result, Beijing women affected by the disease have few support networks and continue to live secluded lives. Only when Smile was founded in 2006 did the lives of some women with HIV/AIDS change and improve. My interviews with six women who frequent Smile's activities suggest the importance of Smile as a promoter of HIV/AIDS prevention and education. Similar to Eva and Xiao Cao, the lives of these six women would have followed different and possibly more dismal paths if Smile did not exist.

My focus on Common Language and Smile enabled me to educate myself and now others about China's lesbian scene and the issues faced by Chinese women with HIV/AIDS. Both lesbianism and HIV/AIDS are traditionally considered taboo, but with this study, I hope to make these topics more transparent. While I might not change conservative attitudes, I aim to enlighten others on the current situation and the vital role of these two organizations in striving to address and provide support for their respective stigmatized communities.

Chapter one of this study examines the subservient status of women in traditional China, while chapter two explores the changing roles and views of women in society from the establishment of the People's Republic of China until modern-day China. These two chapters are evidence that women have been and continue to be subject to society's shifting standards. Even today, lesbians and women with HIV/AIDS must cope with society's generally conservative attitudes; however, as processes of globalization have begun to influence China's traditional views, NGOs are organizing and providing support in order to assuage the commonly construed negative views toward these two communities. Chapter three evaluates the impact of globalization and influences from abroad, especially the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in 1995. Chapter four explores the varying attitudes of lesbianism in China and the significant impact of the FWCW. A case-study of Common Language, an NGO for lesbians in Beijing, demonstrates the existence of but limited nature of lesbian advocacy present in China today. Lastly, chapter five establishes the conflicting role of globalization as the cause for the penetration of HIV/AIDS into China and also as the solution in handling the health epidemic. A case-study of Smile suggests that female HIV/AIDS patients require and greatly benefit from organizations like Smile. The goal of this study is to shed light on how Common Language and Smile both play a central and vital role in the lives of their respective communities.

Chapter One: Women in Traditional China

Women in traditional China lived in a world dominated by males and Confucian values. Their status and position in society clearly demonstrates their constrained role at home and subservience to men. Confucian ideals placed women at the heart of household duties. The belief that the domestic was to be concealed from public view forced women to remain inside their homes, removed from society. Restrained from venturing beyond the perimeters of their living compounds, women were traditionally seen as the homemakers while their husbands assumed the role of the primary breadwinners. Women's main tasks included caring for their children and parents-in-law, managing household chores, and engaging in feminine activities such as sewing or fine arts. This made them dependent on their husbands regarding all financial issues. If women's responsibilities did not entirely constrain them from leaving the home, then the practice of foot binding certainly restricted their physical movement. The excruciating practice of foot binding entailed wrapping young girls' feet in tight bandages to prohibit natural growth. The feet would eventually be deformed and not grow larger than about four to six inches. Although the origin of foot binding is disputed, one reason women's feet were bound was because it provided entertainment for men who enjoyed watching women move delicately. Foot binding was considered a way to assert class status, and affluent families were generally the only ones who could afford to perform foot binding because lower class women often engaged in physically-demanding jobs. As a result, the fashionable procedure evolved into a marker of class status; in essence, it developed into a means to commodify women. Society rewarded and esteemed the men who could afford to literally confine their wives to the home with status, as they did not have to depend on their wives to hold a job or fulfill household duties. Not only did foot binding ensure the fidelity of women, but this practice also emphasized women's financial

dependence on men. Foot binding tended to keep women confined in the home and contributed to women's submissive role in society.

Just as women were denied access to society beyond the confines of their homes, they were also discouraged from exercising their minds with intellectually-stimulating activities. In traditional Chinese society, there was a gendered distinction between physical labor and intellectual pursuits. While men were encouraged to study hard and pursue multiple academic disciplines, females were discouraged from obtaining a higher education, restricting them to domestic labor (Mann 1997: 8). Traditional values reinforced the importance of women's duty at home and not in an academic setting. In accordance with the popular saying in the Qing Dynasty "ignorance is virtue," women with too much schooling were not considered moral or even desired; novelists depicted women as "unfaithful or ... dying in their teens" (Yao 1983: 88). Men fancied women with proper breeding and just enough education to uphold Confucius ideals. Many men even advocated that women only needed enough of a vocabulary for daily housekeeping (Yao 1983: 88). As a result, women did not aim to cultivate their intellects but merely advanced their domestic skills. The constraints placed on women both physically and mentally exemplify their limited mobility within traditional society.

These expectations placed on women to behave accordingly emphasize the prevailing gender hierarchy in traditional China. Throughout their lives, women were placed under the authority of male figures, be it their fathers, husbands, or sons. Because of the patriarchal nature of Confucian society, only men could actively represent their family in public and in sacrifices to their ancestors. As a result, parents tended to favor infant boys over girls, often showering their sons with attention while ignoring or mistreating their daughters. Many families even went to the extreme of practicing female infanticide. A son represented his family and contributed to the

continuation of the blood line, whereas a daughter was simply another mouth to feed and would eventually add to her family's financial burden due to the necessity of providing a dowry. For rural families in already tense financial situations, daughters were considered an additional source of stress. Once married, women moved in with their husbands' families and assumed their filial role as diligent wives and daughters-in-law. The way women were treated as commodities, first as unwanted burdens and subsequently as their husband's newly acquired property, demonstrates their inferior status.

Chapter Two: Women from 1949-1995

Women During Mao Zedong's Communist Revolution

Mao Zedong's socialist revolution in 1949 dramatically changed women's lives. The new Chinese government adopted the communist mission to liberate women from the cultural expectations that confined them in the home. The government instigated various legal reforms and movements to advocate women's rights and encourage women to join the labor force. This state-sponsored feminism enabled China to make gender-related advancements by providing women with increased opportunities for liberty and participation in society.

Mao initiated change in the political arena first with the 1950 Marriage Law. The law was one of the fundamental legal steps toward gender equality by permitting men and women to choose their own spouses. Once the law went into effect, divorce rates escalated. Women were eager to exercise their newfound right. Because of the sharp rise in the divorce rate, many Chinese adopted a new name for the reform law: the "Divorce Law" (Walker 1955: 90). The government intended that the widespread implementation of the new law would enable all women to escape the constraints of the traditional patriarchal society and lead independent lives.

The Agrarian Reform Law complemented the marriage law, in that it provided women more liberty in the economic sphere. Before 1950, women were subject to their husband or son's rules and control not solely because of Confucian values but also because men generally received all the property rights. As women made political and social gains with the marriage law, they gained the right to own property for the first time in Chinese history with the 1950 implementation of the Agrarian Reform Law. Kay Ann Johnson points out, "The marriage reform law gave women and children equal property rights, the land reform law gave them real property" (Wolf 1985: 18). This property allowed a degree of economic independence,

something women had never before possessed. After implementation of these two laws, society acknowledged the raised status of women. Women were recognized in public and given the freedom to do whatever they desired with their land. The combination of the Marriage Law and Agrarian Reform Law in 1950 empowered women with feelings of confidence and ambition.

Women's status was further increased when Mao launched the progressive Great Leap Forward in 1958. Along with the establishment of communes and factories, Mao promoted women's contributions to the public; his initial goal was to mobilize the ambitious number of 300 million women (Andors 1983: 49). Under Mao's guidance, society encouraged rural and urban women's participation in the labor force, especially in social production and collective facilities. Entering social production and abandoning domestic work enabled women to gradually lead more independent lives similar to their male counterparts. The increase of potential for women as active members in the workforce increased their self-confidence and encouraged their participation. Thus, women's contribution in the labor force narrowed the gender income gap and helped them achieve gender equality.

Following the Great Leap Forward, which promoted women's participation in social production and communes, the Cultural Revolution of 1966 further advocated a more radical type of gender equality. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao called for the establishment of a new Chinese society that further emphasized women's obligations to contribute to the country. Numerous women abandoned their former agricultural jobs and trained as semi-skilled professionals such as barefoot doctors, veterinarians, and agro-technicians. As these jobs were traditionally done by men, women who occupied these roles gained status in society (Yao 1983: 168). The Cultural Revolution can be considered as a historical highpoint in women's journey toward emancipation and equality.

However, despite the progressive gains in economic autonomy and social liberty by women during the Mao years, there were also limits to their liberation. Women underwent a dramatic transformation because they were treated identical to and forced to behave like men. They did not achieve liberation on their own terms; instead, women were urged to neglect their femininity and assume men's work and roles. Identifying oneself as a member of the female population was considered counterrevolutionary and in opposition to the current socialist campaign (Zhou 2006: 58). While society encouraged women to assume more communal responsibilities, gender neutrality was established not through equal sacrifice by men and women, but rather by the radical transformations of women alone. Of the shifting dynamics, Professor Jinghao Zhou of Asian Languages and Cultures at Hobart and William Smith Colleges writes that "equality between men and women took an extreme form, that is, gender-free or neutral-gender" (Zhou 2006: 58), but he does not acknowledge the significant unidirectional shift in gender responsibilities. Women altered their beliefs and actions to achieve the male standard of success. According to Honig, acting akin to men was considered appropriate, and "to behave as a woman risked being labeled a 'backward element'" (Honig 2002: 266). Mao's enthusiastic promotion of gender equality consequently led to the constraint and ultimate erasure of femininity.

ACWF: Initial stage

The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) was a precursor to Chinese women's NGOs by facilitating women's shifting role in society. A government-run organization, the ACWF was established in 1949 and served as the cornerstone for the women's movement in China. About 6 months prior to Mao's takeover, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the ACWF as the only organization to encourage women to support Party policies

and to promote the interests of women (Jacka 1997: 30). The largest mass organization at that time, the institution linked official women's groups throughout China in addition to serving as a common thread among grassroots organizations (Wang 2004: 97). The organization established offices at various levels in order to achieve its full potential in helping women in China. Not only did it function as a liaison between the government and common people, the ACWF also protected women's interests by reinforcing Mao's values of equality and attaining rights. During the Cultural Revolution however, the state forced the ACWF to shut down for several years in 1967 because it was considered a target of an ongoing political struggle. The ACWF's mission to promote women's rights contradicted the government's push for a gender neutral society. The Party even charged the editor of the ACWF's magazine *Women of China*, Dong Bian, with attempting to endorse non-socialist values (Andors 1983: 103). Despite this temporary setback, the ACWF eventually flourished and subsequently paved the way for future women's organizations in 1978 when the organization modified its goals in reaction to Deng Xiaoping's reforms.

Women During Deng Xiaoping's Reforms

Women's lives changed yet again with Deng Xiaoping's various reforms. Like Mao, Deng transformed the country, but this time toward a market economy. Deng pushed for a state with more economic power and greater international influence. The new standards of generating capital and seeking personal advancement replaced those which maintained a communal environment and social production. This determination to transform the state into a market-oriented society weakened state support for the development of women's rights. During this period of economic reform and development, women struggled to retain the emancipated status

they had gained during the Mao years. While society was organized as a collective whole during Mao's revolution, Deng's reform prompted the beginning of a division between the privileged and the disadvantaged, those on the brink of crossing the threshold to a modern lifestyle and those left struggling to even catch sight of the door.

A decrease in the status of many women who were once dominant figures in Mao's factories and communes was one of the consequences of China's developing economy. During the communist period, women had been able to advance in society in viable occupations, while in the infancy of the market economy, their low education level and limited skills disadvantaged them. Many rural women experienced de facto gender discrimination because of their lower education levels (Parish/Busse 2000: 217). However eager women were to continue participating in the labor sphere, the increase of jobs requiring advanced education and training put them at a disadvantage. Surpluses of women seeking employment immediately after the birth of the market economy led to the growth of a "pink-collar" labor force comprised of underpaid workers in clerical and sales departments. Because of the nature of the development of a market economy in urban centers, the circumstances of many female peasants proved to be a hindrance for them when competing for jobs with those already living in the city. Additionally, companies preferred to hire single independent women over those married with children, for fear of exhausting valuable resources or additional costs (Parish/Busse 2000: 213). Companies were disinclined to invest valuable time and capital in training women who took maternity leave and ultimately decided to stay at home instead of returning to work. The duties that women once held in the communes and agricultural realms disappeared with the arrival of Deng's reforms, and many women, especially female peasants in rural society, found their skills unsuited to the new economy.

For the sake of efficiency and budding market competition, the state re-evaluated its workforce and reinstated patriarchal values such as a woman's appropriate place was in the home. The new freedom from labor bureau control enabled businesses to strategically select their employees, thus leading to discrimination. According to Edward Friedman, the state's employment of women in the communes during the pre-reform era was seen as excessive and unnecessary (Friedman 1995; 157). With the onset of Deng's reform and China's transition to a capitalist society, state-owned businesses strived to profit with the most qualified and lucrative resources, which they considered to be men. Women were seen as less productive and not as capable of performing tasks similar to men, and as a result, many lost their jobs (Friedman 1995: 157). Given the liberty to employ whomever they desired, numerous businesses demoted those already in the workforce or overlooked women seeking employment when presented with eligible male candidates. Moreover, the state encouraged women to return home and allow males more opportunities for employment in the public sphere. Pulled back into the realm of tradition, many women lost their previous status that had been so rewarding -- gender equality and the ability to work beyond the domestic domain. However, moving back into the household sphere did alleviate their double burden of work and domestic duties. In general, men were primarily encouraged to work to their utmost capacity while women returned to their homes. Society regarded women who relieved the pressure on jobs by staying home as patriotic and in support of the advancement of the capitalist society. Harking back to traditional values, their duties at home included nurturing their sons to be more qualified and competent when they entered the labor force. Although Deng's transition to a market economy gradually facilitated China's development into a more modern society, traditional values of male dominance continued to prevail in rural areas. For those unable to experience the direct advantages of the

market economy, the pendulum swung back to a more traditional society, and women were hampered in their struggle for liberation.

Even though a patriarchal society continued to prevail in areas that did not experience the direct effects of the emerging market economy, the regions that were affected underwent several dramatic transformations. This included greater opportunities for women's career and greater ability to fulfill individual needs. Many of those adjustments were a result of the party's retreat from control over private life and its encouragement of the pursuit of personal happiness. An increased tolerance of different values and personal freedom and a shift from a solely male-dominated society are evident in China's gradual transformation to a capitalistic culture. A more pluralized society and a growing private sector in the city facilitated the changes that women experienced.

For some women, especially those in the urban areas, their traditional status in the community was elevated with Deng's reforms despite the pressure to return to a traditional domestic role. For once, women were permitted to receive an education similar to men. China reinstated its focus on intellectuals in the 1980s when it pushed to provide more opportunities for higher education for both men and women. Despite rural women's relative inability to gain access to higher learning, some urban women took advantage of the state's offer and thus obtained almost identical edification as men (Parish/Busse 2000: 229). The professional jobs they gained because of their higher education took them out of the home and gave them greater economic security. Although women were encouraged to stay in the domestic sphere in the beginning of Deng's reform, and women's participation in the light industries only increased 3.3 percent during that time (Brugger 1994: 299), women's representation in white-collar and professional jobs increased tremendously between 1982 and 1995. The new market economy

produced more job opportunities for women. As a result, almost all fields experienced an increase of women in the workforce. The sole field that experienced a decrease in female participation was in the heavy industries. Women abandoned manual labor to pursue careers in sales and other white-collar jobs. With their higher education, many women shifted careers from those in the agricultural fields to more professional white-collar related occupations such as those in sales and technical arenas (Parish/Busse 2000: 225). Women's enthusiasm for their relatively modern careers persuaded them to continue working; a majority of women became unwilling to leave their jobs after marriage and childbirth (Parish/Busse 2000: 230). The new market economy also provided women with more opportunities for personal gratification by granting them the opportunity for higher learning which in part, exposed them to a wide variety of possibilities for their future.

Many women found employment in the "pink-collar" labor force which consisted of jobs in the sales, clerical, and service sectors. An analogy to blue- and white-collar jobs, pink-collar jobs required less training and skills than white-collar jobs, offered lower wages, and were generally undertaken by women. These fresh job opportunities inspired women to use their earnings to satisfy personal goals. In conjunction with women's switch to more professional jobs, their incomes increased as well. Rather than work-points from the old communist system, women were now earning tangible cash benefits. This new system granted them the liberty of controlling the expenditure of their disposable income; it not only offered more choices and freedom but also empowered many women. The increased opportunities for women helped to spur the development of a women's activist movement. Along with their improved chances for better employment, women's increased awareness of their issues also encouraged them to be more critical of their conditions and treatment by society. In the previous decades, women

would have accepted their jobs and social situations without question. However, as the state withdrew formal support of women's rights and gender equality, women began to debate and contemplate issues they had not previously addressed.

Women During the Market Reform in the 1990s

Social changes in the 1990s reflect the Chinese government's response to the developing gender discrimination that occurred in a number of companies. As mentioned above, many state-owned businesses laid women off in order to generate maximum profit. In response to this recurrent issue, the state passed the 1992 Women's Law which effectively promoted the protection and support of women's rights in all realms of life – politics, society, economics, and culture. From this time onward, women were able to defend their rights as women in court. As Elisabeth Croll points out, the ratification of the Women's Law formally acknowledged the difference between the genders and addresses women's individual needs and interests (Croll 1995: 144). The renewed differentiation between the genders both physically and socially resulting from this law allows women to express their femininity more freely.

After years of living in a severely gender-neutral society, women's desire to express their femininity was evident. In conjunction with the growing consumer market, exposure to global forces, and increased standard of living, women began to concern themselves with fashion and make-up, both of which had been considered suspect during the Mao era. A product of the market economy, the return of gender distinctions helped to facilitate women's conventional beautification and adornment. The market economy courted women's desires to consume as females and regain the femininity they had lost due to Mao's revolution. This symbiotic relationship between the new economy and the expression of being feminine allowed for

separate markets to surface that catered to women's demands and lifestyles. The recent Women's Law, changes in the economy, and a profit-driven desire to cater to women's needs all strengthened women's efforts to reclaim their femininity and maintain independence.

ACWF: Current developments

In response to Deng's reforms, the mission of the ACWF changed in order to better serve women's needs and improve their quality of life. The developments of the organization mirrored major changes in Chinese society. While the ACWF promoted Party policies and political awareness during Mao's rule, the Women's Federation addressed the issues of discrimination that appeared in sectors such as employment, the household, and education during Deng's period. In the 1980s, members of the ACWF directed their attention to primary issues including protecting and educating women about their legal rights, improving family life and young children's education, and reducing the hardship of poverty by encouraging work in the courtyard economy, thus increasing women's job prospects (Jacka 1997: 93-95). During the last decades of the twentieth century, women's status gradually increased and is still escalating today. A successful campaign (1991-2001) identified as "double study, double compete," referred to women's study of culture and technology while also competing in results and contributions. The campaign's approach aimed to improve women's marketable skills (Jacka 1997: 96). By continuing to encourage women to strengthen their abilities, the Chinese government once again acknowledged the importance of achieving gender equality.

Today, the ACWF continues to develop in conjunction with the shifting society and caters to women influenced by the market economy and globalization. The ACWF is in the process of targeting the more contemporary post-Mao women who are struggling with the demands of urban living by broadening its locations to more urban sites (Judd 2002: 173).

Among the major concerns urban women face today are job security, childcare, and maintaining consumer-led lifestyles. Furthermore, although the ACWF still maintains its role as the chief link between women at the grassroots level and the government, it has gradually moved to recognize itself as a more autonomous organization as the reform period progresses. In its responses to Deng's reforms and the subsequent influence of the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), the ACWF has evolved to identify itself as an independent NGO, despite its governmental ties (Wesoky 2002: 174). This new approach has enabled the ACWF to concentrate more on women's issues than on promoting governmental policies. In addition, societal rather than political influence is likely to shift the vertical hierarchical relationship between the state and ACWF to a more horizontal same-level status (Jin 2001: 137). While the state and ACWF collaborated under Deng's reign, the government's increasing leniency and internal changes to the structure of the ACWF have collectively paved the way toward greater independence for the organization.

The ACWF has employed various means to establish connections with other women's groups. One mechanism used to advocate and educate women about their rights is the Federation's magazine *Women in China (Zhongguo Funü)*. Acting as a "forum for the discussion and analysis of [these] new standards, [it] facilitates a nationwide 'exchange of experiences,' [and provides] an avenue of communication" (Croll 1978: 230). This literary publication has aided in the transformation of the Federation's goals and promotes their most recent plans. The ACWF's active pursuit to acquire a broad spectrum of resources creates a more equal relationship with a variety of women's groups across the nation (Jin 2001: 137). The Federation's projects and agenda contribute to their position as the chief link in the women's network of organizations.

China's transitions -- from a strictly patriarchal society, to a communist state that focused on attaining gender equality, to one that concentrated upon meeting the standards of a capitalist society -- have revolutionized women's status in society. Although considered nearly identical to men during Mao's revolution, women nevertheless experienced new feelings of liberation from the restrictive traditional environment that once ruled their lives. For the first time, they were employed and contributed to family life not only by acting as a wife and mother but also by playing the role of a provider. Deng's reforms steered women's lives in another direction. Even though society's reformation prompted the restoration of gender distinction and some women suffered from the repercussions of the return to a male-dominated society, others clearly benefited. They created personal spaces by fulfilling their individual needs and assuming responsibility for their own lives. Currently, the ACWF serves to improve women's skills and protect their rights, while also functioning as a moderator between women's groups and those they aim to assist. An indispensable resource, China's largest women's NGO is crucial to the development of the Chinese women's movement and provides comprehensive support for women throughout the nation.

Chapter 3: Globalization and Influences from Abroad

The increasing number of NGOs in China's emerging civil society evidences their status as a new social force. NGOs in China range from organizations with direct affiliation with the government (such as the ACWF) to popular organizations that have registered with a work-unit (the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center for example) to unregistered groups that have been founded and are run by ordinary citizens (such as Common Language, a lesbian NGO in Beijing). The growing number of organizations increased channels for public participation, empowering NGOs with the ability to influence government policies. After the changes in China's political and social spheres in 1978, the state began to withdraw from many social and economic domains. The government has begun to call upon a growing number of state-supported organizations to manage important matters such as social welfare services and government spending (Lu 2007). This partially-relaxed attitude of the government over social and economic issues finally gave ordinary citizens some freedom to control how their actions would impact society. People began organizing groups to serve the needs and interests which the government had not sufficiently addressed. Some NGOs focused on the rising demands of the budding migrant population, while others placed more emphasis upon meeting people's psychological needs or addressing various environmental issues. By attending to the swelling number of issues that have accompanied the economic reforms, NGOs are playing a more significant and vital role within local populations.

However, despite the surface cordiality between NGOs and the government, the state actually regards them as a potential threat and maintains regulations that control the legal status of many of these organizations. State policy asserts that all social organizations must fulfill two obligations to be considered official: register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and obtain

sponsorship from a government work-unit. While some organizations have already established or can easily acquire the relevant ties, a majority of groups cannot do so because of their inability to fulfill one or both requirements. In fact, many organizations do not trouble themselves to register with the government for two reasons. First, it is often easier to simply register as a business with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce instead of struggling to locate an agreeable work-unit and then registering with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. For example, the Beijing Cultural Development Center for Rural Women is registered with a business entity, the Changping Branch of Beijing Industrial and Commercial Administrative Bureau. Second, due to state regulations that limit the registration of only one NGO per rural or urban district (Lorenz 2006), a majority of NGOs are not even able to acquire an official NGO status. Ironically, however, organizations that do not register actually possess much more freedom to promote and implement activities of their own choosing. Thus, although the government's attempts to maintain ties to such organizations are aimed at preventing the developing civil society from shaking up government authority, the strict regulations to obtain legal NGO status actually foster the autonomy of numerous groups.

The growth of the NGO network was further spurred in September 1995 when China hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) and the parallel NGO Forum. This event opened the door for women's activist movements in China. A number of lectures played a significant role in addressing gender discrimination and inequality issues that emerged with the economic reform. The Chinese government took the initiative by bidding to host the FWCW in 1991 in an attempt to improve the world's view of China. By staging the conference, China hoped to change its global image after the historic 1989 Tiananmen Square incident where Chinese guards killed student protestors (Wang, Z. 1996: 193). The country initially lacked an

appreciation of the concept of NGOs, and this ignorance produced uncertainty within the government (Wesoky 2002: 176). The state's intention to host the NGO Forum stemmed from the country's sense of responsibility to better understand the exact workings of NGOs. Originally concerned that the Forum might be "an international threat to China's political stability [and] state control of power" (Wang, Z. 1996: 196), the state anticipated protests, prohibited the participation of foreign journalists (Wang, Z. 1996: 196), and even relocated the NGO Forum to Huairou which is located at a considerable distance from the conference's location in Beijing (Chow 1996: 189). Furthermore, the Party monitored the activities of its attendants and limited the number of Chinese participants to 5,000 (Milwertz 2002: 119). Only Chinese citizens with Party membership and who were selectively chosen by the government could partake in conference activities (Chow 1996: 190). In spite of the government's restraint on activity during the conferences, the FWCW and Forum's programs ran smoothly and were a huge success in exposing and educating local women about the concept of civil society and the emerging international women's movement.

Preparatory meetings prior to the actual conference informed Chinese women and activists about NGO procedures and objectives. The structure of the conference not only benefited participants but also educated China about the benefits of NGOs and current women's issues. The FWCW even clarified the misunderstanding that China had of NGOs. Before the conference, many people associated NGOs with illegal activity and automatically assumed that all NGOs were in opposition to the government. As a result, they did not trust or acknowledge them. However, their newfound understanding after the conference enabled women to embrace the concept of NGOs. Chinese women were exposed not only to NGOs but also to a wide variety of social issues. By publicly discussing topics that had never before been freely

discussed in public, the FWCW opened the door for women's activism (Wang, Z. 1996: 195) as well as heightened gender awareness and perception (Wang, Z. 1996: 199). Above all, both the FWCW and the NGO Forum alerted the general public to women's issues that had arisen as a result of the reforms. After the meetings in 1995, women and men alike understood more about a number of current concerns related to women which included domestic violence, exploitative labor conditions, and gender differentiation. The conference focused its attention on meeting women's fundamental needs as well as addressing problems such as the oppression of women (Chow 1996: 187). At the Forum, each women's NGO was obliged to host a workshop or seminar addressing social issues specifically addressed by their organization (Liu 2001: 149). One example of a program to enhance women's role in society was the "Women's Eyes on the World Bank Campaign." In this program, women were encouraged to monitor the World Bank's performance and instill a "gender perspective in Bank policies and programs" (Moghadam 2005: 122). Both specific seminars and the conference as a whole exposed Chinese women and men to a civil society that would serve to redefine the social status of contemporary women.

In addition to the significance placed upon women's issues in China, the FWCW and Forum facilitated Chinese women's increased participation in the global women's movement by establishing relations with international organizations. The slogan for the Forum, *Jiēguì*, which translates to "connect the rails," applies to the merger of domestic women's groups and NGOs with foreign women's organizations (Wang, Z. 1996: 195). This increase in contact with international NGOs is one of the major successes of the FWCW and Forum. Connections between Chinese organizations and international groups definitely influenced women in a positive sense. The meager media coverage in China about the conference required many activists to share their beneficial experiences with women around the world by means of hotlines

and international lectures (Milwertz 2002: 47-48). These activities consolidated supporters and produced an international network intended to remedy women's difficulties. The explosion of support and collaboration from the conference produced an agenda for women's empowerment, known as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Wang, Z. 1996: 198). The mission statement of the Beijing Platform for Action asserts the

“principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities... A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is a condition for people-centered sustainable development” (Moghadam 2005: 12).

As an international declaration, the Platform helped to bring awareness to the global issues of equality and justice for men and women all around the world. The reality that even developed countries identified gender inequality as a pressing problem legitimized China's issues regarding gender. By treating the situations in developed countries as a model, China gave the ideas of the conference more credence and consideration.

After the conference, heightened women's actions across the globe illustrated the significant impact of the FWCW on women. One of the major outcomes of the conference is explained when a female academic articulates the chief purpose of the convention: “The greatest inspiration the women's conference gave to people is that we should look at things with a gender perspective” (Wang, Z. 1996: 199). After returning home from the FWCW, many women stressed the principle of incorporating gender views into Chinese society. The Chinese government's commitment to addressing the growing concerns regarding females facilitated discussions of the development of the status of women and their issues (Wang, J. 1996: 498).

Previously, women had reluctantly accepted their fates as housewives or as unemployed women, but since the FWCW, women have continually gained confidence and defended their rights to work outside the home. The FWCW initiated a movement within China to fight against the inequality and lack of visibility of women consequent of the reforms and encouraged women to establish a platform on which to create organizations dedicated to educating and serving women in need.

The NGO Forum inspired women to establish and develop small grassroots organizations in order to address the many growing women's issues. Grassroots and domestic women's groups surfaced primarily after the 1995 FWCW and NGO Forum. Only after those two events did women realize the importance of NGOs and their potential benefits for women. In their hastened efforts to build a secure network of women's NGOs for the NGO Forum, Chinese authorities waived the stringent registration process for many local women's organizations (Howell 2003: 204). Because of this exemption, many women's groups did not register and as a result, it is unclear as to the number of organizations in China dedicated to advocating for women's rights and interests. At the time Howell wrote her article in 2003, she states that the ACWF encompasses about 50,000 women's associations at all levels (Howell 2003: 196). As the ACWF is currently still in the progress of severing its official ties with the government, it is erroneous to categorize those 50,000 groups as true NGOs. However, a newsflash printed in late 2006 quotes a Chinese human rights researcher saying that more than 10,000 NGOs are committed to supporting women's rights ("Over" 24 Nov. 2006). The ambiguity in defining an NGO truly complicates the matter of totaling the number of legitimate NGOs devoted to serving women's demands, although it is safe to say that the phenomenon of women's groups springing

up throughout the country indicates the rapid pace at which women have begun to organize themselves.

Women's NGOs constantly challenge the relationship between the Party-state and civil society. Varying degrees of tensions exist between the state and women's groups. While the ACWF at one extreme serves as the government's direct connection with Chinese women, other women's NGOs – such as Smile, a group specifically for women with HIV/AIDS – enjoy the support of government organizations or work-units. Other popular organizations reside next in this continuum, while totally autonomous women's groups place themselves at the farthest extreme from the government (Howell 2003: 205). Common Language, an NGO for lesbians based in Beijing, is an example of an unregistered group that seems to have no affiliations with the government. The increasing number of independent women's organizations continuously challenges the state's control over the women's realm in the civil society. These types of groups promote the expansion of NGO culture and redefine the state's role in the new society. While the government and ACWF collaborate to execute long-term programs and policies to benefit women, women's organizations, casual salons, and informal groups work collectively to provide immediate protection and other services for Chinese women. As many local women's groups have neither the authority nor resources to implement major initiatives, they attend to women's more specific and practical needs by offering services such as hotlines, training sessions, lectures, and a host of various activities. These grassroots organizations not only serve to protect women but also legitimize women's space in society.

The operation and success of many women's NGOs is generally dependent on outside funding derived from numerous international and private sources. The international NGO Forum and FWCW introduced many domestic women's groups to organizations and foundations in the

international domain. This led to a number of Chinese groups establishing transnational ties with foreign institutions. As a result, women's NGOs in China have expanded and conducted a wide variety of programs they never believed possible before 1995. Some of these activities include facilitating the establishment of organizations, various training courses, poverty-reduction projects, healthcare programs, and the establishment of funds for specific marginalized female communities. Local women's groups strive to enrich their programs by applying for grants provided by benefactors such as the Ford Foundation, Asia Foundation, and numerous United Nations funds. Occasionally, international organizations will co-host a conference with domestic women's groups in China. For example, in order to host its lesbian camp in 2007, Common Language applied to and successfully obtained funding from three international organizations: the Global Fund for Women based in California, New York's Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, and Mama Cash, a Dutch foundation (Xian, Aug. 6, 2007, personal communication). On rare occasions, private individuals donate sizeable sums to specific women's groups. Just as the introduction of NGOs to China was dependent on the international conferences in 1995, women's groups today still rely on foreign support to exist and function.

The new social problems that have surfaced with the economic reforms heightened the demand for NGOs, many of which seek aid from international groups outside of China. Although the 1978 reforms have granted women more independence from the government and opportunities to pursue personal interests, the new society also creates less positive phenomena such as the development of women's psychological problems, the manifestation of gender inequality, and the commodification of women. Market forces have further weakened women's already traditionally inferior status by indirectly marginalizing some female communities even more. Women with HIV/AIDS and lesbians are two such groups that have been negatively

impacted by the new economy. Society neglects to provide the support demanded by women living with HIV/AIDS and does not acknowledge the existence of the lesbian population. Lastly, women have also organized to address other issues such as those involving the maltreatment of migrant women.

Several NGOs have emerged primarily to attend to women who have moved from their rural homes to cities in order to make a living. The hardships they face include unequal access to healthcare benefits, sexual harassment, and the inability to gain permanent urban status in the hukou system. In Beijing alone, the Cultural Development Center for Rural Women assists migrant women from the countryside to adjust to urban life, and the Practical Skills Training Center for Rural Women teaches women general tasks which will assist them in finding employment. Such skills include hair styling and waitressing (Chen Shanshan, Aug. 1, 2007, personal communication). West China Sichuan Relief Center for Migrant Workers focuses on settling conflicts between migrant workers and the government (Froissart 2006: 209-210).

NGOs are also assisting urban women who are struggling to survive in the male-dominated, market-oriented society. Women's benefits formerly guaranteed in the workforce have decreased as a result of the economy's reorganization. The recent profit-making objectives of companies have for the most part eliminated the perks of paid menstrual or maternity leaves (Liu 2002). Women's organizations such as the prestigious Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University strive to advocate for the rights of women and provide legal aid and assistance to address some of these inequities. As lawyers, members of the organization defend women in legal court cases. They also host training sessions to spread and exchange their knowledge with other lawyers and with women's groups around the world. Because many women are laid off as a result of companies' profit-making nature and desire to

employ the most qualified workers, increasing poverty levels among women is another unending battle in which they fight to overcome. The government has actually worked with several NGOs to implement the "Poverty-Reduction Action for Women" agenda. This program provides small loans, facilitates the alleviation of poverty-stricken communities, and introduces women on the east coast who are in need of employment to western cities that are in need of workers ("Gender" 7 Sept. 2005). The rising number and increasing variety of issues affecting urban women across the nation provide the basis for the growth of NGOs that address such matters.

Another important topic of interest that the government has not fully addressed is that of women's healthcare. The focus placed upon developing the economy and capitalist society has consequently led to the neglect of promoting healthy living. A number of women's groups have surfaced in response to the growing demand for healthcare, health education, and psychological support. Many NGOs implement educational programs in rural and urban communities to inform women about family planning, preventing venereal diseases and HIV/AIDS, and general protection of one's body. While the Jinglun Family Center aims to educate women and children about their rights in relation to government policies, the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center in Beijing provides services to females in need through hotlines, psychological counseling, and community-based activities. Smile is another group that offers emotional and educational support exclusively for women with HIV/AIDS. The gender discrimination experienced by many women in the workforce plays a crucial factor in women's growing psychological needs. As more and more women are laid off or are experiencing pressures from home or work, they are more inclined to fall into depression or develop severe mental problems. After the onset of economic reforms, women's health has grown to be a significant issue and a topic that women's NGOs are striving to address fully. In sum, new

influences from abroad such as the FWCW and NGO Forum have opened the door to the growth of NGOs and relevant networks in China. Common Language is currently a major grassroots NGO that serves the lesbian population in Beijing. Women living with HIV/AIDS have a number of sources for HIV/AIDS support; however, Smile is the only organization in Beijing that focuses entirely on women (Xia Jing, July 27, 2007, personal communication). These two organizations will be further examined in the following chapters.

Chapter 4: Lesbians and *Common Language*

Attitudes Toward Lesbians in China

Current attitudes: Elements that have created a restrictive and oppressive environment

Foreign influences that flooded Chinese society after Deng's reforms drastically impacted Chinese views of the formally taboo subject of homosexuality. Prior to the 1990s, lesbians were seldom acknowledged in society, and ordinary people claimed ignorance and failed to acknowledge the existence of the population that existed silently amongst them. These perspectives were further perpetuated by the government, which prohibited openly homosexual behavior because homosexuality challenged the traditional Confucian views of marriage and filial piety. In fact, homosexuality was officially classified as a mental illness in the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders until as late as April 2001 ("Quiet" 26 Dec. 2005). Despite being governed (and virtually repressed) by such a conservative value system, the landscape of gender politics in China witnessed a change in the mid-1990s, with the advent of the FWCW and NGO Forum in 1995. The FWCW and NGO Forum created a social space for Chinese lesbians to "come out of the closet" by exposing participants to the successful integration of homosexuals in other countries via case studies and other examples such as international lesbian movements and organizations (Wan 2001: 50). The NGO Forum in particular provided Chinese lesbians with the confidence and necessary knowledge to start their own NGOs. However, as many lesbians are still uncertain of the government's opinion on homosexuality, a number of these NGOs operate underground. Despite this and other related obstacles, lesbian groups are slowly growing in number and are making an impression in lesbian communities throughout the nation (Chen 2006: 122).

Confucian beliefs, still prevalent in Chinese society, continue to make it difficult for lesbians to come out in society. Even though today's growing number of professional women challenges China's conventional male-dominated hierarchy, a majority of Chinese families still run a strictly patriarchal household. There is strong pressure on women to perform domestic duties. Among these, the most important is bearing children. For women, fulfilling the demands of filial piety includes marrying into a stable family and more importantly, producing a male heir. As a result, a number of lesbians feel trapped by these cultural norms. They are pressured into leading lives they do not want for themselves, marrying men and denying their own sexual preferences.

If the identity of lesbians was publicly known, society would regard them as outcasts and discriminate against them. The significance placed upon marriage causes society to regard anyone who does not conform to conventional patterns to be subject to intolerance. Because a majority of the Chinese population still does not understand homosexuality, ordinary people do not want to associate with lesbians; they consider them to be "eccentrics" (Chen 2006: 118). Even the Chinese Psychiatric Association considered homosexuality to be a mental disease as late as 2001. This attitude discourages lesbians from coming out in society, and as a result, no one knows they exist. Official newspapers still do not openly discuss lesbians' status in society (Wesoky 2002: 229). Thus, society's ignorance of homosexuality perpetuates lesbians' withdrawal from the public view.

Current situation

However, in the past fifteen to twenty years, many lesbians have discovered they can relieve some of their tension online. The movement to open up China in the last decades of the twentieth century coupled with recent technology advancements has created the medium of and

spaces for virtual communication. Lesbian chatrooms have played a major role in cultivating China's hidden lesbian community and continue to do so in the present. Lesbian women can freely express their emotions by interacting with their fellows through online lesbian forums. This way, they can empathize with each other and discuss the difficulties of leading double lives (Xiang 2006). They are also able to share tactics in how to satisfy their sexual desires while still publicly demonstrating heterosexual behavior. Some women join these networks with the sole intention of establishing rapport with other lesbians while others want to find girlfriends. A few lesbians even go on to meet their online lovers in person and maintain furtive physical relationships (Xian, Aug. 6, 2007, personal communication). However, cyberspace is the only channel in which they can freely interact and empathize with other lesbians struggling with issues of identity without jeopardizing their public identity as straight women. Nevertheless, there has been some progress. The Chinese government has removed homosexuality from its list of mental diseases, and society is slowly learning about and accepting lesbians as normal people; these changes can be accredited to the FWCW and NGO Forum in 1995.

The impact of foreign influence

The FWCW and NGO Forum in Beijing made a significant breakthrough in how Chinese society views lesbians. The efforts to promote lesbian culture during the mid-1990s corresponded with the global women's movement. The FWCW highlighted lesbian issues including discrimination and pressure to conform to social norms, while the NGO Forum stressed the importance of organizing for visibility. Lesbians from around the globe gathered together at the conference to share their experiences and learn about their rights. The topics addressed at the FWCW enlightened many women, both Chinese and international, about the hardships that lesbians face. Among the line of "diversity" tents at the Forum stood the "lesbian

tent,” which drew a large crowd. The tent served as a safe haven for lesbians who related to other closeted lesbians facing identity issues and who sought support and orientation to the lesbian scene. Lesbians talked with fellow Forum participants and the media, while lesbian information sessions educated attendees and curious onlookers about lesbianism. This method of propagation was invaluable; Chinese participants could see firsthand that the international lesbian society consisted of happy normal women of different ages and from all countries (Wilson 1996: 215). The Chinese discovered that with the exception of to whom they were attracted, lesbians were no different from other women. The warm welcome from the broader NGO community and engaging nature of the tent demonstrated the importance of lesbianism in the wider international context. The increased awareness about lesbian issues consequently raised Chinese women’s knowledge about homosexuality, and many of the attendees began to accept lesbians as normal people.

In conjunction with the FWCW and NGO Forum, China’s contacts with the outside world have initiated the nation’s gradually increasing tolerance toward lesbians. The influxes of overseas cultures and foreigners have increased China’s exposure to and knowledge of lesbians. Current discussions of the topic by outsiders and liberal Chinese citizens also continue to generate more interest amongst the general Chinese population. Chinese people today are increasingly gaining knowledge about lesbians through foreign influences such as the television series *The L Word*. Global organizations also help to boost Chinese lesbians’ confidence and heighten awareness in Chinese society. Such groups include the International Lesbian and Gay Association, Amnesty International, and other human rights groups, all of which simultaneously work to promote the international gay and lesbian movement (Wan 2001: 50). Additionally, some Chinese women’s rights activists strive to incorporate lesbians into their various agendas

by addressing lesbian issues. These international influences, most prominently the FWCW and NGO Forum, have dramatically altered China's attitudes toward lesbians.

Solutions

Although lesbian NGOs in China have only surfaced within the past fifteen years and are facing some resistance from the government, organizations are making gradual steps in establishing secure public spaces for lesbians to interact and organize. The first public lesbian meeting in Beijing was held soon after the 1995 FWCW when local lesbians took the opportunity to establish contact with foreign organizations who were still in Beijing (Chen 2006: 122). Afterwards, they began organizing for China's lesbian population. Because of the original negative attitude against lesbians before the conference, lesbian NGOs are often mysterious and usually organize underground. Gay men's groups are more public and ubiquitous only because of their high risk in contracting HIV/AIDS. The lack of experience and funds of lesbian groups restrict them from developing to their fullest extent. Nevertheless lesbian organizations continue to strive to reach out to the Chinese lesbian community.

In 1997, Xian, a Chinese lesbian pursuing study in the United States, created Purple Phoenix, a website that essentially functioned as a virtual NGO. Inspired by lesbian support groups and publications in the US, Purple Phoenix catered to Chinese lesbians and provided relevant information and psychological support through its website and email communication. While Purple Phoenix operated in the virtual arena, Beijing Sisters was the first lesbian NGO based in mainland China. Its goals were simple: to create a network of lesbians so that they would know that they are not alone. Founded in 1998, the organization managed a rudimentary website and hotline, in addition to successfully publishing four issues of their magazine, *Sky*. However, despite the government's seemingly tolerant attitude toward lesbians – as

demonstrated by the recent change of view regarding homosexuality as a mental disease in 2001 – in that same year, the state raided the Lesbian Cultural Festival hosted by Beijing Sisters. One can surmise that the apparent radical nature of the event or the politically sensitive timing prompted the government to shut down the 3-year old group and cause the members to ultimately disperse after this incident (Milwertz 2002: 19; Xian, Aug. 6, 2007, personal communication). Many lesbians feared the government after this incident, and no one organized lesbian activities for a while. Despite these setbacks, Purple Phoenix and Beijing Sisters still made an impact on the previously non-existent lesbian sphere. Today, several lesbian NGOs in China are making efforts to gradually expand lesbian culture. The few lesbian NGOs in operation today generally assist in establishing contact among lesbians and facilitating discussions about various topics of concern to lesbians.

Akin to other organizations, lesbian NGOs reflect social trends that occurred as a result of the market economy and China opening up to outside forces. Women regained their right to express their femininity, and increasing incomes enabled women to satisfy their own womanly needs and interests. Similarly, women created lesbian NGOs to serve their growing needs and to assist in helping lesbians live less stressful lives. Furthermore, Deng's reforms encouraged contact between China and foreign countries. For this reason, international relations between foreigners and Chinese increased, and as a result, China's understanding of lesbianism has deepened. Common Language, a grassroots lesbian organization, provides a window into what is happening in terms of lesbian activism at the present time.

Common Language: A Product of Changing Attitudes

Introduction and structure

My first introduction to Common Language took place in the summer of 2007. When I was interning at the Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University, members of Common Language came into the Legal-Aid Center to seek assistance. Xian, the director of Common Language and founder of Purple Phoenix, had sensed that my fellow intern was a lesbian, and thus, after the meeting, Xian invited her to the Salon. The Salon, also co-founded by Xian, is a weekly gathering on Saturday afternoons for lesbians to discuss lesbian-related issues and share their experiences. As my friend had never been exposed to this type of arena before, she requested my company that Saturday. At the Salon, we were introduced to China's lesbian scene. I initially believed the Salon to be a division of Common Language, however, I soon discovered that although their subject matter overlaps, Common Language is only affiliated to the Salon as a supporter. The Salon is only considered a weekly activity forum within the lesbian community, while Common Language is an established organization that not only addresses lesbian issues but also has an agenda for social change. Once I clearly distinguished the relationship between the Salon and Common Language and learned of Common Language's distinguishing status as the sole lesbian NGO in Beijing, I decided to focus on the organization and its development in Beijing's suppressed lesbian community.

Common Language is the only operating lesbian group in Beijing as of August 2007 that focuses on serving the capital's lesbian population (Xian, Aug. 6, 2007, personal communication). The absence of an actual office and its operation out of a room in Xian's apartment illustrates Common Language's limited funding but determined attitude. As it is a project-led organization, Common Language does not maintain conventional office hours or

scheduled activities. Each year, the organization implements a couple of programs that concentrate on improving specific aspects of lesbian life, such as researching the realities of domestic violence or funding the start-up costs of smaller lesbian NGOs throughout China.

The name of Xian's organization, Common Language, conveys the principal message and goal of the group in two ways. First, the Chinese translation of "lesbian" can be expressed as "Tong Nü," while "Common Language" translates to "Tong Yu." Verbally, these two phrases sound almost identical. The double entendre symbolizes lesbians' desire to maintain a universal discourse with China, especially concerning tolerance for homosexuality. Common Language aims to change China's societal and political attitudes toward homosexuality; it hopes to address lesbians' issues by influencing legal policies. The organization hopes to encourage new lesbians to participate in the public sphere, advocate for their rights, and join the fight for tolerance and social equality. Encouraged by new openness on the part of the Chinese government and society, Common Language aspires to increase people's tolerance and respect for all diversities, particularly marginalized populations and those subjected to injustice.

Unlike most women in China who were introduced to the concept of NGOs at the FWCW and NGO Forum, Xian familiarized herself with the idea while she was abroad in America. While in the US, she had worked with a few LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) student groups and even attempted to locate LGBT NGOs in China. When she discovered that a number of gay men's groups – as a result of their AIDS situation – existed, but not a single effective lesbian organization was in operation in her home country, Xian knew she had found her calling. Xian believed a lesbian organization would have great potential for development. Even before she returned back to China in 2004, she had plans to set up a lesbian group in Beijing, a city she speculated to have a moderately-sized population of gay women.

Once Xian returned to China, she was delighted to learn that Beijing had already begun to develop an NGO community, and ordinary people had begun to understand lesbians. Xian consulted a few experts on NGOs for the homosexual community for suggestions on how to create her group. Despite their lack of positive suggestions, Xian persevered, established contact with local lesbians, and ultimately commenced organizing.

When Xian called for volunteers to help start up Common Language, there was no shortage of support. Her colleagues and friends in America enthusiastically provided financial aid while local lesbians supplied emotional and physical help during her efforts. At least twenty volunteers attended the first meeting, and since then, over one hundred people have offered and provided assistance (Xian, Aug. 6, 2007, personal communication). Xian and An Ke, another lesbian organizer, faced obstacles, though, when they had started up the Salon a few months previously. An alternative to internet chatrooms and lesbian bars which cater to the more carefree younger generation, the weekly Salon serves as an informal arena for older more settled Beijing lesbians, generally between the ages of mid-twenties to mid-forties, to interact and discuss important issues such as self-identity and family pressures. They also share their experiences, relax, and learn about different aspects of lesbian life. Some of the subjects discussed include relationships, cultural events, and government policies. In one instance when I attended the Salon in August 2007, a straight woman talked about her mother who turned out to be lesbian. Another week, Xian shared photos and her experiences from Common Language's Lesbian Camp of which she had organized. On average, about forty people go to the Salon (An Ke, Aug. 4, 2007, personal communication), but because of the novelty of this concept, Xian mentioned that about eight months passed before the Salon gradually became reputable and acknowledged. On the other hand, Common Language enjoyed a relatively smooth start because

the Salon had already established a reputation in the lesbian community. The FWCW also played a significant factor in helping Common Language prevail, as it helped develop the lesbian movement in China and gave lesbians more confidence in coming out to the public, or at least in lesbian-accepted places.

A majority of the volunteers that contributed their efforts during Common Language's early stages were young and lacked experience. The first National Lesbian Empowerment Conference that they hosted in 2005 exemplified their inexperience, in regards to logistics and planning. Volunteers were busy organizing activities for forty lesbians from fifteen different provinces ("News" ITS). The enthusiastic nature of the many volunteers, however, demonstrated their excitement in contributing to the emerging lesbian activities that had been absent for so long. Currently, over one hundred volunteers offer their services and support to Common Language. With its comprehensive directory of supporters, Common Language operates a national lesbian network, and oversees a number of different projects, such as an anti-domestic violence program and small grant project, that serve to benefit the domestic lesbian community. The number of volunteers associated with the organization at any one time depends on the events at that time. Generally, projects employ roughly ten to fifteen volunteers. About six to seven long-term stable volunteers operate Common Language while a majority of volunteers contribute to one or two projects.

Operations

As a project-based organization, Common Language is dissimilar from typical NGOs for it does not have a specific structure or routine. The abundance of volunteers and connections with established or emerging lesbian groups across the nation have secured Common Language's position as a hub for China's lesbian network. Through word of mouth and website

communication, Common Language has obtained the support of various organizations and individuals in China. Each year, Common Language works with a number of groups to execute programs that benefit and educate society. They work with LGBT student groups on college campuses to better inform student bodies about lesbians and the issues they face. By donating reading materials and small funds to support the activities of LGBT student groups, Common Language proceeds to raise lesbian consciousness. For three consecutive years since 2006 and in conjunction with Ai Bai, an AIDS group, Common Language has hosted a rainbow kite-flying event in June to represent Gay Pride Month. Common Language, the Salon, and a lesbian magazine *LES+* work together to organize a formidable lesbian network in Beijing. While the Salon is a space for peer support, *LES+* is a magazine catering to China's lesbian population. Started in December 2005 and run by two young lesbian women Sam and GoGo, *LES+* is a bimonthly magazine that includes articles and information for lesbians. Common Language's hub status helps distribute the magazine throughout China and thus broadens the country's lesbian community.

With funding from international foundations, Common Language also implements research projects and specific programs to guide and serve China's lesbian population. In 2005, their research on lesbian health enabled members of Common Language to address lesbian health issues and concerns. 2007 and 2008 have witnessed the start of two major long-term projects: the Anti-Domestic Violence Program and the Lesbian Community Organizing Project.

The Anti-Domestic Violence Program is currently in its first stage of surveying lesbians and incidences of domestic violence in their lives, be it between lesbians in same-sex relationships, lesbians and family members, or lesbians and their heterosexual partners. The data obtained from the survey will enable Common Language to compile a handbook of domestic

violence information to distribute to the lesbian community. Stage two of the program will entail hosting a series of workshops for lesbians and non-lesbians. Members of Common Language plan to educate Chinese society about the severity of domestic violence, especially in same-sex relationships. They also hope to heighten the general public's awareness and teach lesbians how to mentally and physically defend themselves in such situations.

The Lesbian Community Organizing Project utilizes Common Language's position as a hub to provide small grants to startup lesbian organizations throughout China. In 2004, there were no applicants for the small grant project, but as of August 2007, twelve groups throughout China had applied, with over half of them founded in the past year (Xian, Aug. 6, 2007, personal communication). Xian hopes that Common Language will serve as a model for other emerging lesbian organizations. Members of Common Language hope to offer technical and financial support in addition to practical advice helping each organization cater to their local lesbian community. As one NGO in Beijing is not sufficient to provide for China's lesbian population, Xian's goal is to expand the lesbian network and encourage more lesbians to organize, unify, and together voice lesbians' needs.

Common Language is not a publicly registered NGO for two specific reasons. First, as mentioned above, attaining official NGO status is difficult as they are all technically related to the government. Xian feels that despite the focus of the NGO, it is crucial to maintain ties to the government in order to receive significant government funding. Second, even though registering an NGO is difficult and requires the approval of different government branches, the primary reason why Common Language still retains an unregistered status is because of the sensitivity and unique nature of the subject. Lesbianism is still considered a novel concept by the government, and the state does not know how to handle NGOs that are too liberal and could

potentially disrupt society. Common Language informs the media of some of its events, however more often than not, the organization only publicizes through Beijing's lesbian website (<http://www.lalabar.com>), which was originally started by the Salon's co-founder An Ke for exclusive use by the lesbians of the Salon. Eventually An Ke permitted Common Language to post on the website and now, a number of lesbian groups such as Common Language and the lesbian magazine *LES+* employ the website. Lalabar.com allows the government to access Common Language's agenda without having to confront the group. Xian states that it is not always necessary to call for media attention – the “key for us is to have it happen rather than to let the media know” (Xian, Aug. 6, 2007, personal communication). This strategy relates back to the Cultural Revolution when remaining anonymous among the masses was the only way to survive. Standing out attracts unnecessary government attention that can potentially jeopardize the organization's agenda. The government's passive attitude of neither actively supporting nor condemning lesbian activities and Xian's strategy of focusing on action rather than advertisement enables Common Language to organize events beneficial to the local lesbian community.

Common Language offers various programs and support with limited funding from supportive domestic and international organizations. The group's largest financial supporter is an influential domestic AIDS organization, Ai Zhixing, which has provided assistance since Common Language's establishment. The two organizations even shared an office for a couple years. On a global level, the FWCW and arrival of foreign NGOs a decade before ultimately facilitated the establishment of contacts between Common Language and international foundations. Three international organizations sponsored Common Language's Lesbian Camp in 2007: a California-based foundation called the Global Fund for Women, the Astraea Lesbian

Foundation for Justice in New York, and a Dutch foundation, Mama Cash. Deng's effort to globalize China has effectively promoted transnational correspondence, and this grants lesbian organizations such as Common Language the opportunities to seek the funding they need in order to mature.

Difficulties

Despite the government's nonresistant approach to dealing with lesbians, Common Language still faces difficulties in pursuing their ideal agenda. Limited funding and lack of full-time staff are two key factors that restrict the organization from achieving its full potential. While the government provides support and funding for many grassroots organizations in China, it neglects the lesbian group because of its marginalized status. Common Language must rely on international sources for financial aid. In addition, Common Language cannot expand or implement as many projects as desired because of the shortage of permanent staff or experienced volunteers. Together Eva and Xiao Cao actually constitute about one-third of dedicated reliable volunteers. Common Language's aspirations and plans for the future are too much for the few six or seven devoted volunteers to carry out alone. Many lesbians express interest in helping the organization, but because they lack knowledge in lesbian issues and the internal workings of the NGO, they only contribute superficially. A third hardship for Common Language concerns the notion of visibility. The FWCW effectively raised awareness for lesbians' situations at the time, but the experiences that Common Language faces today exposes society's continuing ignorance and disregard for homosexual women. According to Xian, it is difficult to obtain a great deal of financial support because of the sensitive nature of homosexuality (Xian, Aug. 6, 2007, personal communication). While some foundations and private individuals are willing to fund lesbian activities (such as the Lesbian Camp), a majority of the Chinese population still does not actively

support organizations such as Common Language. Lesbianism is still a relatively new topic in China, and Common Language, as well as its individual members, continues to face the challenges of coming out in China today.

Future

As of now, members of Common Language are taking advantage of the budding social space for lesbians to develop the lesbian community while also educating society about lesbian issues and conditions; this is a monumental task. In response to how she would forecast the future of Common Language, Xian mentioned public advocacy and influencing policies as possible items on the agenda. The lesbian group is currently focusing on community-building activities to educate and alter society's attitude toward lesbians in addition to establishing a network for lesbians in China. In the future, Xian hopes Common Language will develop into a more structured organization with a governing body. Furthermore, she trusts in the future establishment of more lesbian groups within the next five to ten years so that others can assume the responsibilities of organizing lesbian support groups and spaces, and Common Language can focus on public advocacy issues and lobbying for lesbians' rights.

Personal involvement: Volunteers

Currently, the number of lesbians that are actually participating in the Chinese lesbian movement appears to be quite restricted. The relatively small population is reflected in the limited number of interviews I could conduct at Common Language. I was successful in my attempt to locate the NGO's volunteers and gain their perspective of working at a lesbian organization in only two instances. Although six to seven people regularly volunteer at Common Language, that number is not a significant percentage in comparison to the more than one hundred volunteers that have merely offered their services on occasion.

The two interviews I conducted were with Eva, a 26-year old English-speaking bisexual from Macao, and Xiao Cao, a straight male. I interviewed Eva at noon on Tuesday, January 22, 2008. Our conversation took place in an upscale café and lasted one hour and twenty minutes. Two days prior, I had spoken with Xiao Cao for forty minutes about his involvement with Common Language. We conversed in Common Language's makeshift office on the afternoon of Sunday, January 20, 2008. Even though I was only able to conduct two interviews, it became clear from these interviews that their participation with Common Language has changed their lives. Before becoming volunteers at Common Language, Eva and Xiao Cao were both characteristic of the typical Chinese person. They did not actively inquire about lesbian NGOs because they lacked exposure to such groups. Had they not randomly heard about Common Language, both volunteers would have potentially led lives without any association to the organization. However, their current work at Common Language reveals they have assertive personalities. Eva and Xiao Cao are willing to devote the required time and energy to implement programs and manage Common Language's administrative duties in the interest of Common Language's development.

A native of Macao and educated in Shanghai, Eva was first aware of her feelings for other women when she was about sixteen or seventeen (Eva, Jan. 22, 2008, personal communication). Her first female crush in high school exhibited homophobic behavior and rejected her, but Eva believes that there should not be so much emphasis placed on sexual orientation – it does not matter whether they are male or female: “If you like the person, then you like the person” (Eva, Jan. 22, 2008, personal communication). Eva has always been comfortable with her sexual orientation and lucky in that she has not encountered any major obstacles of discrimination or hardship. While she does not dare tell her elderly parents of her

sexual preferences, they accept that there is a slim chance of her getting married. Because she is not pressured in finding a spouse and settling down, Eva is able to satisfy many demands at once. Even though she performed in the play “The Vagina Monologues” until the end of her senior year and brushed aside obligations of finding employment, Eva’s internship at the joint-venture between China Film and Warner Brothers the previous year enabled her to secure a job in Beijing the summer after her graduation in 2005 and consequently led her to Beijing’s Common Language.

Eva, who oversees Common Language’s Anti-Domestic Violence Program, has an activist personality and is very involved with Common Language. Her trajectory of taking on this responsibility is different from her lesbian peers. While some lesbians fear the possible ramifications of publicly displaying lesbian pride and thus do not participate in public activities, many others are unaware or do not actively seek lesbian groups beyond cyberspace. Eva’s recent move to Beijing in 2005 and her limited number of friends in the city prompted a gay friend of hers to introduce her to the Salon. After meeting Xian, interacting with other lesbians at the Salon, and familiarizing herself with Beijing’s lesbian scene, Eva gradually increased her level of participation and contributed to Common Language’s meetings. Eventually, her demonstrated dedication and sound judgment secured Xian’s trust to the extent that she suggested Eva direct the Anti-Domestic Violence Program. Looking for a challenge, and desiring to make a difference, Eva willingly accepted the volunteer position. However, without her friend’s suggestion, Eva never would have begun associating herself with lesbians nor would she have actively sought out a lesbian NGO, and thus would not have found herself responsible for supervising one of Common Language’s major programs.

Eva portrays the model volunteer who invests a great deal of time and energy in Common Language's purpose. Her post-graduate career in 2005 landed her in Beijing at the joint-venture between China Film and Warner Brothers. Although Eva asserts her career is both busy and demanding, one would never guess this given that she commits copious amounts of time to fulfill Common Language's goals. When Xian proposed the idea that Eva should take on the responsibility of directing the Anti-Domestic Violence Program, she thought to herself, "Why not [choose to assume this responsibility]? Life is so boring, and I need a challenge from time to time" (Eva, Jan. 22, 2008, personal communication). In addition to holding a full-time job at the joint-venture and her work for the Anti-Domestic Violence Program, Eva calls monthly meetings, applies for funding, and conducts surveys. Eva's determined and charismatic personality is invaluable to Common Language as there are only a few people with Eva's drive and confidence.

Xiao Cao is another devoted volunteer who also inadvertently discovered Common Language. He is one of the more active members in the lesbian community despite being straight. For as long as he can remember, Xiao Cao has been a firm believer in helping people. After he returned to Beijing in 2001 from his mandatory two-year service in the army, Xiao Cao began volunteering with several marginalized populations, beginning with orphans. However, once he believed people had started to focus an adequate amount of attention to the issue of orphans in society, Xiao Cao shifted to working with NGOs, as he knew they had limited funding. He originally helped at a gay men's NGO, which eventually exposed him to lesbians and their even more stigmatized status within society. In March 2007, Xiao Cao commenced communication with Common Language via letter correspondence. He attended the Salon and acquainted himself with Beijing's lesbians. After several months, Common Language gradually

accepted his help. Because he is a man, however, Xiao Cao is excluded from many activities and formal conferences hosted by Common Language, other LGBT groups, or women's groups. He currently helps from behind the scenes. His duties include managing the website, writing articles, preparing materials for meetings, and conducting research for Common Language's programs. Similar to Eva, in the common run of things Xiao Cao would not have been exposed to, let alone volunteer at, Common Language. These two cases suggest that only by accident do many people become familiar with and start volunteering with NGOs such as Common Language.

Xiao Cao is another rare member of Common Language who devotes much of his time to NGO work and educating society about the lesbian group. The necessity of making a living, however, restrains him from giving Common Language as much time as he would like. Xiao Cao currently allocates half of his time to his temporary job as an administrative assistant to a government-run magazine about elderly healthcare, and the other half to NGO work, currently Common Language. Exposing people to different ideas and increasing their understanding of marginalized populations is a priority for Xiao Cao. When he first started working with Common Language, he wrote letters to the organization expressing his desire to help spread the word about the abandoned lesbian community. Members of Common Language initially mistook him for a student conducting research on the organization, but due to his persistence, they eventually accepted Xiao Cao and his unrelenting spirit. He understands he is "still avant-garde among [his peers who generally] stay on the safe side" (Xiao Cao, Jan. 20, 2008, personal communication). Xiao Cao plays an active role in the lesbian community, even though he does not even identify himself as a member.

The energy and commitment of these two volunteers is impressive. However, a substantial number of today's educated youth choose not to participate in the lesbian movement for a variety of reasons. Among these include fears of being thought too liberal, advocating socially sensitive behavior, or not putting enough time into more socially acceptable aspects of life such as work and family. Although many women, both lesbian and straight, approve of and encourage Common Language, they do not publicly show their support. Women generally tend to stay in the background and provide financial support. Nevertheless, they hesitate to give interviews or openly discuss their tolerance for lesbians (Xiao Cao, Jan. 20, 2008, personal communication). Their surreptitious behavior demonstrates their apprehension over being criticized by a society that still holds very conservative views. Further, although some people understand lesbianism, a large number of people do not fully comprehend the concept of NGOs and are reluctant to learn about them. Finally, as Common Language does not provide monetary compensation, many volunteers also worry about their financial situations and cannot afford to invest in the time-consuming, yet unpaid commitment of reaching out to expand the lesbian community.

Current situation and future of Common Language

Currently, Common Language is developing steadily and has promising prospects. Both Eva and Xiao Cao express optimism about the future. Eva's long-term involvement with Common Language has presented her with the opportunity to observe the growth of Common Language from an insider's perspective. Although funding remains a primary concern for NGOs like Common Language, and Eva has not yet observed Common Language to be financially secure, she still hopes that with time, the nature of globalization will expose more international foundations to China's lesbian scene and thus lead to increased financial support for Common

Language. Eva predicts that while Common Language will expand in the future and organize more programs, Xian will simultaneously want to keep it at a grassroots level. Xiao Cao is confident that Common Language will eventually be accepted by the government. As the government is slowly opening up, being influenced by international forces, and becoming more aware of lesbian issues, Common Language will very gradually gain the state's support. Xiao Cao trusts that the organization will work with other women's organizations to better meet the growing needs of society by hosting more events concerning topics such as law, psychology, and health issues. As of January 2008, Common Language served as the sole lesbian grassroots NGO operating in Beijing, but international influences and China's increasing tolerance provide the space for more lesbian groups to develop. Despite activists' efforts to educate society about lesbianism, however, Chinese lesbians should not anticipate major developments regarding Chinese people's conservative attitudes in the immediate future. If Eva and Xiao Cao constitute a representative percentage of Common Language's regularly active members, it would appear that lesbian advocacy is still not in the forefront of many people's minds.

Chapter Five: HIV/AIDS and Smile

Development of HIV/AIDS in China

Effects of globalization

Like lesbians, people living with HIV/AIDS in China are also subject to discrimination and misunderstandings. The number of AIDS patients in China has risen dramatically since an infected foreigner brought the first case into the country in the mid-1980s. While exposure to foreigners as a result of globalization was the earliest source for this outbreak, various unsafe activities that Chinese people engage in have spurred the spread of the fatal disease. People's ignorance of HIV/AIDS and their consequent actions testify to the absence of education regarding the disease. Only within the past few years has the government realized the dangers of HIV/AIDS and its prevalence within China. The government promotes policies and programs aimed at AIDS prevention. However, despite these earnest efforts to control this major health issue at the national level, it cannot substantially improve the current situation without the help of grassroots organizations. These government-supported organizations provide services to patients on a more personal level via counseling, education sessions, and peer support. Smile is the only group dedicated to serving Beijing's local female HIV/AIDS patients. The organization plays a significant role and resource for those women by providing a channel for emotional support and a space for women to be themselves. Many women require more attention psychologically and welcome more peer interaction than their male counterparts in order to cope with the reality of the disease, and Smile provides this by catering to its clients' specific needs.

China's opening up in the early 1980s exposed Chinese nationals to foreign-contracted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, when it welcomed an increasing number of outsiders into the country. Although the exact year when the virus entered China's mainland and infected the first

Chinese is currently unknown, it is widely agreed that a foreigner brought the first case of AIDS to China (Gil 1994: 211; Yan 2006). While the original cases of HIV/AIDS in China came from abroad, domestic forces have facilitated the relocation of people within China and consequently fueled the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Lack of visibility

Education about the HIV/AIDS epidemic is weak in both schools and public spaces, as evidenced by the increasing populations of those infected and recurrent discrimination of HIV-infected people. In general, health education in schools only endorses abstinence and does not address methods of safe sex and sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV. Both Hang Gu and Yin Li, clients of the women's HIV/AIDS NGO Smile, emphasize the importance of starting AIDS education in elementary school to expose children from a young age (Hang Gu, Jan. 15, 2008, personal communication; Yin Li, Jan. 23, 2008, personal communication). Today, there are few health counseling centers and services, and students enter the adult world ignorant of the dangers of unprotected sex. However, as the state is short on knowledge about HIV/AIDS itself, educating children about the danger of HIV/AIDS is not even a possibility. Renwick states the reason for a lack of information collected in the 1980s and 1990s was the fear of contracting the disease while gathering data (Renwick 2002: 389). Today, although the government is providing support to organizations and health departments to further study the disease and its effects, there is insufficient funding to follow through with research. Currently, information is limited; Chinese people, health officials, and even hospital workers do not understand how the disease is spread or how it can be prevented. As a result, local discrimination further stigmatizes those infected with HIV.

In my interviews with clients of Smile, one woman mentions that most people think AIDS is a remote concept and is a disease they will never contract. She also fabricates a scenario concerning ordinary citizens: ““Once they hear ‘AIDS,’ they don’t dare talk to you face-to-face. They think they’ll get infected. I think it’s because of the lack of publicity”” (Hang Gu, Jan. 15, 2008, personal communication). After conducting a survey in four major cities in China, the China Social Survey Firm discovered that among those surveyed, 75 percent would evade any interaction with HIV-infected people, and 45 percent believed that those infected deserved their fate, as a result of “moral degeneration” (HIV). Limited education, incorrect information, and false beliefs such as these only serve to augment the stigmatized status of those infected.

Four primary means to spread and contract HIV/AIDS

The restructured economy has provided the spaces for Chinese to engage in various activities that inadvertently foster this epidemic. The new job opportunities in cities have led to the necessity of mobility, primarily to urban areas and across international boundaries. This migration contributes to the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS and people’s vulnerability to the disease. Because of the lack of education about AIDS prevention, people participate in four specific activities that put them at a high risk for falling victim to HIV/AIDS. First, increased floating populations cultivate the market for commercial sex workers. While such affairs would be considered frivolous and insignificant in some cases, it is the unprotected sex connected with these affairs that pulls these activities into the AIDS arena. Second, a number of drug addicts primarily residing in southwest China, such as in Yunnan, Sichuan, and Xinjiang Provinces engage in risky behavior when they share contaminated needles (Renwick 2002:379). Third, many destitute peasants engage in blood and plasma transfusion in order to earn money for their families. The blood banks’ unhygienic procedures of handling the blood are major agents in the

proliferation of the disease. Fourth, sexual activity between gay men is a significant, although less common, channel to contract HIV/AIDS. This exclusive population is not only stigmatized by society because of their sexual orientation, but also because their sexual behavior puts them at a higher risk for AIDS. Although people can contract the disease through a variety of ways, the inadequate information about AIDS prevention allows these four activities to continue as the primary factors that place Chinese citizens at high risks of becoming infected.

Desperate financial situations are the bases for many women to enter the sex industry. The impact of the economy on society's gender norms not only promotes women's independence but also creates the necessity for females to have increased incomes. A number of poor women from rural areas move to cities in hopes of securing jobs with higher wages, only to find themselves selling their bodies and services. Within the sex business, the high circulation of migrant men, who have traveled abroad and have potentially been infected with HIV, exposes sex workers to the disease. Not only are these women unknowingly contracting HIV, the nature of their jobs, the absence of contraception, and the low knowledge of AIDS cause them to spread the disease as well.

In a situation analogous to China's sex industry, unhygienic practices and the minimal knowledge of AIDS in drug communities have put intravenous drug users (IDUs) at a high risk of becoming infected with HIV. Both Yunnan in China's southwest region and central China's Henan Province are poor, and many of its inhabitants engage in drug use via injection. In addition, there is an increased overall population of drug users. Sources estimate that at least 50 percent and even up to 80 percent of drug users employ needles to take drugs (HIV), and among that population, 45 percent of users share needles (Renwick 2002: 379). The convenience of sharing needles and syringes attracts drug users to adopt those particular methods. However,

even though drug users consider sharing drug implements to be simple and hassle-free, they do not understand that this approach propels the development of HIV-infected communities. The absence of hygienic procedures to cleanse the shared needles between users causes high rates of HIV/AIDS infection. A majority of drug users are unaware of the dangers of the disease and do not comprehend the manner in which it is spread. Regarding commercial sex workers and IDUs, the Ministry of Health declared that unprotected sex and the use of contaminated needles represent the foremost ways that contribute to China's AIDS epidemic ("More" 5 June 2007).

The lack of AIDS education also cultivates unsanitary methods of blood transfusion which parallel the practice of re-using needles among China's IDUs. In order to supplement their low incomes, many people in rural areas turn to blood processing centers and sell their blood, sometimes for a generous US \$5 a pint (Renwick 2002: 380; HIV). One peasant woman admitted that members of her family sold their blood multiple times in order to pay taxes and fund her children's education and daily living expenses (HIV). Many people follow this route because their careers as peasants do not earn them enough money to survive in today's consumer-oriented society. At the blood banks, peasants inadvertently expose themselves to unsanitary conditions. Uneducated and incompetent local health officials frequently combine donors' blood together for convenience's sake. After extracting the necessary plasma, officials re-inject donors with the combined blood (Kaufman 2002: 2339). The poor sterilization and handling of patients and their blood in blood donation stations throughout China attests to the absence of AIDS education in blood banks; these practices result in the affliction and infection of many people in rural villages.

A smaller more marginalized yet equally important community with a high risk of HIV is comprised of gay men (MSM – men having sex with men). As of 2008, 11 percent of HIV-

infected Chinese contracted the disease via homosexual sex (“China” 21 Feb. 2008). They are at a high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS partially because of the stigma attached to them. Society’s negative attitude toward homosexuals consequently causes information regarding HIV/AIDS to be withheld from MSM communities (HIV). The lack of access to AIDS information and the unknown reality that their specific community is at a high risk for the disease merely furthers the spread of HIV/AIDS among them.

Ambiguity of data and future outlook

HIV/AIDS has become a major national health issue in China. For various reasons, the exact number of HIV/AIDS cases today in China is uncertain. The Ministry of Health in China, in conjunction with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organization, estimated that 840,000 people were living with HIV/AIDS in 2003 (Yan 2006). However, according to a more recent source, a second assessment in 2005 estimated a total of 650,000 HIV/AIDS cases (“More” 5 June 2007). Precisely why the original estimates in 2003 are reduced by almost 200,000 cases is due to the improved methods of estimating and data-collecting (HIV). Predictions for China’s HIV/AIDS population in 2010 amount to a potential 10 million cases (Kaufman 2002: 2339), while some sources estimate close to 20 million cases by that same year (HIV). This uncertainty in the total number can be attributed to a high number of unreported cases in rural regions and areas without access to healthcare. Cases go unreported for a number of reasons; people are unaware they have contracted the disease, they fear discrimination from authorities or the public, or there is an absence of health professionals with testing equipment and relevant resources. Health surveys also contribute to the vague total number. Surveys conducted by the government and United Nations only document specific regions and also merely target particular populations with high

risks of the disease. As verified by a number of sources, the disease has spread to 31 provinces and regions (Renwick 2002: 379; Yan 2006). Since the onset of the first case in the mid-1980s, the number of people living with HIV/AIDS is not only increasing, but also the disease is becoming ubiquitous throughout China.

Government response and NGOs

Although the government did not take action to attend to the HIV/AIDS issue during the disease's infancy in the mid-1980s, it is currently making major strides in its efforts to address the problems of HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention. The state responded to the first several cases of AIDS by appointing the National Health Education Institute (NHEI) in 1989 to establish a Division of AIDS Prevention and Health Behavior Education to create and execute various prevention strategies against the disease. In the 1990s there was limited activity regarding HIV/AIDS prevention until the government established a "Medium and Long Term Plan" for AIDS prevention and control in 1998. Spanning from 1998-2010 and bridging multiple organizations and governmental departments, this plan aims to distribute HIV/AIDS prevention information in order to control the spread of the disease. One tangible goal involves controlling the number of HIV infections in China to under 1.5 million by 2010 ([HIV](#)). 2001 witnessed another plan: the "China Plan of Action to Contain, Prevent and Control HIV/AIDS" which was scheduled to last five years. This specific plan focused on allocating a budget for HIV/AIDS prevention, planning the nation's first conference on AIDS, and reinforcing laws protecting and ensuring a healthy blood supply. In 2003, the state launched yet another program. China CARES, a community-based program, focused on treating and caring for patients. On World AIDS Day in December 2003, a historic handshake between Premier Wen Jiabao and an HIV-infected person confirmed the government's determined attitude toward addressing and

ameliorating China's HIV/AIDS issue. The recent implementation of various plans and programs regarding HIV/AIDS prevention and education demonstrates the government's serious stance in the matter. While the state hopes to curb the epidemic with its political agenda, it understands the importance of NGOs and their significant role in society.

As Kaufman asserts, the real battle against HIV/AIDS must take place at the local level with structures such as NGOs leading the fight (Kaufman 2002: 2339). The government's programs play a distant role in relation to society. NGOs aim to be the vehicles that connect with citizens and educate them on a more personal level. The government realizes that the push to control the endemic disease cannot be realized without the help of NGOs working at the grassroots level. Thus, by joining forces, the state and civil society can work to prevent the spread of HIV and bring about awareness of the harmful effects of the disease.

The growing number of Chinese AIDS NGOs can be attributed to the government's support and determination to intervene in the growing HIV problem. Unlike some other types of organizations such as Common Language, NGOs dedicated to addressing HIV/AIDS command support from the government. The Center of Disease Control, a branch of the government, plays a key position in serving as a network, support, and resource center for AIDS NGOs and people living with the disease. A majority of AIDS NGOs address the general HIV/AIDS population. Located in You'an Hospital in Beijing, Home of Loving Care is an NGO that specializes in people living with HIV/AIDS. While NGOs such as Home of Loving Care meet the needs of AIDS patients in general, there are others that focus their efforts on one particular group of people. One of the main targets of a number of AIDS NGOs is the MSM population. Even though education is limited, gay men NGOs are prevalent throughout China and are financially

supported by the government primarily because of the major health risks that this population faces.

However, despite the intentions of AIDS NGOs to concentrate on specific populations, one particular group is neglected: women. The high number of AIDS NGOs that focus on the MSM community tends to push women out of the spotlight. Women's already marginalized status puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to being admitted to hospitals and receiving equal healthcare. While general AIDS NGOs address a wide variety of AIDS populations, their focus upon women is inadequate for the needs of this population.

In an interview with Xia Jing, the director of a small women's HIV/AIDS NGO called Smile, she asserts two specific needs particular to HIV-infected women. First, improving women's quality of life is essential, especially after they have been diagnosed with the disease. Xia Jing mentions that a number of women quit their jobs and do not have a will to live after being tested HIV-positive. They rely on their husbands and family for help, compared to before their diagnosis when they were independent. By enhancing their present conditions and lifestyles, women can learn to appreciate life again and thus better support their family and community. Second, psychological and peer support define another major need. Channels for women to gain such support are limited, if they exist at all. Fears of discrimination are predominant in women's minds, as they live in society still primarily uneducated about HIV/AIDS.

Smile: A Product of Increased Visibility

Introduction and structure

Smile, an organization that focuses exclusively on the personal needs of HIV-infected women, is under the authority of Beijing's Mangrove Support Group, a larger AIDS NGO in You'an Hospital. Born in 1976, Li Xiang, the founder of Mangrove, was infected with HIV/AIDS during a blood transfusion in high school ("Chinese" 1 Dec. 2003). When he tested positive for the disease in his early twenties, Li retreated from society for a few months until 1998 when he came to Beijing for medical treatment. Since he arrived in Beijing, Li Xiang has been involved with HIV/AIDS care and life-skills training programs throughout China. The knowledge he gained during the four years after diagnosis made Li Xiang want to do more to help the HIV/AIDS community. With financial support from the Ford Foundation, he eventually started Mangrove Support Group in Beijing in 2002. Li Xiang named his organization Mangrove Support Group because he hoped his group to be analogous to a mangrove plant's roots which unite together to create a strong foundation (Mangrove). Mangrove aims to develop a support network for HIV/AIDS patients while also promoting HIV/AIDS awareness in the local community. Mangrove has already published a complimentary magazine *Hand in Hand*, a hotline, and has plans to launch its own website (Live and Let Live). The group's education programs have extended throughout China to Guangdong, Sichuan, and Henan in central China – areas where unhygienic blood banks are numerous ("NGOs" 20 July 2004). Li Xiang believes that although his group's work may not impact China on a broad more general level, "what [Mangrove has] done will at least help some HIV carriers improve their quality of life" ("Chinese" 1 Dec. 2003).

My interviews with Xia Jing, the founder of Smile, took place on two different occasions – the first time I met her was on July 27, 2007, while the second time was on January 15, 2008 when I went back to Beijing to conduct a follow-up interview. Both interviews were located in Mangrove's office on the second floor of You'an Hospital in Beijing.

Originally from Gansu Province, Xia Jing discovered she was a victim of HIV in June 2005, after her husband had already died from AIDS. Luckily for her, Xia Jing's family and friends all supported her and even researched HIV/AIDS to find out more about it. Watching a televised interview with Li Xiang, the founder of Mangrove, in 2005 exposed Xia Jing to the existence of such HIV/AIDS organizations. Her newfound connection and interest in the disease caused Xia Jing to change the direction of her career. She contacted Li Xiang who encouraged her to move to Beijing and work with Mangrove. At thirty-two years old, she left her family and job of ten years as a clerk in Xinjiang and moved to Beijing at the end of 2005 solely to work with Mangrove and eventually start up her own group for women, Smile.

The name of the group, Smile, originated from the stigmatized and stereotyped image of HIV-infected women. Xia Jing wanted to challenge the stereotype associated with HIV-patients that they live difficult, solitary, and depressed lives. With the name Smile, she intends to let the general public know that those infected with HIV are normal people, lead ordinary lives, and have a variety of emotions. The Chinese name for the organization, Huanyan, can be literally translated as "Happy Face," as "huan" means "cheerful" and "yan" translates to "face." Xia Jing named her organization Smile to educate people that those living with HIV can smile, too.

Established in 2006, Smile is the only current operating NGO dedicated completely to women with HIV/AIDS in Beijing (Xiao Jing, July 27, 2007, personal communication). A few years after the 2002 founding of Mangrove, Xia Jing, then a Mangrove employee, realized the

discrepancy between men and women in receiving AIDS-related healthcare and the exceptional effect of AIDS on women. In general, women experience more discrimination and require more emotional support than men. These two factors are further stressed when women are sick, and the disease begins to compromise their mental and physical health. When living with HIV/AIDS, women are generally more affected and psychologically unstable. Xia Jing decided to start this group in order to provide peer support in addition to a space for women to share their emotions and also learn about HIV/AIDS prevention. Although Xia Jing is the only full-time staff member at Smile, five to six volunteers help her run the developing organization. During my first encounter with her in the summer of 2007, Xia Jing mentioned that about twenty to thirty HIV-infected women knew about Smile and regularly attended the monthly gatherings. However, when I returned to the organization five months later, Smile's list of contacts had already doubled. Smile appears to be on its way to becoming a successful and recognized organization.

Operations

Affiliation with Mangrove allows Smile to be publicized and promoted within the HIV community. Mangrove's business cards are placed by the doors of You'an hospital for the convenience of patients entering or exiting the building. The card mentions Smile as a group that provides HIV-infected women with consulting and relevant services, along with Mangrove's contact information and their various services (see figure 1). Nurses in the AIDS department of the hospital also distribute the cards to patients in their care. When women contact Xia Jing for more information about Smile, she invites them to be a member of the group and adds them to her contact list. With the help of Mangrove's contact cards, the nurses, and through word of mouth, Smile is gradually becoming recognized and known in HIV circles.

爱心汤 欢颜 纪念树

红树林服务联系卡

联合机构:
北京地坛医院“红丝带之家”
北京佑安医院“爱心家园”

支持机构:
FORD FOUNDATION 福特基金会

爱心汤: 是为在地坛和佑安的住院患者免费提供的送汤、送粥和探望服务，送汤人员是由受过相关培训和指导的同伴和义工进行，所送汤粥保证清洁卫生、现做现送。

欢颜: 由受过相关培训和指导的同伴和义工，为居留在北京的受HIV影响家庭中的女性提供的咨询、关怀和辅导服务。

纪念树: 定期的患者郊外活动，主要活动是种植和看护以自己的名字命名的纪念树，用这样的树来鼓舞自己乐观积极的生活。

爱心汤、欢颜和纪念树是红树林支持组织设立的、与北京佑安医院“爱心家园”、北京地坛医院“红丝带之家”联合举办的HIV患者支持服务。

希望借此探索综合关怀服务的模式，以便在更多地区推广。我们热忱希望有更多的HIV感染者朋友和志愿者的参与，也期望各界朋友给予更多的支持！

我们承诺:

- ★所有服务都是出于公益和互助，不收任何费用；
- ★所有接触都将征得当事人知情同意；
- ★所有涉及隐私信息绝对不会透露给第三方；

北京佑安医院请联系
护士长：福燕 电话：010-63294418
协调人：肖强 电话：010-63296183

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电话：010-63296125 63296135
电子邮件：aidscafe@126.com

Figure 1. Mangrove's business cards are distributed in You'an Hospital, Beijing. Arrow pointing at Smile's information. *Smile: Trained volunteers will kindly provide consultation and guidance with love for women affected by HIV/AIDS in Beijing.*

Smile's rapid success is indicative of its current development and potential future. In August 2006, four years after Mangrove founder Li Xiang had established Mangrove, Xia Jing launched Smile. Although only two women participated at Smile's first gathering, the organization's total number of participants amounted to between forty and fifty in January 2008. Xia Jing is pleased with the turnout and mentions that the activities such as psychological counseling sessions or braiding red AIDS ribbons are well received by female patients, a majority who contracted the disease through drug use or blood transfusion (Xiao Jing, July 27, 2007, personal communication). Participants are excited and eagerly anticipate each month's gatherings. Their recommendation of Smile to other HIV-infected women consequently causes Smile to grow. Xia Jing asserted that although Smile does not necessarily play a large role in the bigger AIDS picture, it is definitely making a difference in some women's lives.

As mentioned above, all health-related organizations have the support of the Center for Disease Control, a government-related organization. While Smile is not registered with and does not receive monetary aid from the state, it is promoted along with other small grassroots efforts as an important resource for AIDS victims. Mangrove's relationship with Smile parallels the government's rapport with the women's HIV/AIDS group: while Mangrove supports Smile, its support does not include financial aid. In order to carry out its activities and events, Smile is funded by the World Health Organization (WHO) who has expressed interest in Smile since the beginning. WHO provides a yearly stipend of \$2,000, but that amount is only enough to cover the cost of events and guest lecturers. Xia Jing admits, however, that she has not pursued more channels of funding because she currently does not know how to improve Smile's activities and offer more effective services.

Even though Smile's relatively new status as an NGO gives it room to grow and develop, Smile could benefit from more support and publicity. The Center for Disease Control acknowledges Smile, but that is not enough. Ideally, more developed NGOs would offer advice and guidance in how to improve and expand the young organization. Furthermore, Smile's financial aid from WHO only provides enough funding for the organization's events, leaving no money to publicize.

Despite the difficulties in organizing and developing all aspects of Smile, Xia Jing claims that mental and peer support are the organization's strongest features. A majority of infected women feel constrained, pressured, and anxious at home, and they have no outlet in which to verbalize their distress. These women live alone or with unsympathetic or fearful family members who do not comfort and support them. However, at Smile, women are able to freely express their emotions and empathize with one another. They liberate themselves from their

oppressive thoughts when with their peers. During their gatherings, women laugh, share stories, and are free to be themselves. By surrounding themselves with those who are just like them, those females living with HIV/AIDS tend to forget their anxieties and worries. The mutual communication and understanding builds and strengthens the already intimate community. Smile functions as a space for women to be surrounded by friends and happiness in addition to tolerance, understanding, and comfort.

With at least one gathering a month, Smile's activities and services not only cement participants' bonds with one another but also cultivate a growing community among Beijing's women living with HIV/AIDS. Xia Jing plans a variety of activities and events each month free of charge for Smile's women. The clients range in age from mid-twenties to well over fifty years old. In order to decide what activities best suit Smile's diverse population, Xia Jing discusses possible activities of interest with the women. A variety of events supplement peer support and counseling. Women participate in excursions, educational lectures regarding healthcare, informal discussions about basic care and support in the home, braid red AIDS ribbon pins or bracelets to sell, and participate in charity bazaars. Every month, Xia Jing contacts each member of Smile and informs them of upcoming events. While not all women are able to attend every gathering, about twenty women are present for each activity. A number of participants look forward to the monthly gatherings; they are the only occasions in which women can freely spend time with their close circle of friends and not have to worry about the potential discriminatory views surrounding them.

Personal involvement: The impact of Smile on its clients

I conducted six interviews with HIV-infected women of different backgrounds who frequently participate in Smile's events. Xia Jing helped me arrange each appointment during

my visits – three in August 2007 and three in January 2008. All of my interviews took place in You'an Hospital in Smile's office, with the exception of a group interview which occurred in a nearby vacant conference room.

In the group interview, I talked with Xiao Yu, Chen Li, and Bai Ye. Xiao Yu, a 34-year old woman originally from Henan Province, moved to Beijing in 1997. In October 2002, she discovered she was HIV-positive. Her husband transmitted the disease to her, but because she did not know the date of being infected, Xiao Yu feared for her 3-year old son's fate. Fortunately, he was healthy. That year, she started working at her current job at an art therapy NGO for AIDS patients. As her job is located next door to Mangrove, Xiao Yu was aware of and contributed to the initial planning process of Smile. Ever since Smile's establishment in 2006, she has helped Xia Jing and has been actively involved with the women's group.

36-year old Bai Ye lives a comfortable life with her parents in her hometown of Beijing. Even though she was quiet and did not contribute much to the conversation with Xiao Yu, Chen Li, her, and me, she revealed she contracted HIV/AIDS in 2004 through drug use. She is currently unemployed. Also a Beijing native, 33-year old Chen Li does not have a job and was infected in 2005 while using drugs as well. Nurses at You'an Hospital suggested the two women visit Smile for moral support, as they both felt alone and the organization had just started.

Similar to Xiao Yu, Yin Li is a 31-year old woman also from Henan Province who has been in Beijing since 2000. She believes she got infected in the mid-1990s during her previous work at a blood bank in Henan. Yin Li discovered her HIV-positive status only in 2002 and stopped working in early 2007 because of her declining health. In May 2007 she heard about Smile on the television and started attending the organization's events.

Mei Feng is a woman from Hebei Province with an elementary-level education. She moved to Beijing in 1992 when she was 21-years old. Mei Feng left her job in 1995 when she discovered she was pregnant and since then has been a housewife and mother to two children. When Mei Feng tested positive for HIV/AIDS in 2004, she attributed her sickness to a blood transfusion in 2000. As she was not familiar with organizations such as Mangrove and Smile, Mei Feng only accidentally discovered Smile during a hospital visit and began participating in its activities in 2007.

Shaanxi Province native Hang Gu has lived in Beijing for seven years with her husband and his parents. Similar to Mei Feng, she originally worked in a supermarket but does not currently hold a job. In 2006 Hang Gu took a maternity leave at 25-years old when she was pregnant. When she went to the doctor for a check-up, she unexpectedly tested positive for HIV. After realizing she could have transmitted the disease to her unborn child, Hang Gu immediately had an abortion. Hang Gu does not know how she contracted the disease. She has been unemployed ever since. When she was diagnosed, the Center for Disease Control recommended she visit several HIV/AIDS NGOs, and since then, she has participated in Smile's activities.

This sample of these six women depicts both the similarities and differences of Smile's clients. Five women are currently unemployed and five women are in their thirties. On the other hand, while two originate from Beijing, the others hail from different provinces in central China. Two women are unmarried, two have families, one is widowed, while another's marital status is unknown. While it is unclear if the trends evident in these six women represent the clients of Smile in general, Smile appears to assist a diverse population of women and has evidently made a significant impact on the lives of these six particular women.

The nature of Smile as an organization supporting and disseminating AIDS information has enabled its clients and their families to better understand the disease. Before their introduction to Smile, these women and their families lacked knowledge of and even feared AIDS. While Mei Feng understood that AIDS could be contracted from participating in “bad” activities such as selling and transfusing blood, Yin Li had never heard of AIDS before being identified as HIV-positive, even though she was employed at the blood bank. When I asked her how her family responded to the news of her diagnosis, she began to cry. Yin Li reacted this way not because of her family’s resistance but because of their unending support. Beyond being merely supportive, they actively learned about HIV/AIDS with Yin Li. Chen Li’s family also increased their knowledge of AIDS once Chen Li discovered she was infected. Her family initially feared open wounds as a way of spreading the disease, but they eventually learned otherwise. Only through their connections with Smile have these particular clients and their families gained more of a handle on their comprehension of AIDS.

Visibility of psychological and peer support is another significant factor in these women’s lives that has increased with participation in Smile’s activities. Because many women do not inform their old-fashioned family members of their infected status for fear of discrimination and unfair treatment, they stifle their depression and feelings of anxiety. Ignorant of how to gain access to support channels, women feel confined. When Mei Feng first discovered she was HIV-positive, she shut herself up at home and cried every day for a year: “I wanted to find a place that didn’t have anyone so I could just hide and not come out.” (Mei Feng, Jan. 25, 2008, personal communication). After her first encounter with Smile, however, Mei Feng is more relaxed and confident. She mentions that conversing with other people calms her down and reduces the distress that she previously felt. Smile’s activities and informal gatherings

provide an arena for HIV-infected women to casually share their experiences, mutually empathize with each other, and release their melancholia without facing discrimination. Chen Li believes that when everyone is together, no one feels sick or different since they are collectively in the same situation. The interviewees unanimously confirmed that they have made new bonds at Smile and compare their intimate “family” of HIV-infected women to a close circle of friends. Without hesitation, many women will call each other up to casually chat and make sure the other is healthy and not sick. This invaluable peer support provides women with a channel that they would not have had access to without Smile.

The various forms of support at Smile lead to the restoration of women’s optimistic emotions and moods. When a few of the women discovered they carried the disease, their initial feelings were nothing but emptiness and loneliness. Hang Gu was devoid of emotion while Xiao Yu lacked a will to live: “I immediately wanted to die. I had heard of this disease and knew it was really serious... At the time we thought our whole family could be infected since we thought it was a really resilient disease... We just didn’t know what to do” (Xiao Yu, Aug. 7, 2007, personal communication). Bai Ye thought that she only had three years to live. Participating in Smile’s activities and gatherings, however, transformed their frames of mind. Xiao Yu recognizes that Smile has given her self-confidence and a deeper understanding of the disease, and Bai Ye feels healthy and alive three years later. The growing group of friends and support system in addition to the variety of informative and fun activities contribute to the women’s buoyancy. Eager and excited for each new activity, women today are very enthusiastic to be included in Smile’s agenda and even prefer Smile over other AIDS NGOs. These days, Mei Feng’s increased interest in Smile’s activities leaves her with only enough time to make dinner for her family.

Smile's different activities prompt these women, such as Mei Feng, to spend more time at the organization. Although not all of the activities fit into their schedules, Hang Gu and Mei Feng both mention that they frequent the organization at least a couple times each month. Yin Li participates if time allows. These six women's stories show how their lives have improved as a result of their active participation in Xia Jing's group.

Future of Smile

According to the interviewees, Smile's growth is advancing forward toward maturity and development. As gay men constitute a major focus of AIDS NGOs, there are few activities devoted to serving women's needs. Nevertheless, the increasing number of AIDS patients guide Smile's future. The women I interviewed have faith that the organization's development will continue to cater to the growing number of HIV/AIDS patients. Although Smile's funding is limited, these women are confident about Smile's future growth.

Conclusion

Over the past twenty-five years, the collective history of both lesbians and women with HIV/AIDS has reflected the impact of globalization upon Chinese society in the People's Republic of China. This study serves as a preliminary examination of the effects of globalization upon two marginalized female populations, lesbians and women with HIV/AIDS, and how the presence and impact of NGOs have positively contributed to the quality of life of these women. As relatively new phenomena, lesbianism and HIV/AIDS offer the space and potential for thorough examination and detailed research. The course of development of both these topics is especially interesting, given the recent history of China and the major role of globalization within that history. However, despite the fresh nature and immense potential for the maturation of lesbian pride and HIV/AIDS NGOs, little to no research has been conducted on these topics, other than this analysis.

The Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) played an integral role in influencing how Chinese society viewed lesbianism by openly examining this topic, thereby forcing society to acknowledge and adapt to people's changing views on homosexuality. Before 1995, lesbians in general were not positively acknowledged, and they consequently hid from society; however, with the visibility that accompanied the international conference, Chinese lesbians gained more confidence and began to establish domestic support groups.

Although the impact of globalization upon the public lesbian scene has been positive, it has not always been so with respect to other issues. Oftentimes China's path towards globalization has been marked by contradictions. One could argue that without globalization, HIV/AIDS would not have crossed China's borders and the present HIV/AIDS epidemic would not exist. On the other hand, the very same forces of globalization are working to resolve this

situation. By collaborating with international AIDS organizations and better understanding the disease through information supplied by foreign media and sources, the Chinese government and its people are increasing their knowledge about HIV/AIDS treatment as well as implementing prevention measures.

The effects of globalization have not always been straightforward; however, the impact that NGOs have had in reaction to globalization and its effects is noteworthy and apparent. NGOs have initiated the process in attending to these issues on a case-by-case basis and their presence alone has had a tremendous impact on the people involved. Yet, there still exists discrepancies between the exposure and magnitude of change that each NGO can bring about. Smile and Common Language are two such organizations. Both NGOs are currently working to build the foundation for women's NGOs in Beijing; however, the scale to which each can help their respective populations differs drastically. The level of involvement of the government with Smile and Common Language is clearly tied to the respective subject matter of each NGO. Smile has the support of the government while Common Language is operated independent from any government association.

Using the lives and experiences of these volunteers and women as evidence to the present situation and needs demanded by their respective communities, it is clear that NGOs for lesbians and support groups for women living with HIV/AIDS are critical and necessary in today's society. Furthermore, it is imperative that Smile and Common Language receive funding from external organizations in order to exist and provide the much needed support for their respective communities. However, why is it so critical that these two groups depend on international resources? The issues that globalization has brought to light affect the domestic population. Should this not be the responsibility of the government to address these concerns?

From the amount of government support allocated to each NGO, one can imagine that the government is more concerned with the image of the country than the well-being of the people. While the state is actively supporting NGOs and the measures against HIV/AIDS, it is not providing any support whatsoever to lesbians. Why is this the case? Because of the nature of HIV/AIDS as an impending health issue, the Chinese government is striving to address this issue and promote the image of a healthy nation to the rest of the world. The state's apparent resistance against lesbians stems from the reality that lesbians challenge traditional Confucian values. Lesbians will most likely not marry and not produce a male heir. Thus, because of the government's commitment to tradition and thereby projecting the image of a society that values and appreciates tradition, the government does not actively support populations that challenge stability which is based upon Confucian beliefs. Consequently, the interests of lesbians are not served as the government is more concerned with the vision of a country that respects deep-rooted Confucian beliefs.

As a proposed solution to China's negative response to the effects globalization, the government must assume the responsibility of properly addressing the issues introduced by globalization. In order to appropriately handle these matters, the Chinese government and society need to reevaluate its priorities and possibly its values. NGOs should only supplement the actions of the government; they should not be required to serve as the foundation and pioneers of such important domestic movements as gay pride and AIDS/HIV prevention and support. The government must eventually decide what is more important – the interests of the people as shaped by globalization, or the country's traditional image, as seen by the rest of the world.

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