

“In my Opinion, most *Tongzhi* are Dutiful Sons!”

Community, social norms, and construction of identity among young homosexuals in Hefei, Anhui Province

PIERRE MIÈGE

Based on interviews with young homosexuals in Hefei, Anhui Province, this article examines the precarious modes of socialisation of young *tongzhi* (a term often used by gay people to refer to themselves), centred on the Internet and small groups of friends. The difficulty they have in constructing an identity based on sexuality stands out in the context of social norms and roles they cannot resolve to defy, above all because of their feelings of respect and duty towards their parents.

Every year, World AIDS Day provides an opportunity for the Chinese health authorities to publish in the press the latest figures concerning the epidemic of HIV/AIDS, and to emphasise the main challenges being faced. In December 2008, various articles highlighted the rise in infection among men having sex with men (MSM).⁽¹⁾ For example an article in the English-language *Shanghai Daily* announced that the rate of HIV/AIDS had almost tripled, from 1.5 percent in 2005 to 4.4 percent in 2008.⁽²⁾ According to national statistics produced by a major survey, the results of which were also published on World AIDS Day 2008, the incidence among MSM had risen from 0.4 percent in 2005 to 4.9 percent in 2008.

Much research, first in China and then in the West, has popularised an overall concept of “sexual revolution” that is supposed to be transforming socialist China with the diversification of sexual practices, including homosexuality. The high visibility of prostitution, as well as of discotheques and bars⁽³⁾ where some urban youth dance, cruise, and talk about sexuality, intrigues and even fascinates observers.⁽⁴⁾ It cannot be denied that something is happening in China, at least in some social spaces. And yet, the difficulties experienced by Chinese homosexuals, who are usually married and in the closet, indicates that while some norms have not survived the Cultural Revolution, the single child policy, and the social and economic transformation of the country,⁽⁵⁾ others seem largely unchanged.

The steady growth of HIV/AIDS among those considered to belong to the MSM category obliges us to think of ways to improve and consolidate prevention and education pro-

grammes. The difficulties that emerge when certain prevention initiatives are applied indicate the need for more detailed study, using sociological and anthropological approaches, of a certain number of problematics that have been overlooked. Moreover, it seems necessary to distinguish between different groups of men who have homosexual relations.

Much research, not only in Western countries, has called into question approaches that reduce homosexuality to a sexual practice or behavioural variable.⁽⁶⁾ Indeed, it is important to take into account the numerous social, cultural, and normative factors used by actors in constructing their identities.

This study was conducted with the financial support of the CEFC through a short-term field-work scholarship

1. Men having sex with men (MSM) is the expression suggested by the American health authorities at the end of the 1990s.
2. “HIV-rate among gay men triples,” *Shanghai Daily*, 2 December 2008.
3. James Farrer, “Disco ‘Super-Culture’: Consuming Foreign Sex in the Chinese Disco : Cosmopolitan dance culture and cosmopolitan sexual culture,” *Sexualities*, vol. 2, n. 2, 1999, pp. 147–166.
4. See for example the documentary by Alexander Trudeau, *China’s Sexual Revolution*, broadcast by the CBC on 28 September 2008, and consisting mainly of edited interviews with young people in the fashionable nightspots of Beijing: <http://www.cbc.ca/doczone/sexualrevolution.html>; David Eimer, “The sexual revolution sweeps across China. HIV, divorce and abortion rates soar as the new generation rejects repression and creates its own permissive society,” *The Independent*, 11 December 2005.
5. Pan Suiming, “A sex revolution in current China,” *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, vol. 6, n. 2, 1993, pp. 1–14 ; William L. Parish and Pan Suiming, “Sexual Partners in China: Risk Patterns for Infection by HIV and Possible Interventions,” in Joan Kaufman, Arthur Kleinman, and Tony Saich (eds.), *AIDS and Social Policy in China*, Cambridge, Harvard University Asia Center, 2006, pp. 190–213.
6. See for example John K. Williams, Gail E. Wyatt, Judith Resell, John Peterson, Agnes Asuan-O’Brien, “Psychosocial issues among gay- and non-gay-identifying HIV-seropositive African American and Latino MSM,” *Cultural diversity and ethnic minority psychology*, vol. 10, n. 3, 2004, pp. 268–86.

Sexual identity is not an individual's only identity, and it is elaborated in the tension between different normative systems and social roles (family, power, gender, etc.). While some homosexuals in the big cities of the West, as well as some members of the medical and research community, have adopted a discourse that places sexual identity at the centre of the construction of self, in China, as in many other cultures, actors set out as primordial the identities of gender (masculinity is constructed through marriage and children) and a certain number of social roles: being a son who is respectful of his parents and of his duties towards the family, and being a responsible citizen who contributes to society. Thus in India, for example: "[...] masculinity in India is asserted and publicly acknowledged through marriage and, more importantly, through the production of children. To be a husband and a father is to be a man. [This society] offers little scope for the development of alternative identities based on sexuality."⁽⁷⁾

The research presented in this article is based on interviews with 15 young *tongzhi*⁽⁸⁾ from Hefei, in the province of Anhui. It seeks to complement studies already carried out on the modes of identity construction of young homosexuals⁽⁹⁾ by focusing on an analysis of the forms of sociability these young men construct among homosexuals as well as the way in which they perceive their social environment. The participants in this survey present society as a whole as being relatively intolerant of their sexuality, obliging them to develop fragmented social networks with small groups of friends who are also homosexual, and to separate completely the two parallel worlds in which they live: on one side their everyday lives, in which they conceal their sexual orientation, and on the other, activities and social relations organised around a shared sexual orientation.

First we will examine the place of the Internet in their experience and in their practices. Indeed, the Internet is not just a technology that has allowed them to come to know and understand their sexual identity, and then to meet and communicate with other homosexuals: their use of information and "virtual world" technologies reflects the way in which they elaborate specific forms of sociability, characterised by fragmentation and isolation.

In the third part, we will deal with the way these young men perceive activities and organisations that are specifically *tongzhi*, and which seek to constitute a "homosexual community." The participants in this survey show themselves to be distrustful of and little interested in these activities, and make very little use of the social and symbolic resources that such institutions could provide. Moreover, these young men

perceive society as a whole — generally referred to in the interviews as "they," "the others," or "people" — as not very tolerant, forcing them to maintain a double life that is both precarious and harrowing. Even the "heterosexual" friends they take into their confidence do not play a supportive role: they are clumsy and give the impression of avoiding the subject, and thus of denying the specific problems of these young homosexuals.

In the last section, we will analyse the discourse of these young men on the norms and social roles they identify as obstacles to the development of their identity and their homosexual practices. Presenting themselves as dutiful sons (*xiao*), they do not want to disappoint or cause suffering to their parents by refusing to marry. It is in fact not so much homosexuality as the question of marriage that arises, inside the family of course, but also in the face of the rest of society. For these young homosexuals, the social norm of marriage is imposed by the power of authority and duty relationships within the family, but it is also constantly repeated and revived by the people around them — friends, colleagues, and neighbours — who worry that these young men are still single. The social norm of the family, which is to say the obligation they experience as absolute and unavoidable to marry and have children, forbids them to follow through with their identity: the nexus of tensions with their environment in fact constitutes itself not on the basis of the expression of desire or of sexual preference, but on the obligation imposed on them to marry and "ensure the continuation of the family." Analysis of the discourse of these 15 homosexuals thus opens up a whole field of research into the strategies adopted by today's young Chinese in the face of the still continuing affirmation of social and family norms, at the same time that spaces for experimentation and individual development are opening up. Before expanding on these analyses and presenting the survey carried out in Hefei, it is important to resituate them in the context of the research on Chinese homosexuals that has grown up in response to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS.

7. Sheena Asthana and Robert Oostvogels, "The Social Construction of Male 'Homosexuality' in India: Implications for HIV Transmission and Prevention," *Social Science and Medicine*, n. 52, 2001, pp. 711-712.
8. *Tongzhi*, which literally means companion or comrade, is a term adopted in Hong Kong to designate homosexuals. The young men in our survey prefer it to the term *tongxinglian* (literally, who loves the same sex), which they see as too medical and too explicit. For a discussion of these various terms, see: Sun Zhongxin, Farrer James, and Choi Kyung-Hee, "Sexual Identity Among Men Who Have Sex with Men in Shanghai," *China Perspectives*, n. 64, 2006, pp. 2-12.
9. Tong Ge, *Zhongguoren de nannanxing xingwei. Xing yu ziwo rentong zhuangtai diaocha* (The homosexual practices of the Chinese: Survey of sexuality and self-identification) Beijing, Beijing Gender Health Education Institute, 2005, 654 pages.

Research on Chinese homosexuals in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic

The population of men who have sex with men has been the object of growing attention from organisations responsible for public health as well as in Chinese and foreign universities and research centres. Anxiety in the face of the increasing prevalence of the virus among this population comes within the wider context of a reversal in the means of infection: since the early 1990s, the sharing of needles and syringes among intravenous drug users has been the main means of transmission; but infection through sexual activity has grown steadily, and in 2005 became the principal means of transmission of HIV.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, infection through sexual activity among MSM has grown more rapidly than is the case for heterosexual relations, highlighting the need to increase prevention and information among the MSM population.

The MSM category, which was defined in the United States by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), poses challenges to our understanding of the vulnerabilities and specific behaviours of men who have homosexual relations. The expression is part of a wider movement in public health work and thinking in both research and medical practice, which is centred on behaviours that are meaningful in the health questions at stake, in this case HIV infection, while leaving aside the social, cultural, and political contexts in which individuals construct themselves and live. Such a category thus avoids asking the question of identification by individuals themselves, and situates them in a taxonomy of behaviours at risk of HIV contamination that has been defined *ex ante*. Consequently, the MSM category covers a very wide spectrum, including men who define themselves as homosexual or "gay" as well as men who refuse to identify themselves as such; men who currently have sexual relations with one or several other men, and men who have only a past history of homosexual relations; men who have only homosexual relations, and others who simultaneously engage in heterosexual relations. Creating a single category that includes individuals whose experiences, practices, and attitudes are so different conceals some of the fundamental stakes and restricts the understanding of behaviours.⁽¹¹⁾

The problem such a categorisation poses to research and understanding in general is compounded by the specificities of the cultural, social, and normative context of China. The majority of men who have sex with men in China do not want to reveal their sexual orientation; at the same time, many have a certain number of female partners in the course

of their lives, and usually marry. A majority of MSM consequently avoid frequenting homosexual bars and saunas, but also refuse to participate in prevention activities set up by associations or institutions. The Internet makes it possible for many Chinese homosexuals to find partners without having to frequent cruising venues (such as public toilets or parks) or meeting places. It is therefore extremely difficult to reach these men, either for prevention or for epidemiological surveys. However, many studies of the prevalence and incidence of the virus among MSM are carried out among men who frequent meeting and cruising places such as parks, public toilets, or saunas, and therefore have specific behaviours. Such epidemiological studies consequently consider only the serological status, and sometimes the sexual practices, of a relatively small subgroup of men who have sex with men.

In the wake of the experience in Western countries, MSM were very rapidly presented in China as one of the main "risk groups." However, studies of the situation in China, whether epidemiological or more sociological or anthropological, have remained relatively limited. Of course, this is partly due to the constraint just mentioned: the fact that most do not reveal their sexual orientation to those around them. However, one must also emphasise the lack of institutional interest in the situation of homosexuals in China until very recently. In 1995, one single sentinel site for monitoring the epidemic of HIV/AIDS on a national level was set up, in Harbin in the province of Heilongjiang; after 2005, only two other sites at the national level were opened, but none at the provincial level. In comparison, since 2005, there have been 67 national sentinel sites and 57 provincial sites dedicated to women "sex workers," and 120 national and 147 provincial sites set up in STD clinics.⁽¹²⁾ It is important to emphasise that while these sentinel sites are supposed to carry out seropositivity tests twice a year on 200 to 400 individuals

10. According to the most recent data published by the Chinese Ministry of Health for World AIDS Day, in the 12 months between December 2007 and November 2008, 40.4% of new infections were due to heterosexual relations, as against only 5.1% for homosexual transmission and 28.3% through sharing of needles among drug users. "China reports 264,000 people living with HIV/AIDS," *Xinhua News Agency*, 1 December 2008; see also: UNGASS (United Nations General Assembly Special Session dedicated to HIV/AIDS) *Country Progress Report – P.R. China. 2008. (Reporting Period: January 2006 – December 2007). Prepared by the State Council AIDS Working Committee Office and the United Nations Theme Group on AIDS.* http://data.unaids.org/pub/Report/2008/china_2008_country_progress_report_en.pdf

11. Gary Dowsett, "The Problematic Category of MSM: Masculinity, sexuality and HIV/AIDS," paper given during a pre-conference organised on MSM on 10 and 11 August 2006, in Toronto, ahead of the Global Forum on MSM&HIV.

12. Jia Yujiang, Lu Fan, Sun Xinhua, and Sten H. Vermund, "Sources of Data for Improved Surveillance of HIV/AIDS in China," *Southeast Asian Journal of Tropical Medicine and Public Health*, vol. 38, n. 6, 2007, pp. 1041-52.



Cui Zi'en, the first gay man to come out in China, sits under a gay rights poster in his apartment November 17, 2004 in Beijing. He came out publicly as a gay man in 1990. Cui Zi'en is a documentary filmmaker who has remained controversial due his films of gay life in China. As a result of public stigma, very few men are openly gay in China. This has resulted in less openness about HIV and less sharing of information about the disease. © AFP

belonging to the target population, the Harbin site had by 2005 carried out only two such surveys on only around 200 men each time. Moreover, the men had been recruited in cruising and meeting places where practices, particularly in terms of the average number of partners, do not reflect the behaviours of MSM in that city as a whole.⁽¹³⁾

Academic research on homosexual practices in China, which has increased both in China and in Western universities, is very often linked to the preoccupations and needs of public health, and therefore tends to consider only the sexual behaviours of certain sub-categories of MSM, in particular those whose practices are most at risk. However more qualitative Chinese studies have increased since the end of the 1990s in the wake of pioneers such as Li Yinhe,⁽¹⁴⁾ Pan Suiming,⁽¹⁵⁾ Tong Ge,⁽¹⁶⁾ Zhang Beichuan,⁽¹⁷⁾ and Zhuo Huashan.⁽¹⁸⁾ One nevertheless notes an over-representation of perspectives that have more to do with sexology than with the sociological study of these populations, and which sometimes tend to essentialise homosexuality.⁽¹⁹⁾ In other words, while studies of the sexuality of these men are increasing, we still know little about their lives, their needs, their expecta-

tions, and the way in which they perceive themselves and their environment. This is all the more so as the category of

13. Wu Yuhua, Bai Lishi, Liu Yancheng, and Zhao Zhonghou, "Men Who Have Sex With Men and HIV/AIDS Prevention in China," in Lu Yichen and Max Essex, *AIDS in Asia*, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic, 2004, pp. 365-377.
14. Li Yinhe, *Tongxinglian yawenhua* (Homosexual sub-cultures), Beijing, Jinri Zhongguo chubanshe, 1998, 524 pages; Li Yinhe, *Zhongguo nǚxing de ganqing yu xing* (Love and sexuality of Chinese women), Beijing, Jinri zhongguo chubanshe, 1998, 327 pages.
15. Pan Suiming, "Homosexual Behaviors in Contemporary China," *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, vol. 7, n. 4, 1995, pp. 1-17; Pan Suiming, "Male Homosexual Behavior and HIV-related Risk in China," in Peter Aggleton (ed.), *Bisexuality and AIDS: International Perspectives*, London, Taylor-Francis Group, Social Aspects of Aids Series, 1996, pp. 178-190.
16. Tong Ge, "Gay de wenhua chonggou" (The reconstruction of gay culture), in Gao Yanning (ed), *Tongxinglian jiankang ganyu* (Intervention for the health of homosexuals), Shanghai, Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2006, 527 pages.
17. Zhang Beichuan, *Tongxing'ai* (Homosexuality), Jinan, Shandong kexue jishu chubanshe, 1994, 676 pages.
18. Zhou Huashan (Chou Wah-shan), *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies*, New York, Haworth, 2000, 343 pages.
19. In this article we leave aside the case of Hong Kong, where research is often more dynamic and innovative than on the mainland. See for example Chow Wah-shan (Zhou Huashan), *Houzhimin tongzhi* (The postcolonial tongzhi), Hongkong, The Hong Kong Tongzhi Study Centre, 1997, 278 pages; Travis Kong, "The Seduction of the Golden Boy: The Body Politics of Hong Kong Gay Men," *Body and Society*, vol. 8, n. 1, 2000, pp. 29-48; Petula Sik-ying Ho and Adolf Kat-tat Tsang, "Negotiating Anal Intercourse in Inter-Racial Gay Relationships in Hong Kong," *Sexualities*, vol. 3, n. 3, pp. 299-323.

MSM all too often mixes together individuals who are fundamentally different.

Sodomy was decriminalised in 1997, and homosexuality depenalised the same year, before being withdrawn from the list of mental illnesses in 2001. However it must be noted that certain behaviours can lead to arrest and imprisonment, for example when the police use the extremely vague categories of "violation of the social order" or "sexual promiscuity." Public toilets or bars can thus be raided by the police, and even closed down. "Prostitution" also makes possible the arrest of young homosexuals in cruising places such as parks or public toilets. This is why, although homosexuality has officially been decriminalised in China, the police have sufficient margin of manoeuvre for many young homosexuals to continue to feel themselves in danger in public places.

To conclude these aspects of general problematics concerning homosexuality and public health, one must emphasise the various kinds of vulnerability this situation produces: vulnerability in the face of HIV/AIDS of a population that is poorly informed about the risks⁽²⁰⁾ and the ways of self-protection, and that is difficult to reach by the means used in other countries.⁽²¹⁾ The study presented in this article is not about this subject, but certain questions put to the participants revealed their inadequate knowledge about the disease and its modes of transmission and prevention. There is also the vulnerability of their female partners, whether wives or one-night girlfriends. In the survey carried out in 2001 by the Harbin sentinel site among 215 MSM belonging to very high risk behaviour groups (because of their high incidence of unprotected intercourse and their monthly average number of partners), 26.5 percent were married, and 9.2 percent divorced. Only 14 percent declared that they used condoms every time they had intercourse, and 60 percent that they never did, while 52.8 percent believed they were not running any risk.⁽²²⁾ There is also the physical and psychic vulnerability of many young homosexuals, some of whom come from the country or small towns, are extremely isolated in the big cities, are sometimes forced into prostitution, and are often the victims of violence.⁽²³⁾

The continued growth in HIV/AIDS infection among the population categorised as MSM obliges us to rethink prevention and education programmes in order to improve and consolidate them. The difficulties that surfaced during the implementation of certain preventive measures have shown the need for more detailed study, from sociological and anthropological perspectives, of a certain number of

problematics that have been neglected, while distinguishing between different groups who have homosexual relations. Some examples that suggest the size and diversity of the fields of research that have opened up include research on homosexuals' experience of discrimination,⁽²⁴⁾ on male prostitution,⁽²⁵⁾ and on lesbians,⁽²⁶⁾ who are often neglected because less threatened by the epidemic of HIV/AIDS.

The research presented in this article was carried out in Hefei in April 2008, among 15 young men who declared themselves to be homosexuals. They were selected by a small local association that participates in prevention programmes, but mainly organises cultural and sporting activities (badminton competitions, singing contests, karaoke evenings, etc.) for homosexuals. The common denominator among the 15 individuals is that each had freely taken part in at least one of these activities and had left contact details in order to be informed of future programmes. This sample does not therefore in any way reflect the entire population of men who have sex with men in Hefei. Given the structure of the survey, the sample over-represents young men, and among these, individuals who declare themselves to be homosexuals and were willing to discuss the question with an academic researcher.

20. Kyung-Hee Choi, Liu Hui, Guo Yaqi, Han Lei, and Jeffrey Mandel, "Lack of HIV Testing and Awareness of HIV Infection Among Men Who Have Sex With Men, Beijing, China," *AIDS Education and Prevention*, vol. 18, n. 1, 2006, pp. 33-43.
21. For a synthesis of the various of epidemiological studies carried out since the 1990s, see Liu Hui, Yang Hongmei, Li Xiaoming, Wang Ning, Liu Hongjie, Wang Bo, Zhang Lan, Wang Qianqiu, Bonita Stanton, "Men Who Have Sex With Men and Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Sexually Transmitted Disease Control in China," *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, vol. 33, n. 2, February 2006, pp. 68-76.
22. Wu Yuhua, Bai Lishi, Liu Yancheng, and Zhao Zhonghou, "Men Who Have Sex With Men and HIV/AIDS Prevention in China," *op. cit.* p. 372 ff; a study of a similar group in Jiangsu whose results are very similar: Jiang Juan, Cao Ningxiao, Zhang Jinping, Xia Qiang, Gong Xiangdong, Xue Huazhong, Yang Haitao, Zhang Guocheng, Shao Changsheng, "High Prevalence of Sexually Transmitted Diseases Among Men Who Have Sex With Men in Jiangsu Province, China," *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, vol. 33, n. 2, February 2006, pp. 118-123.
23. On the various factors of psychological and physical vulnerability of young homosexuals, see for example Zheng Yingjun, Wang Zaixin, Xu Juan, et al., "Nannanxing jiechuzhe shehui xinli tezhen" (Psychosocial distinction of men who have sex with men), *Zhongguo xingwei yixue kexue* (*Chinese journal of behavioral medical science*), vol. 13, n. 6, 2004, pp. 655-657; Zheng Ying-Jun, Xu Juan and Zhang Hong-Bo, "The Relationship between Anxiety, Depression and HIV Risk Behaviors among Men who Have Sex with Men," *Chinese Mental Health Journal*, vol. 19, n. 10, 2005, pp. 699-703.
24. Jenny X. Liu and Kyung-Hee Choi, "Experiences of Social Discrimination Among Men Who Have Sex with Men in Shanghai, China," *AIDS and Behavior*, Vol. 10, Supplement 1, 2006, pp. 25-33.
25. Tong Ge, *Zhongguo nannan xingjiaoyi zhuangtai diaocha* (Enquiry into the sex business in the homosexual community in China), Beijing, Beijing Gender Health Education Institute, 2007, 539 pages.
26. Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Queer ethnography in theory and practice: Reflections on studying sexual globalization and women's queer activism in Beijing," *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, vol. 5, n. 2, 2008, pp. 88-116.

At the time of interview, half of the participants were between 25 and 27 years old, the youngest 19 and the oldest 37. The oldest was also the only married man in the sample; all the others were single and had never had a girlfriend. Only two stated that they had a stable relationship with another man at the time of the survey. It must also be noted that there is an over-representation of students in the survey, with seven secondary and three university students. Lastly, only one participant was born in Hefei, and six in other towns or villages in Anhui province. The others were born in provinces in the west or the centre of the country, and came to Hefei to continue their studies, after which the older ones found work there. None of them came from the coastal provinces or from a big city in the east or the south.

To better understand the discourse of these young men, a few words must be said about Hefei. Capital of the agricultural and relatively poor province of Anhui, west of Shanghai, Hefei is a medium-sized city (with a population of 1.4 million) that benefited from relatively high investment from the 1950s to the 1970s aimed at making it a regional industrial centre (cigarettes, steel mills, chemicals, etc). However, since the launch of the reforms 30 years ago, the economy has not experienced a vitality comparable to that which has transformed the big cities around Anhui: Wuhan to the west, and Nanjing, Shanghai, Suzhou, and Hangzhou to the east and southeast. Average earnings per inhabitant are very slightly above the national average (around 22,000 *yuan* as against a little over 21,000 *yuan* at a national level). Despite a few recent property developments, the city centre has changed little since the 1970s, and provides a different aspect of contemporary urban China.

Hefei has several universities, some of which are big, in particular the University of Science and Technology of China. Initially founded in Beijing by the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 1958, and then transferred to Hefei in the early 1970s in order to support industrial development in the centre of the country, it is one of the 16 big national universities. Hefei universities draw students from the country's central and western provinces, and add to the dynamism of the city. Homosexual establishments are few. The most frequented are the small number of "public baths": besides a shower-room, these places offer several beds lined up in front of a TV screen as well as one or two small rooms that clients can close off from the inside. There is only one homosexual bar left after two others closed down in 2007 for lack of customers. In fact, few of the city's homosexuals frequent the

baths or the bars. However, it must be noted that some karaoke bars draw an older clientele by offering "money boys," prostitutes who are often very young. Lastly, contrary to what can be observed in the big cities of the east, in particular in Shenzhen, Canton, Shanghai, and Beijing, Hefei's public "gay" scene is disconnected from the big national and international networks. Largely forgotten by the international NGOs, Hefei is not a destination for foreign gays. None of the participants in this survey had spoken to a Westerner before.

The central role of the Internet in creating fragmented and fragile forms of sociability

The place of the Internet in the lives and experience of these young homosexuals is far from insignificant. When they talk about their personal histories, around half of the participants acknowledge that before having access to the Web, they were already conscious of their sexual orientation. Nevertheless, the Internet contributed to their becoming aware of what these desires meant, to discovering that other men shared these desires, and that therefore they were not alone.

When I grew up, I was aware of not being very interested in girls; whether they were pretty or not, I didn't like them very much [...] Around 15 years old I began to have these kinds of feelings for boys. But I only began to find out about homosexuality, and this community of homosexuals, after secondary school. At that time, I began to pay more attention to boys [...] The Internet helped me a lot [...], first of all I discovered that there were a lot of people who were like me [...]. Some of them wrote about their experiences and their feelings, or wrote short novels [...]. And then there was also pornography. (Li, 22)

I used to go on the Internet because I felt alone. I hoped that on the Internet I could find out about this situation [homosexuality], and see if there were other people like me, and maybe get in touch with them, to escape my loneliness [...]. Sometimes, I hoped that on the Internet I could meet someone like myself, someone I could become friends with [...]. (Zhang, 26)

The other half of the participants explain their biographies in slightly different terms: for a long time they did not take

any interest in love, and did not wonder about it, but one day, by chance, they had the opportunity to visit homosexual sites that opened their eyes to their own desires. Wu, 26, tells how, when he was at secondary school, he had no sexual preference and was not interested in the question, although his friends talked endlessly about love and boyfriends and girlfriends. He was too taken up with classes and examinations. It was only in the third year of university, in 2004, that things changed:

At the time we often went on the Internet. Once I was surfing and on the screen next to me there was a window open, and this window was a foreign pornographic site, with a lot of links, ... and I had a look and there was some gay stuff, and a lot of articles. I went into the links, and at same time I said to myself: "That's what I want to see and look for!" [...] and finally everything became clear.

For a very long time I had been attracted to boys, [...] but I didn't realise that that was being homosexual. Then, one day, I began to learn to use the Internet, I didn't know what sites to surf, so I had a look at the sites that the others had registered, and I saw there was a site called "boysky" [...]. I realised that it was a site with nothing but boys, and I was very interested, I went exploring, and then I understood that there was such a phenomenon. Of course there are lots of other people who are also homosexual, but until that day I thought I was the only one. (Guo, 25)

The Internet thus plays a key role in the experience of these young men. But in order to understand the impact of new technologies on social changes such as this, one must realise that today, for young urbanites in a medium-sized and relatively poor city, the Internet is still a rare resource. Lacking computers at home, they have to use the services of what are called "Internet cafés," but which in reality are fairly dismal places, without any decoration, coffee, or food, and more typically consist of dozens of computers in lines, with ashtrays and a drinking fountain. Behind a booth, the manager takes identity papers (everyone in China who uses the Internet has to register) in exchange for access to a computer. Depending on the place and the city, rates vary but are always very low (one to three euro cents per hour of connection).

These places are always full, and most of the users, who are usually very young, play games online. It is consequently dif-

ficult to look at homosexual sites, whether they contain information or personal stories and especially if they are erotic: there is a great danger of being surprised by your immediate neighbour. The same difficulty holds for students, who have access to computer rooms on campus, or for those who use a computer at work.

The constraints were even heavier when these men were beginning to think about their sexuality, between five and 15 years ago (depending on their age), at a time when computers were very rare. Even when they had access to a connection at home, as was the case for Wang (30), whose brother very early on bought computer equipment, the machine was set up in the middle of the living room of a tiny apartment, and did not allow unhindered surfing of the Internet. Consequently, accessing sites devoted to homosexuality, or to individual experiences, was necessarily fast and fragmentary, with a constant fear of being discovered. These constraints partly explain why, very quickly and most of the time, these young homosexuals stopped using anything but online chat software, such as MSN and especially QQ, to talk to friends and meet new people. The windows that these chat programmes open on the screen are small, are easy to make disappear, and do not display any images or symbols that could betray their users.

All the participants admit to using forums and discussion programmes with varying degrees of frequency. Some prefer this way of making new friends or meeting a partner, while others prefer going to bars and favour face-to-face meetings. One notices in all cases that once the initial discovery period is over, the Internet quickly ceases to be an information tool and becomes merely a means of communicating and meeting. Even when users look for information about homosexuality, they cannot take the time for prolonged and attentive reading.

Many prevention programmes are based on providing websites that discuss homosexuality and the problems of living out one's sexuality in Chinese society, while providing information on the dangers of HIV/AIDS, and on prevention methods. All the participants in this survey admit to not having visited such a site for a long time — months, and even years — and while their assessment of such programmes is positive, they say they are not themselves very interested in them. Moreover there are initiatives, for example in Tianjin, that seek to develop other kinds of programmes no longer aimed at providing attractive websites, but rather at training volunteers who take turns on discussion forums to launch debates on the prevention of HIV/AIDS or provide information on

activities, or who participate in hotlines aimed at homosexuals.⁽²⁷⁾

The stories these young men tell about discovering and affirming their sexual orientation are moving. They show the difficulty of thinking out one's desires in a society where homosexuality does not seem to exist, particularly in the countryside and the small towns of the inland provinces at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new century, when these young men began to wonder about their sexuality. Except for Su (21), who had a boyfriend among his secondary schoolmates, none was really able to think out his desire for another man before the Internet. What the Internet makes possible is precisely to put into words, as well as into experiences, images, discourse, and novels, those desires that previously found no way of expressing themselves. The encounter with homosexuality on the Internet is usually presented as an accident, an unplanned discovery. The introduction of the Internet into the lives of these young men is thus a fundamental upheaval:

What is different is that when you think about this question [of your own sexuality], you have to think about it alone, you are alone. [...] Sometimes you can consult a book, but there are not many books of this kind. [...] The Internet is the only way to find out about these questions. [...] If there were no Internet, our lives would be much more difficult. For a person on his own, it's terrible. Maybe we would suffocate, or some would go mad. (Zhang, 26)

However, the "cyberworld" is only a limited and fragile space in which they can live differently and express their desires and anxieties, but subject to constraints, and in fear of discovery. It is therefore not in any way a matter of constituting spaces of resistance or spaces in which alternative cultures can grow and in which dense and strong networks can be established. In this sense, the Internet reflects the other aspects of their social life, which is divided and precarious.

An unstructured and fragile "community" in an intolerant society

In the West, we associate a homosexual (or "gay") identity with the existence of a "homosexual community." In China, both are problematical. As can be seen in the words quoted above, the majority of participants in this survey cannot resolve to use the words "homosexual," "gay," or even

"*tongzhi*" in conversation. On the contrary, they talk of "people like that," of "those ones," of "those who are like me," or of "those who also have an orientation like that." As for homosexuality, it is "this question," "this problem," "this business," or "this kind of phenomenon." One of the participants to whom I made a remark about the difficulty he had in using exact words to speak about homosexuality replied, "It's easy for you to speak about us as homosexuals, but those are not easy words for us to use" (Feng, 29).

While homosexual identity itself is far from assured, the community is nonexistent, especially the institutionalised aspect of this community. And yet, there are organisations and activities in Hefei aimed at homosexuals.

These young homosexuals participate very little in activities that are specially organised for them, whether HIV/AIDS education and prevention initiatives, or simply sports sessions or singing competitions. And even when they join other young men on these occasions, they maintain a considerable distance. Li, 22, who likes participating in badminton tournaments, speaks very little to the others and does not know them well, all the more so as they all keep their real names secret. The director of the homosexual association who made it possible for me to carry out this research warned me never to use his real name with the participants in the survey. His activities in the association are completely sealed off from his other salaried job, where nobody knows that he manages a small homosexual NGO. In the same way, those who join in the NGO's various activities usually provide no information about their daily lives, their names, their professions, or their places of origin.

They all admit that conversations with strangers are rare, and that they listen only distractedly to the classes and presentations on AIDS and prevention.

In any case [during these activities] we don't talk openly; just because we are all together does not mean that we talk about these questions [of homosexuality]. [...] Maybe sometimes some talk a little about these questions. But to tell the truth, in general I am not someone who talks easily, and when I take part in

27. On the uses that can be made of the Internet in the context of HIV/AIDS prevention and information programmes, see Wang Quanyi and Ross Michael, "Differences Between Chat Room and E-mail Sampling Approaches in Chinese Men Who Have Sex With Men," *AIDS Education and Prevention*, vol. 14, n. 5, 2002, pp. 361-366; Zhang Dapeng, Bi Peng, Lü Fan, Tang Houlin, Zhang Jie, and Janet Hiller, "Internet use and risk behaviours: An online survey of visitors to three gay websites in China," *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, vol. 83, n. 7, 2007, pp. 571-576. A study carried out in Britain: Graham Bolding, Mark Davis, Graham Hart, Lorraine Sherr, Jonathan Eelford, "Where Young MSM Meet Their First Sexual Partner: the Role of the Internet," *AIDS and Behavior*, vol. 11, n. 4, July 2007, pp. 522-526.

a discussion, in general, it's because it's not about that sort of question. I never discuss that. (Li, 22)

Moreover, Li himself distrusts the people he meets at these activities or in gay bars, because many of them conceal the fact that they are married, and can sometimes behave violently. Chen, 25, has an interesting opinion. To him, this idea of a "homosexual community," or of the "tongzhi community," is used by "them," without stating clearly who "they" might be. However, it does seem that he is thinking about the institutional system, because to him, the community is merely a question of health:

They say "this community," making it into a kind of belonging, in order to say that we are different from other people. It's a bit like... like prostitutes, that kind of thing, they say that they are "sex workers," they see them as a community, by considering them in terms of their sex work. And so it's the same for homosexuals, this tongzhi community is for homosexuals, and so they say that there is a "tongzhi community" or a "homosexual community". [...] In fact, it's mainly a question of health, that's the most important thing.

The programmes linked to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS therefore have an impact on some of these young men, such as Chen, who is extremely well informed on the dangers and the ways of prevention, compared to the other participants. But as it is viewed through the prism of public health, the community appears to Chen and other participants to be a mere category, an "at risk group," rather than a gathering of people around common values and shared ideas, or in defence of common interests.

Completely sealed off from the rest of society through the refusal of participants to reveal their names, the activities of the homosexual association cannot form a framework for community. They provide, at most, a relatively safe and protected place to a small number of young men. But for others, these meetings also present a risk of being found out, which no doubt explains why so few of the city's young homosexuals join in the sports competitions and karaoke sessions. Moreover, the association, while run by enthusiastic volunteers, lacks the resources to expand its activities and become more visible. It is difficult to see in all this an embryonic homosexual community such as emerged in Western cities beginning in the 1960s and 70s. Everyone uses the same word to characterise the "homosexual community": *san*, meaning dispersed or fragmented. Few say they regularly go

to the city's homosexual bar, and none admits to frequenting one of the "public baths." They keep their distance from activities organised specially for the "community," and prefer using the Internet to make new friends or communicate with those they are close to.

To me there is no homosexual community in China. [...] In China, it is dispersed; it exists only on the Internet, and nowhere else. [...] The majority [of homosexuals] dissemble. [...] I think the biggest thing is the growth of the Internet; if the Internet wasn't so developed, things certainly wouldn't be the way they are. (Wang, 30)

The four youngest participants all see "community" as meaning or consisting of the same thing:

My good friends that I like to go out with are also tongzhi. [...] But our community is relatively small; liking everybody is such a tall order, and I'm not interested in that sort of community. [...] I prefer this sort of small group, I find it gives me a sense of security. (Huang, 21)

Just as they use the Internet as a different, separate space in which they can exist as men who desire other men, these young men construct their social lives in a compartmentalised way, seeking to preserve spaces in which they can experience themselves as homosexuals alongside daily lives where they keep quiet about their difference. Of course, compartmentalising daily life into different spaces and groups is a necessity for the very great majority of homosexuals the world over, including the West. But what makes these young Hefei men different from, for example, San Francisco gays, is that they do not have structured, stable, protected spaces, as they would if they were organised, and even institutionalised, by associations, NGOs, or even public institutions. In Hefei, all spaces, including the Internet, are viewed with suspicion, and cannot offer the support, protection, and attention these men need.

The feeling experienced by these young men is reinforced by the fact that they do not find enough support among the non-homosexual population, or even among their own friends. Wu (26) says, "They may accept; people today are more enlightened, when they know you are gay, usually they won't react violently, they won't think you're somebody not to be associated with." Of course, he adds that you have to choose carefully whom you talk to: "You have to be discreet," but

fundamentally, "in China there is no discrimination against gays." To Zhang, a 26 year-old student, on the contrary, "a heterosexual [...] initially won't have any opinion on homosexuality, but once he knows [that you are homosexual] he's going to think that's not good, he will begin to have a more negative opinion." However, he thinks that revealing one's homosexuality does not lead to discrimination in professional life, except for members of the Communist Party. Chen, 25, also a student, thinks that his university friends are capable of accepting homosexuality, but in other circles discrimination is inevitable. To Li, 22, most heterosexuals are "disgusted" by homosexuality. Guo, 25, is also careful not to mention it, although he believes that "at first, [people] will be surprised [...] but then they will accept it; they probably won't show too much surprise or contempt."

When friends, companions, or colleagues are taken into confidence, once again personal experiences and how they are felt and interpreted differ, but all have one point in common: while the individuals who are confided in, mostly also young themselves, are not really shocked, they nevertheless do not really understand, or rather seem to have difficulty approaching the subject and talking about these questions, leaving these young men in their solitude. "In reality, ordinary friends are like that: they know, but they generally behave as if they didn't know; [...] they don't bring up the subject" (Su, 21). When Zhang spoke about sexual orientation to his friends, "They were very surprised, but then everything became normal again, but [...] all the same, I still say to myself that there's a sort of misunderstanding with them. [...] So when I am with them, it's not the same as when I am with homosexual friends, I don't feel as good." Some told him to try girls, others made jokes. "They don't pay any special attention to what you are, but neither do they have any great wish to talk to you about the subject" (Zhang, 26). Twenty-two-year-old Li's best female friend, the only non-homosexual person in Hefei to whom he has revealed his homosexuality, persists in helping him change by giving him lots of advice and introducing him to girls.

These young men therefore do not find any real opening in revealing their sexual orientation to non-gay friends. Relations cannot develop completely, as they are usually marked by an underlying discomfort, by difficulty in bringing up the subject, by jokes, and even by clumsy advice. Consequently, it is important for them to maintain, alongside their "normal" social life, a small group of *tongzhi* friends with whom they can go out and talk without the fear of a conversation getting out of hand, or of letting a word slip out that would suddenly reveal their secret.

We face here the creation of "intermediary spaces" of the type analysed by Laurence Roulleau-Berger, within which "sociability networks, practices, and ways of living based on some sort of cultural and economic alternative are developed."⁽²⁸⁾ The organisers of these associations find it hard to serve as liaisons with the environment, since they are themselves afraid to disclose their sexual orientation. These groups and networks are therefore unable to build bridges or transitions with the rest of society. Participants in these "intermediary spaces" remain mostly on the margins, "*entre-soi*," and develop forms of "liminal socialisation."⁽²⁹⁾

The only people who participate in these [homosexual] activities are those who are aware of what kind of people come. [...] outside people do not know, and those who participate are not going to shout slogans; they have no distinctive signs, nothing that would let people who see them know that it is a group of homosexuals. (Chen, 25)

Participation in these *tongzhi* networks and spaces also seems to be limited in time. These young men believe that after the age of 30, they will no longer be able to escape marriage. This question permeates all their social life and increases their feelings of solitude.

"Getting married" rather than "being homosexual": The place of norms and social roles in the identity construction of *tongzhi*

"As far as the future is concerned, I think that most of the others are like me [...]: we don't know what we're going to do" (Chen, 25). All the participants in this survey agree that marriage is the main problem faced by Chinese *tongzhi*, and that it is a source of great suffering.

As 30 year-old Wang reminds us, the problem for the social environment is not so much that two men, or two women, live together:

One good thing about China is that if two men live together, or two women, you can say to others, "It's my cousin," and people have no trouble believing it.

28. Laurence Roulleau-Berger, *La ville intervalle*, op. cit. p. 12.

29. Laurence Roulleau-Berger, "Espaces intermédiaires, économies urbaines et lutte pour la reconnaissance," in Guénola Capron, Geneviève Cortes, Hélène Guétat-Bernard (eds), *Liens et lieux de la mobilité*, Paris, Belin, 2005, p. 182.

[...] Most people don't have that sort of idea, because they have never been in contact with homosexuality, and have certainly never heard it talked about. [...] On the other hand, if a boy and a girl live together, people will say, "Oh! What's the relationship between those two?" One day I read a magazine, and in an article there was a foreign woman who said that China is Heaven for lesbians. She said that girls could hold hands in the street, that it was perfectly normal [...]. So you see, people never think of homosexuality. (Wang, 30)

What preoccupies friends, colleagues, and social relations, is that an individual is not married. Wu, 26 says:

The problem at work is that I've been working for three years, but I have never had a girlfriend, so my colleagues want to do the right thing and help out by introducing me to girls: "I've got a friend who's lovely, I'll introduce her to you." [...] But then, how do I put it, the others can see that I'm not very keen. [...] People want to be nice, but to me it's a kind of pressure. We don't want people to interfere in our lives, but they do it with good intentions, they think they're being helpful. It's a widespread problem in China. (Wu, 26)

Wang also says that it's "usual" for neighbours and people in the area to worry, and to want to introduce him to young women: he's already thirty! None of them think in their wondering about lack of enthusiasm for girls or lack of desire to marry that it might be a question of homosexuality. To the participants in this survey, society as a whole never considers that question. Homosexuality is still largely invisible, especially among the older generations; the "others" do not know, and therefore do not understand: the problem they keep bringing up is marriage, and not sexuality. In the face of continual reminders about social norms from those around them, some accept the criticism that is levelled at them. Thus, 26-year-old Zhang is very talkative about this subject, but also very tough-minded:

When you are young, it is natural to have desires. So you think about this sort of subject [sexuality]. But when you progress in society, when you have more experience, after a certain age, you begin to think about other things. Because if you want to play a certain social role, naturally you have to start thinking

about marriage and children. [...] But today people like me, many tongzhi, lack a sense of duty towards the family; they don't necessarily want to have children. (Zhang, 26)

Indeed it is around this dilemma that these young homosexuals construct themselves: to marry or not to marry? The question comes before that of identity or sexual orientation. It is around the family, the institution that blends the social norms of marriage and children, that the anxieties and contradictions of these young men are centred. It is the parents who impose the obligation of "perpetuating the family" (*chuan zong jie dai*) – which is to say, of providing a line of descent, preferably male – a traditional expression repeated by several of the participants. It is within the family that the power of the social norm is exercised:

Because in China today the most important thing is to "perpetuate the family" [...] [the parents say] "You are a man, why do you not yet have a child?" My opinion is that if a man could have a child with another man, then there would no longer be a problem. That's how the Chinese are: to them perpetuating the family comes before everything else. (Wang, 30)

The questionnaire included a few questions about what we would call, using the American expression, "coming out" (in Chinese *chu gui*), an act that is an important rite of passage in the West.³⁰ Very frequently, the answers given by these young men distort the question, or rather rephrase it: questions about sexual identity and orientation raise the problem of marriage. Similarly, on a number of occasions participants went into detail about their relations with the rest of society, as well as their own family, in terms of "I don't want to get married," rather than "I am homosexual." Thus, the major concern of over half of them was not telling their parents about their sexual orientation, but rather their wish not to marry a woman. This is also how Wang – who was the only one to have talked about these matters with his parents very early on – began to affirm himself. While still very young, before adolescence, he proclaimed that he would never marry, and then at around 15 explained to his parents that

30. On debate about "coming out," which has become a central ritual in the experience of homosexuals in the West, see Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*, London, Routledge, 1995, 244 pages; Mark Blasius, "An Ethos of Lesbian and Gay Existence," *Political Theory*, vol. 20, n. 4, November 1992, pp. 642-671; Kirsten McLean, "Hiding in the closet?: Bisexuals, coming out and the disclosure imperative," *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 43, n. 2, 2007, pp. 151-166.

he didn't much like girls, and finally, at the end of university, that he loved boys.

Moreover, according to these young men, their parents' generation — whom they present as less educated and brought up in a very different social, cultural, and economic environment to theirs — really doesn't have any idea what homosexuality might be.

That generation [my parents'] are very ignorant about these things, very conservative. Which is to say, they don't understand. [...] But if they find out you are, in the beginning, they'll probably treat you like a monster. [...] It's a little like if one day you said to your parents: "I'm from Mars." (Zhang, 26)

If you are not related to someone, they can say: "It doesn't matter to me whether you're gay or not." [...] But if it's their child who is gay or lesbian, then they will say, "How is my child going to marry?" It's a problem they can't not think about. (Wu, 26)

Maybe your close friends can understand you, but your immediate or extended family, the family in the sense of traditional ties, they can't understand you. [...] The only thing they can accept is marriage and children, that kind of traditional relationship. I think that if you have brothers in the family, then you might feel that the pressure on you to marry will be less strong, and maybe you will be able not to marry [...] because they can pin their hopes on your brothers. (Chen, 25)

Wang believes that the fact that he has an older brother who is already married and a father made things easier for him with his parents, whose line of descent is already assured, and who have grandchildren to keep them busy. It must be emphasised that very few of the participants in this survey were only children, either because they were born before the policy was strictly applied, or because, coming from the country, they already have an older sister.⁽³¹⁾

Marriage, rather than sexual identity, appears for all concerned to be the great difficulty faced by homosexuals in Hefei. Consequently, they see their future as dark, and take advantage of the few years left before having to decide to find a wife. Up to the age of around 25, it is still normal not to have a girlfriend, but once getting a job, and therefore financial independence, makes them into adults, they are expected, like their comrades and colleagues, to set to work

finding a young woman. From 30 onwards the pressure increases, and not only do the insistence and mocking remarks of those around them increase, but often parents decide to help children who are apparently too taken up with professional activities. In some Chinese cities, it is common for parents to gather in parks, each holding a placard displaying a photograph of their son or daughter, and the main features of their CV.

What allows the family to play its part as the guarantor of respect for the social norm is the affection felt by these young men for their parents, whom they cannot rebel against, and to whom above all they do not want to cause any suffering. Several participants were deeply afraid of how their parents would react if they were to tell them, not about their homosexuality, but about their refusal to marry. Feng sums it up:

In general, tongzhi are afraid their parents will be too "tough" or too "weak." By "tough" I mean the parents saying: "You don't want to get married, so leave our house, we no longer recognise you as our son." In that case the children will give in to their parents. [...] by "weak" I mean parents who stop eating or drinking, who no longer do anything. I even know someone whose parents went on hunger strike in order to make him marry. (Feng, 29)

According to him and other participants, many homosexuals are afraid of being blackmailed by their parents. They present Chinese society as being different from Western societies: it is not individualistic, and the family is still more important than the individual.

There remains only one other hypothetical option, that of marrying a lesbian. In the process of other research projects, I have met a few young homosexuals who married lesbians, particularly in big cities such as Shanghai or Beijing. In Hefei, none of the participants knew of such a couple, but all talked about this possibility. Generally, in particular for the youngest, this idea seems the best hope, enabling them to reconcile the expectations of their family and their own desires — although one must bear in mind that they don't see any way of carrying out such a project, since they do not know any lesbians. The older participants reject this idea as bringing more complications than solutions. How can you live with someone you don't love? How can you organise

31. Since 1988, rural households whose first child is a daughter have been allowed to have a second child.

your social life when each spouse has a partner of their own? What will the neighbours say about so much coming and going of partners of both sexes? How long will lying to two families be tenable? And what if one day the wife leaves with the child?

Consequently, as Wu, 26, puts it, "These young homosexuals have to resign themselves to choosing who is going to suffer: one's parents, one's future wife, or oneself." Wu, as well as Wang (30) and Li (22), worry about the suspicions and unhappiness that their wife could not avoid experiencing: either they cheat on their wife with another man and one day she realises it, or they deprive themselves of sexuality, without being able, for all that, to provide the emotional and physical comfort that a woman is entitled to expect from them. Since marriage is everything, only destructive dilemmas remain. But to conclude on an optimistic note, Wu, who is certainly a bit naive, thinks he has found the answer: a former colleague is still passionately in love with him, even though he has revealed his homosexuality to her precisely in order to get rid of her. But the young woman persists, and continues to ask him to marry her. There lies his escape route: since she knew already before the wedding, she will not be able to complain that she was misled about her husband's real desires. So nobody should have to suffer...

Conclusion

Behind the appearances of a society engaged in headlong liberation of the body and the mind, these 15 young men from Hefei show us a Chinese society that is far from having accomplished its "sexual liberation." Evans Harriet warns us against the deceptive appearances of a society in which bodies and desires seem to liberate themselves, emphasising that "the diverse forms which the sexualized body takes in contemporary China discursively function as emblems of the individualist ideology of market opportunity and competition. Detached from a critical language of articulation with which to address hierarchical relations between men and women, sex and sexuality become components of individual exploration, dissociated from the broader issues of power and injustice."⁽³²⁾

In the major cities, other cultural and identity practices are being elaborated, partly in the framework of the globalisation of models, ideas, and concepts, which allows homosexuals to invent new ways of living out their desires and their identities.⁽³³⁾ Poorly integrated into the networks within which the Western and Asian models and images circulate, the young *tongzhi* of Hefei can experiment with their desires

only within strongly defined limits and under very powerful constraints. These constraints bring suffering, unhappiness, and solitude.

This is firstly because marriage seems ultimately unavoidable. Enforced by parents whom they cannot resolve to disobey, and on whom they cannot imagine inflicting suffering, the norm of marriage is like a sword of Damocles. While they can dream of alternative ways of living, such as marrying a lesbian, they all know there is little chance that they can escape marriage. Of course, the young men in this survey still have a few years in front of them before the question is seriously raised by their parents, and in the course of the life that still awaits them, new experiences and encounters will provide some of them with original resources to invent a different future. But at the time of the survey, they perceived the future as already determined and devoid of hope.

Other studies have focused in the last few years on the role of parents in the lives of the younger generations, including in choosing a mate. According to Ellen Efron Pimente, young urbanites give great importance to their parents' opinion on a possible future spouse; their agreement even appears to be an element of satisfaction in married life.⁽³⁴⁾ Similarly, research on Chinese parents' perception of their children's intimacy and "private life" show the persistence of relations of authority and duty within the Chinese family, which remains the basic unit of social life.⁽³⁵⁾

The homosexuals we interviewed in Hefei for this survey cannot bring themselves to place an identity based on sexuality above their other identities linked to social roles, in particular to the role of "dutiful son." The family, through its cohesion and the intact power of authority relationships governed by the values of "filial devotion," ensures the normalisation of the behaviour of the young. Francine Deutsch, in her research among third level students, notes the persistence of considerable filial devotion on the part of young people who, in the course of interviews, spontaneously place the well-being of their parents among their main preoccupations. In particular, among the duties linked to filial devotion, these students emphasise the importance of providing their parents with

32. Evans Harriet, "Sexed Bodies, Sexualized Identities, and the Limits of Gender," *China Information*, vol. 22, n. 2, 2008, p. 378.

33. Lisa Rofel, "Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture," Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2007, 251 pages.

34. Ellen Efron Pimente, "Just How Do I Love Thee?: Marital Relations in Urban China," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 62, n. 1, February 2000, pp. 32-47.

35. Tang Shengming and Dong Xiaoping, "Parents' and Children's Perceptions of Privacy Rights in China: A Cohort Comparison," *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 27, n. 3, March 2006, pp. 285-300.

grandchildren.⁽³⁶⁾ The norms of marriage and parenthood are thus not imposed by the power of repression, but through the acceptance by the young of a set of social rules and roles, the first being that of "dutiful son." In research on married seropositive homosexuals, Rachel Zhou has also shown how, in the face of illness, these men put their roles as sons, fathers, and husbands before their desires or an alternative sexual identity, in order to protect their families from the stigmatisation and discrimination linked to homosexuality.⁽³⁷⁾

Faced with the obligation to marry, the young homosexuals in Hefei think it is difficult to construct a *tongzhi* identity even outside the strictly family sphere. They believe that their friends, classmates, and colleagues cannot understand or genuinely accept their homosexuality. The Internet, a few outings to the only gay bar in Hefei, and sporting and cultural activities organised by the homosexual associations: these are the few spaces in which one can exist with one's difference, but they remain relatively confined, always under threat and are kept completely sealed off from the rest of society. Moreover, many of these young men remain mistrustful of other homosexuals they meet, and prefer to keep their distance; even during sporting events and singing contests, exchanges between the young men are rare. These activities are less an opportunity for learning and self-development within a friendly community than spaces that are a little less precarious and stifling than the rest of social life. In the end, only three of the participants regularly take part in such activities.

These young men thus confine themselves to a few homosexual friends and to the virtual networks and communities that the Internet makes possible. They arrange moments and groups to express their desires, as well as their joys, their anxieties, their expectations and their hopes. These moments remain fragmentary, like shifting archipelagos walled off from the rest of their lives. It is not surprising that for all of them, as Zhang, 26, accurately sums up:

The great problems of the young tongzhi are: firstly, psychological pressure, a pressure that comes from solitude, from a feeling of solitude, which is the second problem. Then there is sexual stifling, which is the third problem. [...] The main problem is the psychological pressure, which comes from many factors. The feeling of anxiety, the question of identity, make many develop an inferiority complex, or show themselves to be indecisive or very troubled. •

• Translated by Michael Black

Glossary

Chuan zong jie dai	傳宗接代
San	散
Tongxinglian	同性戀
Tongzhi	同志
Xiao	孝

36. Francine M. Deutsch, "Filial Piety, Patrilineality, and China's One-Child Policy," *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 27, n. 3, March 2006, pp. 366-389.
37. Yanqiu Rachel Zhou, "Homosexuality, seropositivity, and family obligations: Perspectives of HIV-infected men who have sex with men in China," *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 8, n. 6, 2006, p. 496.