



Hong Kong

by Andrew Matzner

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With a population of nearly seven million people, Hong Kong, located in the South China Sea, is one of the world's most cosmopolitan areas. A British colony for over one hundred and fifty years, Hong Kong is now under the administration of mainland China. In Hong Kong, Chinese and Western ideas about gender and sexuality have uniquely shaped social attitudes toward homosexuality and transgenderism.

Colonial History

The British used Hong Kong Island, which was home to small fishing villages, as a naval base during the Chinese Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1842 China officially ceded Hong Kong Island to the British; land adjacent to the island was added to Britain's territory in later years. Under British rule, Hong Kong became one of the world's most fascinating cities, for its mingling of Western and Eastern ideas and for its thriving free-market economy on the doorstep of Communist China.

On December 19, 1984, China and Britain signed an agreement that stipulated that on July 1, 1997 Britain would return Hong Kong to China, which would govern the territory as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) for the next fifty years. During this time period, China would allow Hong Kong a high degree of independence, excepting issues of foreign policy and defense. Since the handover, Hong Kong's free market economy has continued to thrive, and fears of a repressive mainland China smothering the territory have failed to materialize.

Cultural Influences on Sex and Gender

Chinese cultural traditions that privilege heterosexual relationships have constrained respect for gender and sexual diversity in Hong Kong. Factors such as family obligations, including immense pressure to marry and reproduce, have traditionally made it difficult for those whom we would identify as gay or lesbian to lead independent lives.

Nevertheless, in traditional Chinese communities same-sex sexual relations were not uncommon and were tolerated as long as they did not threaten the family unit. There is little precedent in Chinese history for the kind of religious-based homophobia that has led to persecution of glbtq people in the West.

Cross-dressing is also an important part of Chinese history. In the theater, for example, all of the roles were traditionally played by men. There are numerous historical accounts of love affairs between female impersonators and their male lovers.

With British colonization of Hong Kong, Western social, religious, and legal influences worked to stigmatize homosexuality and transgenderism. Not only did the British introduce laws against male homosexual activity, but they suppressed information about the place of non-normative gender identity and sexual practices in Chinese history. The result was a cultural amnesia that led many Hong Kong Chinese to assume



Top: The Hong Kong Skyline in 2005.

Above: Women Coalition of HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) march in the Taiwan Pride Parade in 2005.

that homosexuality was a Western import foreign to Chinese culture.

Anticipation of the Handover: Its Positive Impact

Seeking to forestall repressive policies that might have been instituted following the 1997 handover, the Hong Kong government passed laws to strengthen human rights protections as the deadline approached. This had a direct effect on laws pertaining to homosexuality.

Under British rule, homosexual contact between men was illegal, regardless of whether it was consensual or not. (Sexual relations between women were not mentioned in the legal code.) Sentences were harsh. For example, conviction of buggery (that is, anal intercourse) could result in life imprisonment.

Beginning in the late 1960s, liberal British government officials began to struggle with conservative members of the local Chinese community over the legalization of homosexuality. As a result of earlier British policies suppressing information about Chinese sexual history, the Chinese argued that homosexuality was a vice that had originated in the West, and hence had no place in Chinese culture.

In response to this cultural amnesia, in the early 1980s a local Chinese gay activist (known by his pseudonym Samshasha) began publishing books in Chinese in order to demonstrate that homosexuality and transgenderism had a long tradition in Chinese history.

In 1991, consensual homosexual relations between adults in private were finally legalized, 24 years after they had been legalized in England.

From the late 1980s, gay activism gained strength, and activists began using the term "tongzhi" to describe themselves. This word, which originally meant "friend" in Cantonese, then was adopted by the Communist party as "comrade," was favored because it lacked sexual undertones, and could be used as an inclusive, umbrella term to describe the diverse members of the Hong Kong Chinese glbtq community. The first Tongzhi Conference took place in Hong Kong in December 1996.

Although homosexuality had been decriminalized in 1991, bias still existed throughout society. An anti-discrimination law that would have shielded gay men and lesbians from discrimination in housing, employment, and public service was hotly contested in the Legislative Council in the late 1990s. The proposed bill was narrowly defeated in June 1997.

After the Handover

The July 1997 handover to China produced a great deal of anxiety among Hong Kong residents, who did not know what to expect, and were fearful of mainland-style political oppression. However, the feared oppression did not occur. Moreover, the Hong Kong glbtq community has grown more visible and active since the handover than it was before.

In 1999 Hong Kong's first gay pride day (referred to as Tongzhi Day) was held, in conjunction with a two week festival that celebrated glbtq life with a series of parties, activities, and seminars.

In recent years, many of Hong Kong's gay and lesbian activists have become more confrontational. For example, in early May 2001, almost fifty demonstrators clashed with police after attempting to disrupt a Red Cross event, charging that the organization was biased against homosexuals. Other activist groups have staged protests against anti-gay policies espoused by Hong Kong's Roman Catholic Church.

At the same time, however, other gay activists have eschewed confrontational strategies, which they see as a Western technique. They, instead, focus on less direct methods of protest in an effort to preserve social harmony.

While Hong Kong's gay community is increasingly visible, and services such as bars, bookshops, and saunas proliferate, nonetheless traditional, conservative values remain dominant in the greater society. Hence, many members of the glbtq community who do not identify as activists remain closeted in family and work contexts.

Transgenderism

It has been possible to obtain sex reassignment surgery in Hong Kong since 1981. According to Sam Winter's country report on the web site Transgender ASIA, the Hong Kong government subsidizes this surgery as a treatment for gender dysphoria.

On the other hand, transgendered people have little protection against discrimination in the work force. Identification cards, which every resident is required to carry, show a person's birth sex, regardless of one's gender identity or dress. Because these identification cards are routinely demanded by officials, a disjunction between birth sex and gender identity or dress can expose a transgendered person to bias. Similarly, the gender on birth certificates is not permitted to be changed to reflect a person's new gender after sex reassignment surgery.

To the Future

Since the handover, Hong Kong's glbtq community has become increasingly visible and active. It thrives with numerous glbtq-oriented bars, clubs, and saunas, as well as film festivals, conferences, and activist demonstrations.

Hong Kong activists are struggling to combat negative colonial ideas about sexuality and to reconnect with a rich Chinese history of non-normative gender and sexual expression. They are also continuing to demand legal reforms that would protect people who identify as gay or lesbian. Whether Hong Kong will realize its potential to become a glbtq capital of Asia will be known only with time, but in recent years progress has been made to that end.

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