



Taiwan

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Participants in the public wedding ceremony at Taiwan Pride in 2006.

The island of Taiwan, lying off the coast of southern China, is today home to a hybrid society, incorporating elements of various Chinese, Japanese, and American languages and popular cultures. The expression of gender and sexuality in contemporary Taiwan mirrors this hybrid society.

With the transition from rigid authoritarian social and political control under the Kuomintang government to a nascent pluralist democracy following the lifting of martial law in 1987 has come a range of far-reaching social transformations. One of the most exciting of these is the emergence of a vibrant, politicized, and diverse public queer culture--a culture whose rise since the early 1990s has not, however, been without controversy.

The Pre-Modern Period

Taiwan has been dominated for several centuries by Han Chinese culture, with Han Chinese inhabitants of the island vastly outnumbering the island's relatively small indigenous population. Little information is available on non-heterosexual and non-normative gender cultures in Taiwan in the pre-modern period, since the island was not a major center of the Qing dynasty's intellectual and bureaucratic life and hence relatively few pre-modern written records survive.

However, it is clear that the social organization of gender and sexuality in pre-modern Taiwan mirrored that of the Chinese metropolitan culture in at least one way: it lacked any single, coherent category comparable with the modern, Euro-American identity "homosexual." Of course the absence of a coherent homosexual identity does not mean that erotic behaviors between people of the same gender did not occur before the modern period. But such behaviors, when they did occur, would most likely have been managed according to local and specific cultural understandings, and always within the broader context of an agrarian village society that was economically and ideologically structured around the reproductive, patrilineal family.

The Modern Period: Legal Regulation of Sexuality

There are no legal prohibitions specifically directed against homosexuality (*tongxinglian*) in Taiwan's legal code, nor have there ever existed such prohibitions in the modern period. Neither sodomy nor *tongxinglian* is criminalized either by the Japanese criminal code, which came into force in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial occupation (1895-1945), or by the Republican legal code, which was brought into force with Taiwan's hand-over to China under the Kuomintang party and which remains in force today.

However, the lack of explicit legal prohibition of *tongxinglian* does not mean that people who engage in non-normative sexual and gendered behaviors have therefore been free from state harassment. During the Kuomintang-enforced martial law period during the 1960s and 1970s, for example, an article prohibiting "wearing odd outfits" (*qi zhuang yifu*) was vigorously enforced to persecute cross-dressing "T" ("tomboy," or butch/transgendered) lesbians and male cross-dressers.

Moreover, in Taiwan today, laws criminalizing behavior that is "deleterious to fine customs" (*fanghai shanliang fengsu*) or "deleterious to cultural morality" (*fanghai fenghua*) are routinely used to discipline men engaging in homosexual behavior in public. This occurs most prominently in police harassment of public cruising and in police raids of gay saunas.

In addition, while it does not actually criminalize homosexuality, neither does Taiwan's legal code afford any state protection for the rights of lesbian and gay citizens, for example by recognizing same-sex unions.

Changing Terms, Shifting Identities

As Tze-lan D. Sang shows in her book *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*, the modern European invention of the quasi-medical category, "homosexuality," was translated into Mandarin as *tongxing'ai* or *tongxinglian* in the 1920s from the Japanese *doseiai*. This sexological understanding of same-sex desire and practice was probably imported to Taiwan at approximately the same time.

But the existence of a local linguistic parallel for the modern European idea of homosexuality as a biological and psychological identity does not mean that distinctive local understandings of same-sex eroticism necessarily disappeared as a result. Contemporary Taiwanese sexual culture is a hybrid formation, neither the simple expression of an unadulterated local, traditional culture, nor merely an annex of homogenizing global gay culture. It incorporates multiple different ways of conceptualizing same-sex desire and sexual behavior; some local, and some imported from elsewhere.

Anthropologist Teri Silvio has undertaken extensive research on the all-female Taiwanese folk opera, *koa-a-hi*, which peaked in popularity between the end of World War II and the mid-1960s and still survives today. In the *koa-a-hi* troupe, actresses are trained to perform either male (*sio sing*) or female roles (*sio toan*), with *sio sing* sometimes extending their masculine stage personae into their everyday social lives.

Silvio shows that romantic and sexual relations between actresses or between actresses and their female fans are a form of female homoerotic relationship that is widely recognized within the broader community. But interestingly, such relationships are not necessarily understood by the actresses themselves as "lesbian" (*nütongxinglian*). Instead, these relations are seen by actresses, their fans, and to some extent the general public as specific to the local culture of the *koa-a-hi* theater world, and therefore not *primarily* related to the implicitly western concept of lesbianism per se (although as Silvio also emphasizes, these two knowledge systems on erotic relations between women are increasingly difficult to pry apart).

The coexistence of the modern, western-style discourse of *nütongxinglian* with local folk understandings of love between women in the *koa-a-hi* world mirrors the general situation of understandings of sexuality in contemporary Taiwan, where local folk understandings interpenetrate modern western-style knowledges to produce complex, hybrid forms of sexual culture.

Subcultural Histories

Prior to the mid 1980s, the same-sex and transgender subcultures that existed in Taiwan were relatively discreet, low profile, and ephemeral. Male same-sex sociality revolved initially around cruising and sex work, most famously in Taipei's New Park, which has been a center of male cruising and sexual cultures since at least the 1940s and is celebrated in Pai Hsien-yung's classic 1983 novel, *Crystal Boys*.

Mixed gay-straight bars and a limited gay commercial and sexual subculture have probably been in existence in some form in urban Taiwan since the 1960s. In the mid-1960s, the presence of large numbers of American GIs in Taipei on R&R leave from the Vietnam war fueled the development of an extensive bar and entertainment culture in Taipei City. More public, exclusively gay bars had emerged in Taiwan's major cities by the 1980s, foreshadowing the more extensive commercial gay culture that would appear in the 1990s.

Aside from the relatively discreet world of erotic relations between women that formed around *koa-a-hi* troupes, between the 1960s and the 1980s lesbians tended to socialize in general public venues such as western hotels, as well as in the gay male and gay-affiliated bars. It was not until the mid-1980s that an independent lesbian bar culture began to emerge.

As the research of Taiwanese cultural anthropologist Antonia Yengning Chao shows, Taipei's female same-sex subcultures between the 1960s and the late 1980s were largely structured around the dimorphous secondary genders of T and *po*--comparable in some ways to the English categories butch and femme-- hence the common designation of "T bar" for lesbian bar. T bars in the 1980s tended to be small, relatively private, "underground" social spaces, with some proof of a social connection with the T/*po* subculture often required as a condition of entry.

This style of bar is historically related to Japanese bar culture: karaoke performance is often a central element, and paid "hostesses" (*gongguan*) may be provided to socialize with patrons and encourage drinking. As with the gay male bars, the appearance of the small, underground T bars during the 1980s prefigures the rise of a more public lesbian commercial culture in the decade that followed.

The 1990s "Queer Boom": *Tongzhi* Politics, Subcultures, and Commercial and Artistic Cultures

After the lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987, widespread social change occurred along with urbanization, the rise of commodity culture, and the emergence of a range of grassroots political movements including feminism and the *tongzhi*, or lesbian and gay, movement.

The term *tongzhi*, literally meaning "comrade" but appropriated as a politicized marker of sexual identity, arrived in Taiwan from Hong Kong in 1992: prior to this there had existed no generic term that both politicizes sexual identity and encompasses both men and women. The rise of *tongzhi* as a category of sexual identification was accompanied by transformations across the fields of queer movement politics, commercial culture, subcultural practice, and artistic production.

As a form of politicized identity politics, the *tongzhi* movement initially emerged in large part from Taiwan's nascent feminist movement, and was spearheaded in the first instance by lesbians. The first formal lesbian or gay organization in Taiwan was a lesbian social group, *Women zhi Jian* (Between Us), formed in 1990 and based on the principles of lesbian feminism. Three years later the first publicly available lesbian or gay publication emerged: *Ai Bao* (Love Paper), again a product of the new lesbian feminist culture.

In the late 1990s, however, a sharp split occurred between the organized feminist movement and lesbian political activism when two of the *tongzhi* movement's key activists were dismissed from their jobs at the feminist Awakening Foundation and moved on to form a new, exclusively *tongzhi*-based organization, the Hotline project.

During the early-to-mid 1990s, lesbian and gay student associations mushroomed on university campuses all over Taiwan, and some lesbian and gay studies courses began to be taught in the major universities, especially National Taiwan University and National Taiwan Central University, where the Centre for the Study of Sexualities was established in the mid-1990s. Out of this emergent lesbian and gay academic culture came the localized translation of the 1990s English reclamation of "queer" in "queer theory" and "queer literature," with the phonetic Mandarin transliteration *ku'er*.

The organization of campus-based *tongzhi* groups was greatly facilitated by the rise of Internet technology: from the mid-1990s, the Internet, and Bulletin Board System (BBS) forums in particular, became vital tools for the solidification of locally based *tongzhi* student communities. The easy accessibility, relative anonymity, and affordability of the Internet (with most of the new *tongzhi* BBS forums located on free university servers) led to the formation of a vast island wide network of student *tongzhi* net users, who are

able to share information, engage in debate, and consolidate sexual identities and communities with unprecedented ease thanks to this new communication technology.

Tongzhi movement activists have mobilized effectively and publicly across a range of local social issues since the early-to-mid 1990s. They have protested, for example, over police harassment of gay cruising; the slated redevelopment of Taipei's iconic gay cruising site, New Park; the Taipei City Government's summary revocation of the licenses of the municipality's licensed female sex workers; and a mid-1990s rash of sensationalist, homophobic television specials on male and female *tongzhi* subcultures.

At the same time, queer commercial cultures flourished, particularly middle-class gay male cultures of consumption. These are epitomized in the bar and dance-club scene in the major cities of Taipei and Kaohsiung, which expanded markedly during the 1990s and began regularly to include elements of spectacular performance such as drag and costume shows.

The rise of cultural consumption as a means of expressing gay identity can also be seen in the launch of two glossy gay life style magazines, *G&L* and *Together*, in 1996 and 1998 respectively, both aimed at a Taiwan/Hong Kong/Chinese diaspora readership. At the peak of its popularity, *G&L* reached a readership of some 40,000; however, both of these magazines folded after a few years' publication because of financial difficulties.

The existing female T bar scene, too, diversified as a result of the rise of public, politicized *tongzhi* cultures. In the early-to-mid-1990s, debates began to occur in lesbian-feminist circles over the gender politics of T/*po* roles, with many rejecting such roles as inappropriate to the new *tongzhi* culture. They argued that such roles merely reproduced patriarchal power structures.

Alongside the T bars there now began to appear new-style lesbian bars, which were generally more public, lacking hostesses, not organized around T/*po* roles, and overall more similar to American style lesbian bars than to Japanese style hostess/karaoke bars. Debates between lesbian-feminism and defenders of T/*po* culture are ongoing within Taiwan's queer academic circles, with American transgender studies and autobiographies currently undergoing local translation and dissemination and providing the basis for more nuanced and less dismissive understandings of local T/*po* cultures.

The 1990s "queer boom" has also brought new forms of *tongzhi* cultural production. Over the past decade there has been a marked leap in the number and prominence of literary works dealing with same-sex desire, queer politics, and transgender identity. These include stories and novels by well-known authors such as Chu T'ien-wen, with her 1994 novel *Notes of a Desolate Man*, as well as those of the younger "queer" (*ku'er*) authors such as Qiu Miaojin, Chen Xue, Hong Ling, and Chi Ta-wei.

A number of popular and art-house films have been made on similar subjects, such as Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*, most of the films of Tsai Ming-liang, Jo-fei Chen's lesbian feature *Incidental Journey*, and many recent student films. Since 2000, there has even been a small spate of locally produced, free-to-air, lesbian and gay-themed television dramas. At the same time, a strand of contemporary graphic art dealing with the topic of homosexuality and queer desire has emerged, for example in the works of artists such as Tung-lu Hung, Mei-hua Lai, and Chun-ming Hou. There have also been some small-scale queer theater productions, and there is a small, lesbian live music scene.

Future Directions

Despite this apparently momentous proliferation of queer politics and cultural production over the past decade, it should be kept in mind that the audience for much of the new *tongzhi* culture remains limited. In the case of avant-garde queer fiction, film, theater and graphic arts, the audience is largely restricted to a liberal-minded portion of the educated urban middle-class.

The fact that such stories, films, plays, and artworks enjoy prominence in the intellectual cultures of northern Taiwan does not translate into any widespread acceptance of actual gay and lesbian individuals: the ideological centrality of the patrilineal family has certainly not disappeared in the contemporary period, and parental pressure to marry and raise children remains very strong in the lives of most individuals. Much of the current media buzz around *tongzhi* cultures, too, remains implicitly or explicitly homophobic.

Indeed, one worrying recent development is the emergence of a more organized homophobic backlash in response to the increasing prominence of local *tongzhi* cultures. On the one hand, when the queer topic becomes mainstreamed it may have the potential to diversify the character of mainstream commercial culture itself, as is arguably the case with the recent spate of locally produced lesbian and gay-themed television dramas. But on the other hand, the new prominence and coherence of minority sexual politics can also spark angry repudiations from the social mainstream.

For example, in 2001 the plate-glass window of Taiwan's first exclusively lesbian and gay bookstore, Gin Gin's (established in 1999), was repeatedly smashed, leading *tongzhi* groups to protest what they viewed as a hate crime. Even more disturbingly, in 2003 Professor Josephine Ho, a founding member of the Centre for the Study of Sexualities and an outspoken champion of the rights of sexual and gender minorities, has been targeted by a coalition of new-right women's and Catholic groups seeking legal action to have her removed from her teaching position at National Taiwan Central University.

These groups are attempting to stifle Professor Ho's groundbreaking work on academic studies of sexuality and her activist intervention in women's rights, lesbian and gay rights, and sex worker rights. The legal challenge to Professor Ho may mark the worrying appearance of an American style, new right, Christian inflected anti-queer conservative politics, something that had not previously been seen in the local Taiwan context.

Thus, while on the one hand Taiwan's queer political, subcultural, academic, and artistic cultures continue to grow and diversify, on the other hand their increased prominence may have unforeseen consequences in precipitating a more organized homophobic backlash. The deathbed pronouncement of Sun Yat-sen, who is officially revered as the Father of the Nation but whose words are cheekily claimed by the *tongzhi* movement as a queer political slogan, seems never more apposite: "The revolution has not yet been successful; comrades, we must struggle yet" (*Geming shangwei chengong, tongzhi reng xu nuli*).

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