

LESBIAN SPACES IN BEIJING

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ABSTRACT: Till now, lesbian spaces are still ignored in China regardless of the fact that a large number of women are lesbians. The aim of this paper is trying to show a general view of lesbian spaces in Beijing, focusing primarily on four principal aspects concerning lesbian spaces: the background preparing for the emergence of lesbian spaces, the historical process of the development, different spatial types, and challenges they faced nowadays. The author points out that, lesbian spaces in Beijing are actually a byproduct of mainstream gay man movement, that's why the predominant lesbian spaces are bars. Nonetheless, lesbians have invented new types of spaces in the recent years, which demonstrates different value orientation from gay man. Meanwhile it is worth noticing that the situation of lesbian spaces can't explain the living condition of all the lesbians in Beijing. Lesbian spaces also represent as a model for the heterosexual women to develop their own cultural spaces.

KEYWORDS: lesbian, space, Beijing

1 BACKGROUND

Homosexuality is a natural phenomenon since the beginning of human race, which exists in all kinds of human culture including China. According to the historical Chinese documents, there were always private or public gay affairs in China. But since the foundation of new China, gay people seemed to have disappeared in the country under the new political and cultural circumstance.

It was not until the Reform and Opening-up that the issues concerning gay people reappeared in China. Information about gay and Aids and their seeming relations came into China along with the economic trading. As in the western world, the fear for the spread of Aids helped to make the Chinese people pay more attention on gay people, but at first exclusively on gay man. Scholars began to do and publish researches on gay man, organizations were founded aiming especially at gay man, and some kind of spaces was formed in order to enhance the work concerning gay man. For instance, the first article about homosexuality appeared on a Chinese medical magazine in as early as 1981. In 1992, the Institute of Chinese Health Education founded the first gay man space in Beijing, which was a saloon serving exclusively to gay man. In the same year, the first organization named Love Knowledge Action was founded in Beijing, which focused on sexual activities among gay and bisexual men and the prevention of Aids. It was exactly during this process that the Chinese gay people acquired a sense of self awareness and grew stronger, ready to create a space for themselves.

Which worth to mention and can't be overlooked is the widespread of internet in China at that time. Connections among gay people through internet were much safer and easier than before. Therefore they met each other more, and more people came together to get support from each other. In a sense, internet has greatly accelerated the development of gay movement in China and helped to create gay spaces in Chinese cities.

2 HISTORY

Lesbian space didn't appeared in Beijing until the first half of 1990s. Till now, there have been more than 20 lesbian spaces in Beijing. The emergence of lesbian spaces in Beijing was not solely a contribution by lesbians, but rather a byproduct of Chinese gay man movement. For the one thing, it was just through working with gay men in the movement that lesbians of Beijing attained their self awareness and grown stronger, although the movement was not in the first place for them. For the other thing, discrimination and ignorance received from gay man spaces, for example gay bars, forced lesbians to build their own spaces.

Lesbians of Beijing have stepped onto stage in the early 1990s. Under the influence of publications on gay people and also the influence of western gay culture, some gay people in Beijing began to come together and meet each other regularly. Actually, it was a private meeting started in 1994 holding by an English woman named Susie, firstly in her own house then in the bars in Sanlitun. Since then, Beijing lesbians, though only a few began to emerge from underground onto the surface and participated at the very beginning in the gay movement. But the gatherings couldn't been categorized as a lesbian space as there were only two or three lesbians participated compared to a comparatively larger number of gay men, and the meetings were not located in a certain place but moved all the time around from one place to another due to discriminations of normal people in the bars.

The 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women provided an excellent opportunity for Beijing lesbians to step into the view of the public, and it was the first time that solely lesbians came together and make their presence. There was a particular session on lesbian in the conference. Some Beijing lesbians who formerly had contact with foreign lesbians appeared in the session and participated in the discussion. After the conference, all the lesbians both from Beijing and abroad, went to a disco bar and had a dance party there together, which really created a sensation at that time.

Afterwards, more lesbians came out and began to appear in gay spaces in Beijing, mostly bars. But usually they only occupied a small part of the space on the edge, and also discriminated by some of the gay men. According to an interview of the boss of the biggest lesbian bar in Beijing, at that time, there were usually more than 200 gay men in a bar, but only no more than 20 lesbians. In the meantime, some groups of lesbians began to extend their existence to and appropriate some public but non-gay spaces in the city, like restaurants, to use them as an informal gathering spot. For example, a dining hall on the top floor of a shopping mall in Xidan was and still is one of the favorite meeting spot for lesbians in Beijing.

On the one hand, more lesbians participated in the enterprise of gay movement, and began to form their own organizations as well. In 1995, an informal lesbian organization was founded in Beijing, named Women Comrades, which mainly focusing on entertainment for lesbians. In 1997, a hot line for gay people was created both by gay men and lesbians. On Aug. 1998, the first Chinese Gay Conference was held privately in a temple northwest of Beijing, maximal 10 lesbians were present. As they thought the lesbian issues haven't attracted sufficient attention in the conference, they decided to hold their own meeting. On Oct. 1998, the first Chinese Lesbian Conference was held in a bar in Haidian District. More than 30 lesbians from more than 10 provinces have participated in the meeting. A small organization was formed consequently, named Beijing Sisters Group. The members of the group published a lesbian magazine and hold a lesbian hotline. They had an office, met each other once to twice a month. But the group lasted only 3 year till 2001.

From the beginning of the new millennium, great change has occurred concerning lesbian space in Beijing. As mentioned above, lesbians usually shared a common space with gay men in a bar but only occupy a small and marginal space in it. In 2000, a former lesbian singer Qiaoqiao decided to do something to change the situation. She built the first lesbian bar of China in Beijing, named Maple Bar, with its service exclusively for lesbians in Saturday evening. Afterwards, more lesbian bars and other kinds of lesbian spaces emerged. At the end of 2004, Beijing Lala Saloon was founded, which besides normal chatting and entertainment was predominantly a discuss group concerning issues about lesbian. On Jan. 2005, the second most famous lesbian bar in Beijing named West Wing Room was founded, meanwhile founded was a recently most important lesbian organization Tongyu. On May 2006, the first and still unique Tomboy shop was opened. On Aug. 2007, a kind of club house was opened by the same boss of the first lesbian bar, providing accommodations and much more private and free environment for lesbians to entertain. On May 2008, Tongyu, collaborating with other three gay or Aids related organization opened Beijing LGBT Center, with a certain time span especially for lesbian chatting.

As to the development of lesbian spaces in Beijing, although many may have come into being in the last 15 years, which was really a great success compared to before, some may not be able to stand long for various reasons, especially lesbian bars.

3 TYPES

The existing lesbian spaces in Beijing might be in the first place divided into two categories, one concerning spaces which are normally none-lesbian spaces but might be occasionally or at a regular intervals. The other is specialized lesbian spaces.

As to the former, normal restaurant or gymnasiums or other kind of spaces might be occupied by lesbians at times and become a lesbian space temporarily. As mentioned above, the development of internet in China has helped to accelerate the development of gay movement in China, so it helped to form some casual lesbian spaces as well. There are several lesbian groups on the internet, either on the webpage through BBS or through communication software like MSN or QQ. The members of the group launched an activity individually and freely, who are interested could join the activity as they wish. According to the interviews with several lesbians, small scale gatherings, especially among several acquaintances through internet, are in the matter of fact much more frequent than that happened in specialized lesbian spaces. The dining hall on the top floor of the shopping mall in Xidan is one of the most powerful evidence for such a situation.

The latter, namely the specialized lesbian spaces, is also comprised of several different types of spaces. The first is lesbian bars. Though there is a seemingly great difference between noisy bars and quiet bars, the objective is the same, that is, to provide a safe and relaxed environment for lesbians to release their desires. Generally speaking, most of the noisy bars provide noisy music, hot dance and sometimes beauty contest, or erotic performance, while the quiet bars focus more on personal communications. The lesbians going to lesbian bars are mostly younger ones.

The second is lesbian saloons. The typical example is Beijing Lala Saloon, which is a lesbian gathering every Saturday afternoon from 14:00 to 18:00. Although at present it is located in a bar, it differs greatly from lesbian bars. Firstly the gathering is held in the daytime, which makes people more sober and rational, which helps to think. Secondly, the activities within it are normally topic-centered discussions, either concentrating exclusively on issues concerning lesbians, like the awareness of self identity, or some general questions, like how to release pressure, which attract lesbians from all the ages, though most of them are comparatively older.

The third is lesbian shops. At present there is only one such shop in Beijing, selling corsets for Tomboys, lesbian books and movies, and sex aid as well.

4 PROBLEMS

Although so many lesbian spaces in Beijing now proved to be a great success for lesbians, still there are problems which must be dealt with by most of the lesbian spaces.

The first is how to solve the tension between lesbian spaces and the public. At present, most of the lesbian spaces are in a more or less hidden situation, either located far from the main street or in a normal residential building or without an obvious sign outside the façade. People can't identify a lesbian space from outside or aware a lesbian space nearby. Even if you enter into it at the right time, you still can't tell the difference. Only people among the circle know everything.

The second problem regards to the management of lesbian spaces, especially lesbian bars. Several factors determine whether a lesbian space exists or on the contrary disappears. The first factor is location. At present most of the lesbian space are located in the north-east part of Beijing, where most of the most famous bars congregate. Once in Wudaokou, an area in the north-west of the city, near both Tsinghua and Peking University is there a lesbian bar but disappeared shortly. The second factor is the managerial skills. How could you balance between an exclusive space for lesbian and making money? It was said by a lesbian that lesbians usually spend very little money in a commercial space though it is exclusively for lesbian. Beijing Lala Saloon asks for an obligatory 25 RMB entrance fee from each guest to obtain the use of the space in the bar. They spend four hours in it, only a few of them would ask for more drink beside the one freely provided by the bar after you pay the entrance fee. The personality of the boss and atmosphere inside the space are also very important. If the boss is once disliked by the lesbians, they will never attract lesbians any more.

The third problem concerns particularly the governmental attitude towards gay culture and gay people. Though gay spaces may exist peacefully in everyday life if only they don't advertise themselves too much, they may be affected primarily under certain circumstance. For instance, several months before the 60th National Day of China, some gay spaces in China have been forced indirectly to close in order to maintain or guarantee something.

5 CONCLUSION

In our societies, homosexual people are usually discriminated more compared to heterosexual people;

women are much more often overlooked compared to men. With an identity combining gay and woman, the living condition of lesbians requires more attention. Nonetheless, not all the lesbians come out of home and go to lesbian spaces in the city. Rather, they'd like to enjoy their own living when they find their lovers. Therefore, though investigations on lesbian spaces may show something valuable, they can't explain the real living conditions of all the lesbians in Beijing. As mentioned above, Beijing's lesbian spaces have grown out from gay man spaces, therefore the dominant lesbian spatial type is the same as gay man's, that is, the gay bars. But in recent years, new types of lesbian spaces have emerged, like Beijing Lala Saloon, which demonstrates a different value orientation of lesbians from gay men. In the mean time, also as a kind of women's space, lesbian spaces have erected a model for heterosexual women to develop their own cultural spaces.

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