

Inside the Circle:
Sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and Civil Society
in Post-Socialist Northwest China

A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

Inside the Circle: Sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and Civil Society
in Post-Socialist Northwest China

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

By Casey J. Miller

This dissertation critically examines changing expressions of sexuality and civil society in post-socialist northwest China, in particular how recent social and economic reforms and the global HIV/AIDS crisis are enabling the formation of a local gay and lesbian community (referred to colloquially as “the circle”), as well as creating both opportunities and challenges for an emerging social movement made up of grassroots gay and lesbian NGOs. Data was collected over seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2011, during which time I took on the role of a volunteer in a grassroots gay men’s group. Based on extensive qualitative research, such as daily participant-observation carried out in a variety of locations including NGO offices, private homes, bars, bathhouses and cruising areas in public parks, as well as in-depth interviews with gay and lesbian NGO leaders and volunteers, local community members and government officials, this dissertation develops a vivid and personal account of everyday gay and lesbian life in urban northwest China. A rich and complex local gay and lesbian culture is taking shape as social and economic reforms give people greater leeway to begin expressing their sexualities more openly as well as to develop new forms of intimacy and kinship, even as they continue to struggle to find ways to cope with

enduring social and familial norms and expectations such as marrying and having children. At the same time, in spite of continuing legal restrictions on voluntary associations in China, the threat of HIV/AIDS is compelling the state to tolerate and even cooperate with a growing number of unregistered grassroots gay NGOs in order to provide HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment services to “men who have sex with men” who can be difficult for the state to reach on its own. However, even as grassroots gay NGOs play an increasingly important role in government HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment efforts, many local gay and lesbian groups are also pursuing a broader social and political agenda: increasing the awareness and acceptance of homosexuality in Chinese society.

All theory, dear friend, is gray, but the golden tree of actual life springs ever green.

—Goethe

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List of Abbreviations

AAA	American Anthropological Association
AIDS	acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
ARGOH	Anthropological Research Group on Homosexuality
AQA	Association for Queer Anthropology
CBO	community-based organization
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CD4	a protein found on the surface of immune cells, including T helper cells
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CSO	civil society organization
GMD	Chinese Nationalist Party
GONGO	government-organized non-governmental organization
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
IDAHO	International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia
LGBT	lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
MSM	men who have sex with men
NGO	non-governmental organization
PLWA	people living with HIV/AIDS
PRC	People's Republic of China
RHI	Reproductive Health International
SARS	severe acute respiratory syndrome
SOLGA	Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists
STD	sexually transmitted disease
STI	sexually transmitted infection
USO	uncivil society organization
VCT	voluntary counseling and testing

Note on Translation and Transliteration

Unless otherwise noted, the following ethnographic data, including accounts of events and conversations with informants, came from transcribed audio recordings or field notes that I took down within hours or days of the events they describe. Language contained within quotation marks are verbatim statements from my informants. All translations are my own.

Chinese words and phrases in italics have been rendered using the standard *Hanyu Pinyin* system. I only include Chinese characters in cases of ambiguity or for illustrative purposes; a list of characters can be found in the appendix. When translating quotations, I have italicized words to indicate that they were originally spoken in English by my informants. All pseudonyms and other proper names have been given their original Chinese spellings; their corresponding characters and meanings in English can also be found in a list at the end of the text.

Introduction

Xiao Yu first discovered that he liked other boys in the third grade, when a male classmate kissed him underneath a blanket during nap time. He developed a crush on a different male classmate during middle school; although Xiao Yu didn't dare tell his fellow student about his feelings, they slowly became fast friends, spending a lot of time together and chatting about everything, even love. Although he never returned Xiao Yu's affections, his friend told him one night in the depth of winter, when Xiao Yu had waited at school so he didn't have to walk home alone, "If you were a girl, I'd pick you (*Ruguo ni shi yige nühai, wo hui xuanze ni*)." After they graduated from high school, his friend joined the army. "I told him to look after himself," Xiao Yu told me. "When we sent him off to the military, he ran over and hugged me. My tears were about to come out, but I held them in." While his friend was in the army, they kept in touch via letters and the occasional phone call. His friend had recently left the military. "He's dating now," Xiao Yu said. "He'll probably get married in the next two years."

A handsome, soft-spoken, fourth-year university student majoring in electric automation, Xiao Yu was born in 1989 in a small municipality 30 minutes outside of the large, northwestern Chinese city where I first met him in January 2010, five months into my third and longest visit to the field. During an interview I conducted with him in late March 2011, Xiao Yu told me that he had moved to the city to start college in 2007. Initially, he had wanted to attend university and find a job in a city on China's more prosperous and developed eastern seaboard as his older sister had done, six years earlier.

But he ended up remaining in the northwest in order to be closer to his parents. “I had no choice,” Xiao Yu explained to me. “In China, ordinarily speaking, one of the children in the family must stay closer to home. That way, if something happens, at least there will be someone by their side (*zhishao you yige ren zai shen bian*).”

Although Xiao Yu had a very good relationship with his parents, no one in his family knew that he was gay. Sometimes his relatives would jokingly ask if he had a girlfriend yet, Xiao Yu told me. “When relatives come for a visit and we are all chatting, they will tease me, say what a big lad (*xiaohuozhi*) I’ve become, that it’s time for me to get a girlfriend. They’ll ask me if there are any girls chasing (*zhui*) me. I’ll say that no one chases after me because I’m not enough of a catch (*wode tiaojian tai cha*), but they don’t believe me; they just look at me and say that I must have a girlfriend.” I asked Xiao Yu how he hid his sexuality from his family. “Usually, when I am with my family, I don’t let it show (*buhui biao xian chulai*),” he replied. “I am a very adaptable (*shiying*) person. When I am with other people inside the circle, I can show the true side of my feelings (*ba wo ganqing zhenshi de yimian biao xian chulai*). But when I am with my family, I just act like a child who is all grown up.” Xiao Yu told me that he hoped he could tell them one day.

I asked Xiao Yu if he planned on ever getting married to a woman. “No,” he replied. “At least, not until after I am 30 years old (*zhishao shi sanshi sui yihou ba*). This is a responsibility I have to my family (*zhe ye jiu shi wo dui jiaren de zeren le*).” Part of this responsibility came from the fact that he was his parents’ only son. Xiao Yu explained to me that, although his older sister was likely to marry, “In China, most families think of daughters as marrying out of the family (*nü’er shi yao jia chuqu*). In this

way of thinking, a daughter is part of someone else's family (*nü'er shi bieren jia de ren*)." Xiao Yu dismissed this kind of thinking as "feudalistic" (*fengjian*), arguing that "young people today don't think this way." Still, the traditional gendered duties expected of Chinese sons seemed to weigh heavily on him. "I am getting married for my parents (*wo shi weile fumu jiehun*)," Xiao Yu told me, even though they hadn't yet given him any pressure to find a girlfriend and get married. "In Chinese people's consciousness, marriage is one of life's most monumental moments (*Jiehun zai Zhongguoren de yishi limian shi zhongshen dashi*)."

I asked Xiao Yu if it wouldn't be difficult for him to be married, as he doesn't like girls. "It's not that I don't like girls," he corrected me. "Actually, I get along with them really well. Sexually, I've never tried it, so I can't render a verdict (*suoyi bu neng jielun*). But at the very least, I like them. It's a pure (*danchun*) kind of affection. Whether my body will be able to like them, I don't know (*Shenti shang hui bu hui xihuan wo bu zhidao*)." Although Xiao Yu had been with several boyfriends since starting college, none of his relationships seemed to last very long. "Fate likes to play jokes on me (*Yuanfen xihuan he wo kaiwanxiao*)," he said rather wistfully.

In December 2010, while surfing the web, Xiao Yu found out about Tong'ai, a local grassroots gay men's NGO (*feizhengfu zuzhi*) whose mission is to "establish an equal, healthy, civilized, and harmonious gay community (*jian yige pingdeng, hexie, wenming de tongzhi shequ*)" and who had been working to prevent the spread of HIV among "men who have sex with men" (MSM) in northwest China since 1998. Xiao Yu contacted one of the group's volunteers online, and then became a volunteer himself, coming to the group's office and participating in its activities, which is where we first

met. Like many others within the group, Xiao Yu's desire to be a volunteer was motivated in part by the opportunity to make friends with other gay men and to learn more about himself and the gay community. But it was also motivated by a desire to make a difference, not just in the health of his peers, but in the way that gay men were understood by wider Chinese society. "Our organization is one small part of the gay community (*tongzhi qunti*), and our gay community is a larger part of the overall society. When our organization serves this community, it is also gradually influencing the entire society," he explained. "Our first priority is doing [HIV/AIDS] intervention work, creating a civilized and healthy gay community (*tongzhi shequ*). After this has been done well, our influence will expand, and only then will we be able to carry out the next phase of our work (*jinxing xia yi jieduan de gongzuo*)," which he described as improving the understanding of homosexuality and advocating for greater social rights for gay men and lesbians in Chinese society.

However, as with many other Tong'ai volunteers I had come to know over years spent conducting fieldwork with the group, it seemed that Xiao Yu's work as a volunteer was not only having an impact on his local gay community and altering the way that Chinese society regarded homosexuality, it was also transforming the way he thought about himself and his own sexuality:

Before, I simply liked men. There wasn't anything strange about it; I thought about things in a relatively straightforward way, which made me able to face up to them. When facing up to things alone, sometimes you are not very willing to think about them. But after I came to Tong'ai and saw so many other people who were like me, it gave me a lot of courage (*yongqi*). It has made me feel like I am part of a social force (*shehui de yi gu lilian*), like there isn't anything I don't dare to think, there isn't anything I don't dare to do (*meiyou shenme bu gan qu xiang, meiyou shenme bu gan qu zuo*).

Sexuality, Civil Society, and HIV/AIDS

Xiao Yu's story of discovering and coming to terms with his homosexuality, and his experiences as a volunteer in a grassroots gay men's NGO, is one of the many similar stories that dozens of gays and lesbians of various ages and socio-economic backgrounds shared with me during my fieldwork in northwest China. In many respects, the themes contained in Xiao Yu's personal narrative are typical of these stories: Xiao Yu knew that he was attracted to others of the same sex from an early age; his close relationship with his parents and other immediate family members was a critical aspect of his moral and social character as a person, although no one in his family knew about his sexual orientation; he desired same-sex intimacy and relationships yet was unlucky in love; he felt a social, familial, and personal duty or obligation to become married to someone of the opposite sex, yet hoped to put this responsibility off for as long as possible; and he had actively sought out others like himself and was dedicated to the project of creating a stronger, healthier, and happier gay community through the work of HIV/AIDS prevention among MSM, a project that he believed would gradually lead to a greater recognition and tolerance of homosexuality in Chinese society in the future.

The stories of Xiao Yu and other gay and lesbian men and women offer a fascinating and intimately personal perspective on the enormous transformations that have taken place in Chinese society in the decades following social and economic reforms. However, these experiences have largely been overlooked or ignored in the scholarship on contemporary Chinese society, relatively little of which has focused on the themes of gender and sexuality, and even less of which has considered the development of same-sex cultures and communities, especially those located outside of the giant metropolises on China's eastern seaboard such as Shanghai and Beijing. This dissertation

explores grassroots gay and lesbian culture and activism as a means to better understand how processes of gender, sexuality, and civil society are unfolding in a rapidly changing China. Partially by design, and also due in no small part to a fortunate degree of serendipity, I conducted this exploration in a large urban area located in northwest China, bringing some much needed and long overdue attention to the experiences of gays and lesbians in a relatively less developed and less cosmopolitan region of China, and thus contributing to a more complete and representative body of knowledge regarding gay and lesbian histories, identities, experiences, and practices in what is an extraordinarily large and diverse country.

Chinese society has experienced a series of dramatic changes following a spate of social and economic reforms beginning in the late 1970s that were aimed at “opening up” the country to the outside world after decades of Maoist isolation. Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong, “the Great Helmsman,” set about constructing a strong, socialist state which sought to intervene in every aspect of individual and family life. Agriculture and industry were increasingly collectivized; the state exerted control over the distribution of such goods as food, housing, jobs, education, and medical care; and the daily life of the Chinese citizenry was politicized through constant mass campaigns and class struggles. Two years after the death of Mao in 1976, Chinese leaders suddenly switched gears. Under new slogans such as “Practice is the only criterion of truth” and “It doesn’t matter whether the cat is black or white as long as it catches mice,” Maoist orthodoxy and ideology were shelved in favor of “reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang*) policies designed to stimulate the economy (Ikels 1996:2).

Deborah Davis argues that, although these reforms were initially seen as temporary measures designed to fuel social and economic prosperity and bolster the legitimacy of the state, “By the early 1990s, when the initial reform had produced a decade of double-digit growth and ensconced the Chinese industry firmly within the global capitalist economy, the leadership discovered they could not reverse course” (2000:1). However, social and economic reforms have not yet led to political change. “The breathless pace of market reforms has created a paradox in which the pursuit of private initiatives, private gains, and private lives coexists with political limits on individual expression,” write Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang. “The neoliberal principles of private accumulation and self-interest—expressed in profit making, entrepreneurialism, and self-promotion—are not allowed to touch key areas that remain firmly under state control” (2008:1). Lisa Rofel argues that one outgrowth of social and economic reforms has been the creation of competitive, cosmopolitan “desiring subjects” who are motivated by the private pursuit of “sexual, material, and affective self-interest” (2007:3, 17; cf. Ngai 2003). Whereas personal desires were seen as improper or stigmatized in the past, they have become increasingly public and celebrated after reforms, resulting in the construction of a new “inner self” in which “the previous socialist sentiment of class consciousness” has been replaced by “a postsocialist sensibility of personal desires” (Kleinman et al. 2011:4).

Chinese social and economic reforms continue to attract a great deal of academic and popular attention as scholars, journalists, and other interested observers struggle to understand the multifaceted effects of reform on Chinese culture and society. While some social scientists focus on the impacts of reform on China’s public sphere, seeking signs of

an incipient transition toward democracy and debating the usefulness of the concept of “civil society” in the Chinese context (Brook and Frolic 1997; Calhoun 1994; Chan 2005; Davis 1995; Flower and Leonard 1996; Frolic 1997; He 2003; Weller 1999; Wilson 2012), others have been busy exploring what has been called China’s “sexual revolution,” or the various ways in which popular experiences, beliefs, norms, and practices of gender and sexuality are being affected by China’s ongoing social and economic transformations (Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002; Farquhar 2002; Farrer 2002; Hershatter 1996; Jeffreys 2006; Sigley 2006). Although he judiciously warns against uncritically applying Western historical or theoretical models to the Chinese context, Everett Zhang nevertheless argues it may be the case that “no other expression than the phrase ‘sexual revolution’ is accurate in capturing the enormity of the changes in sexuality in China over the past decades,” which he sums up as “a new experiential awareness of subjective sexual identity” (2011:107).

This dissertation seeks to bring these two expanding literatures—on sexuality and civil society—into greater conversation with one another by examining two intriguing yet relatively under-studied recent phenomena: the formation of gay and lesbian cultures and communities as well as the spread of grassroots gay and lesbian NGOs in urban areas across China. Although connections between sexuality and civil society in China are rarely made in the scholarly literatures on either topic, the case of gay and lesbian grassroots activism shows how these two areas are intimately linked, and provides an excellent opportunity to investigate how recent reforms have created a space in which people are coming together to advance various projects including improving the physical and emotional health of their peers, promoting the development of local gay and lesbian

cultures and communities, and increasing the awareness and acceptance of homosexuality in Chinese society.

A major theme of this dissertation is exploring both the intersections and the tensions that exist between these various goals. For Chinese grassroots gay men's groups in particular, a focus on HIV/AIDS provides political protection and legitimacy, as well as financial resources in the form of HIV/AIDS testing projects funded by international donor agencies and administered by the state, both of which are necessary for the very survival of such organizations. However, a focus on HIV/AIDS can divert energy and effort away from their other goals, including working toward achieving greater awareness and acceptance of gays and lesbians as well as the creation of a more robust and democratic civil society in China. This tension is exacerbated by the actions and priorities of the Chinese government and foreign donor agencies, which seem to regard fighting a disease like HIV/AIDS as a more acceptable or palatable project than addressing more controversial social and political issues like sexuality and the rights of gays and lesbians. The tendency to downplay or ignore issues related to sexuality is not unique to the Chinese government; for example, after an abstract of my research project that I had written for a major U.S. government scientific research funding agency was published on their website, I was shocked to discover that all mention of sexuality and even HIV/AIDS had been erased. When I requested an explanation for the changes, I was told that grants for social science research had come under increased political scrutiny in recent years, with some members of Congress objecting to specific projects on topics related to sexuality and HIV/AIDS, and that therefore the language in my abstract had been altered in order to avoid generating "unnecessary controversy."

The paradox of how to advocate for increased respect for difference as well as greater self-governance and democracy while operating in a political and legal environment that is often overtly hostile to such efforts is one that my informants in China's many grassroots gay and lesbian organizations face every day. Despite rapid social and political changes, including a thawing of public attitudes toward homosexuality, their position in Chinese society remains somewhat uncertain. Laws and regulations regarding voluntary associations make it almost impossible for such organizations to register with the authorities, meaning that they and their volunteers lack basic protections and must operate in a legal gray area. Many gay men's groups are adopting a long-term strategy where politically sensitive topics such as sexuality and human rights are avoided and the focus is kept on collaborating with the state to provide HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment services, a strategy that some local lesbian NGOs find more difficult to adopt. Meanwhile, debates over sexual identity, culture, HIV/AIDS, and the proper course of the Chinese gay and lesbian movement are taking place among activists, many of whom believe that political change will only take place if state and society gradually come to perceive gay men and lesbians as healthy and responsible citizens.

Using data gathered from a variety of ethnographic research methods conducted over a period of seventeen months of fieldwork in northwest China, this dissertation explores how Chinese gay men and lesbians are thinking about, experiencing, expressing, and transforming their sexual and gender identities as well as other aspects of their private and social lives in the decades after China's economic and social reforms. It also examines the extent to which grassroots gay and lesbian NGOs are examples of an

emerging Chinese “civil society,” how volunteers in such organizations understand their role in the changing relationship between Chinese state and society, as well as the effects of international HIV/AIDS testing and treatment projects on the local civil society environment and on the lives of individual gay NGO activists. Investigating these issues is timely and important not only because doing so can help to deepen our understanding of how processes related to gender, sexuality, and civil society are unfolding in China’s rapidly changing society, but also because it promises to broaden our knowledge of behaviors and practices related to grassroots HIV/AIDS education and prevention among urban Chinese gay men, a crucial risk group in China’s worsening epidemic.

Although there has been an explosion of research conducted regarding MSM and HIV/AIDS in China over the last several years (Feng et al. 2009; Liu et al. 2009; Ma et al. 2007; Ruan Shiman et al. 2009; Ruan Yuhua et al. 2009; Wong et al. 2009; Zhang et al. 2007), this research mainly consists of quantitative epidemiological and behavioral studies. Although such work is valuable, qualitative ethnographic methods allow access and insights into marginal and at-risk populations in ways that purely quantitative epidemiological and behavioral studies do not (Carrillo 2009:36). Indeed, an in-depth understanding of how grassroots gay men’s groups, national policies, and international donor agencies are interacting with one another in their response to the disease is crucial to developing a holistic understanding of China’s worsening HIV/AIDS epidemic among MSM. Gilbert Herdt writes that while “studies have shown consistently that simple knowledge of AIDS is not enough to instill safe sex or self-protection A more fully developed and socially acknowledged gay or lesbian identity tends to reduce the risk of infection with HIV/AIDS” (1997:14, 18). Chinese gay men’s groups are playing a crucial

role in reducing the risk of HIV infection in MSM and their sexual partners as they work to supply a critical source of social, emotional, and psychological empowerment for gay men.

The ethnographic story my project aims to tell is one about life on the margins of power and society, of individual agency and resistance to social and state marginalization and changing forms of governmentality, told through the lens of sexuality and played out in the daily actions and lived experiences of Chinese gay men and lesbians who are engaged in various forms of community activism including volunteer HIV/AIDS education and prevention work. The theme of marginalization, the powerfully negative effects it has on people's lives as well as how it can be a source of creativity, agency, and positive social change, serves as a thread that links the main analytical and interpretive problems of my project together and motivates my research into contemporary Chinese gay and lesbian culture.

Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Anthropology

This dissertation is part of a growing body of work within anthropology dedicated to the cross-cultural and comparative study of sexuality that has variously been called gay, lesbian, or queer anthropology (Boellstorff 2007; Weston 1993). Research into sexuality, particularly homosexuality and other forms of non-normative sexual identities, desires, and practices, has a long and somewhat tortured history within both anthropology and the social sciences in general. As Gayle Rubin writes, "For much of the twentieth century, sexual practice that varied from a norm of fairly straightforward, generally monogamous, and preferably marital heterosexuality with a possibility of procreation was cast not only as undesirable but also physically unhealthy, socially inferior, or symptomatic of psychological impairment" (2002:18). Rubin argues that, due to the reluctance of many

institutions within anthropology to support research on homosexuality, especially in urban North American contexts, “Many scholars who work on gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender issues, for example, assume such research began in the 1990s, is derived almost entirely from French theory and is primarily located in fields such as modern languages and literature, philosophy, and film studies” (18). However, although the study of same-sex identities, desires, cultures, and communities only began to pick up steam within anthropology in the 1990s, scholars like Rubin and Kath Weston point to the existence of a long and “forgotten legacy of sexuality within the social sciences,” which Weston characterizes as a “long, slow . . . burn, or at least [a] simmer” (1998:2).

According to Weston, examples of anthropological attention to sexual practices can be found in ethnographies written by European and North American explorers in the early twentieth century. However, Weston argues, “Throughout the first half of the century, most allusions by anthropologists to homosexual behavior remained as veiled in ambiguity and as couched in judgment as were references to homosexuality in the dominant discourse of the surrounding society” (1998:147). Describing them as “a flora and fauna approach to the study of sexuality,” Weston writes that, for many of these early ethnographers, “Details of social life that European and North American observers considered ‘sexual’ provided nothing more and nothing less than additional data. . . . ‘Sexual acts’ did not seem to call for specialized examination, much less a disciplinary subfield.” Instead, they were bundled into comprehensive lists of social and cultural errata “containing everything from edible plants to myths, from body painting to funerary practices” (6).

Rubin traces the beginning of what she calls the “long and distinguished lineage” (2002:19) of studies of homosexuality and other non-normative sexualities in the social sciences to “the idea that sexuality was social and an appropriate object of social science inquiry” that she argues first originated in the literature on the sociology of deviance that was being produced in the U.S. during the 1950s and 1960s by a small group of scholars, many of them who were trained at the University of Chicago (22). According to Rubin, these early sociologists of sexuality “developed a persuasive critique of the prevailing assumption that something was intrinsically wrong with deviants and misfits,” and created research that “showed how such populations became morally discredited and how they constructed alternative structures of community and meaningful lives within them” (26). Perhaps most notable among them are John Gagnon and William Simon, who undertook a major study of homosexuality at the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research at Bloomington, Indiana, and produced co-edited volumes such as *Sexual Deviance* (1967), which contained a number of articles on contemporary homosexual life and communities of the time, including Nancy Achille’s ethnographic analysis of San Francisco gay and lesbian bar culture, “The Development of the Homosexual Bar as an Institution.”

Weston writes that, “Before ethnographers could set out to remap the globe along the contours of transgendered practices and same-sex sexuality, homosexuality had to become a legitimate object of anthropological inquiry. One prerequisite was the redefinition of homosexuality from a matter of individual pathology (the medical model) to a cultural construct” (1998:149). Rubin argues that the move from a deviance model to one of social construction that took place in the 1970s in social science research on homosexuality and non-normative sexualities had as much (if not more) to do with the

work of figures like Gagnon and Simon as well as later sociologists like Jeffrey Weeks than with that of more familiar scholars like Michel Foucault, whose influential work *The History of Sexuality*, first translated into English in 1978, has received much of the credit. According to Rubin, Weeks' book, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, which was published in 1977, contained "one of the earliest crystallizations of the premises of the social construction of sex paradigm. It was the first comprehensive investigation of the position that homosexuality was not a transhistorical category but rather a form of same-sex behavior that involved particular types of historically specific persons, identities, and communities" (2002:38).

Weston claims that, "Within anthropology, another set of antecedents for the social constructivist turn can be found in the culture and personality school" associated with U.S. anthropologists like Ruth Benedict (1939) and Margaret Mead (1963). Although Benedict and Mead "did not dispute the conceptualization of homosexuality as a matter of individual drive or temperament," Weston asserts, "they saw some societies as better prepared than others to accommodate this variance." Nevertheless, Weston continues, "It would be years before the deviance model of homosexuality gave way to a view of same-sex sexuality as patterned, organized by culture-specific categories and occurring at particular cultural sites" (150).

Two of the earliest pieces of anthropological research on homosexuality had as their subjects not the exotic erotic practices of members of some far-flung tribe, but rather sexual subcultures located closer to home in North America. The first was created in 1966 by David Sonenschein, a graduate student in the anthropology department at the University of Chicago who was hired by Gagnon and Simon to carry out a study of the

gay male community in Chicago. Rubin argues that Sonenschein's 1966 article, "Homosexuality as a Subject of Anthropological Inquiry," was a "remarkably prescient document" (2002:44), in which he asserted that "homosexuality emerges as being in reality a group phenomenon as well as an individual one" and called for "the application of an anthropological investigation of homosexuality in contemporary Western society" (45).

Sonenschein's article was followed by the first book-length anthropological work on a gay or queer subject, Esther Newton's 1972 *Mother Camp*, which presented a detailed ethnography of female impersonators in North America. Profoundly ahead of its time, Newton's work predated Judith Butler's (1990) argument about gender performativity by almost two decades. For example, Newton observes that while drag performances in the "homosexual subculture" can work to naturalize what she called the "sex-role system" (what we today might refer to as the sex-gender system), it also challenged "the 'naturalness' of the sex-role system *in toto*; if sex-role behavior can be achieved by the 'wrong' sex, it logically follows that it is in reality also achieved, not inherited, by the 'right' sex" and can be "manipulated at will" (1977:103).

For decades, Newton's pathbreaking work remained the only gay-focused ethnography in anthropology. Indeed, it wasn't until the 1990s, some eighteen years after the publication of *Mother Camp*, that a significant body of work on the topics of homosexual behaviors and identities as well as gay and lesbian cultures and communities began to accumulate within the field of anthropology (Weston 1998:147; Rubin 2002:52). According to Ellen Lewin and William Leap, although a resolution that passed at the annual business meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in 1970

called for the support of gay and lesbian rights as well as the study of gay and lesbian topics by anthropologists, these provisions were virtually ignored within the discipline for many years (1996:vii). In spite of the rise in feminist anthropology, through which the study of women and gender became a central topic within the discipline during the 1970s and 1980s, Lewin and Leap argue that, “Although sexuality and sexual variation were presumably among the range of topics feminists might choose to examine, little work was done in feminist anthropology on homosexuality or lesbianism during the 1970s and 1980s,” and that many lesbian feminist anthropologists felt that their concerns and interests were ignored or invisible at the time (viii).

Many gay and lesbian anthropologists chose to remain invisible themselves during the 1960s and 1970s, making early contributions like those of Sonenschein and Newton all the more remarkable. Gilbert Herdt, whose own work on ritualized semen transaction practices among male members of a New Guinean hill tribe he called the Sambia (1981) was to become a classic study of masculinity and male-male sexuality, recalls how “a taboo on the study of sexuality surrounded the subject when I was myself an undergraduate and then a graduate student in the late 1960s and through the mid-1970s. The scientific study of sexuality was nascent, and the prohibition on the study of homosexuality in the social sciences, including anthropology, created terrible, seemingly impregnable barriers” (1997:xvii–xviii).

The first formally organized AAA interest group related to gay and lesbian issues within anthropology was the Anthropological Research Group on Homosexuality (ARGOH), which was founded in 1974 by a small group of (mostly male) anthropologists. Not all of its members studied topics related to homosexuality, and it

was “generally understood that the name of the group concealed its actual function as an organization for gay anthropologists” (Lewin and Leap 1996:viii). Lewin and Leap write that “by 1986 a number of members of ARGOH had become frustrated with the group’s secretive stance,” including many new female members who were also active in feminist studies as well as people who were more open about their sexuality. During the 1987 AAA meeting, members of the interest group changed its name to the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists (SOLGA), and the organization began to have a higher profile, steadily gaining membership and initiating research collaborations with other bodies including the AIDS and Anthropology Research Group and the AAA Task Force on Anthropology and AIDS (ix). In 1998, SOLGA transformed itself from an interest group to an official section of the AAA, reflecting the “substantial florescence of lesbian/gay-oriented scholarship throughout anthropology” as well as the increasing “visibility of lesbian and gay, bisexual and transgender participants at professional meetings and in the other domains of academic and professional life” (Lewin and Leap 2002:3).

The swift and sudden increase in gay and lesbian scholarship within anthropology did not take place without encountering some bumps along the road. In an article reviewing the virtual explosion of research conducted on gay and lesbian themes that took place in the 1980s and 1990s, Weston describes much of the work as examples of what she calls “ethnocartography,” or the practice of “looking for evidence of same-sex sexuality and gendered ambiguity in ‘other’ societies” (1998:149). Indeed, as Herdt writes, “Many of the scholars who are doing basic research on homosexuality . . . are themselves lesbians or gay men who have sought to ‘set the record straight.’” Due to a lack of “curiosity, empathy, or understanding [necessary] to learn about homosexuality”

shared by many heterosexual researchers, Herdt argues, “gay- and lesbian-identified anthropologists are making new headway in a fascinating and fast-changing sexual landscape of field study” (1997:xvii). However, while she does not entirely dismiss the value and importance of “ethnography” in the gay and lesbian-themed anthropological scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s, Weston compares it to “salvage anthropology” (1998:154) and contends that much of it is under-theorized work that tends to “seek data first and ask theoretical questions later” (153).

Another criticism of some of the anthropological scholarship on homosexuality in the 1990s was that it displayed a simplistic, homogenizing, and transhistorical tendency to assume that “male homosexuality could stand in as the norm for all homosexual practices, and [that] homosexual practices share a commonality of meaning” (Blackwood 2002:78). Evelyn Blackwood gives the example of several cross-cultural homosexual typologies that were developed to separate homosexual relationships into different categories, including “gender-differentiated relations,” “trans-generational relations,” “egalitarian relations,” and sometimes “class-differentiated” and “role-specialized” relations, nearly all of which claimed to include yet omitted or ignored data on female same-sex sexuality (78). Not only was male homosexuality used “as the standard by which to understand homosexuality, in effect creating a universalizing narrative of men’s sexuality that conflated male and female homosexuality,” Blackwood argues, but the assumption that homosexuality had a shared or common meaning across cultures and time resulted in a focus on genitalia and sexual acts, to the neglect of cultural contexts and the construction of gender (80). Weston also argues that “granting homosexuality the status of an ‘it entity’ that transcends specific cultural contexts can quickly become a

methodologically problematic enterprise. By setting out in advance to look for sexuality, the anthropologist cannot help but reify the object of (ethnographic) desire” (1998:158).

One example of this problematic tendency in the literature to assume that practices and meanings of homosexuality transcended historical and cultural barriers is Herdt’s work on semen transactions among Sambian men, which he described in a 1984 publication as examples of “ritualized homosexual practices” (169). Herdt later recanted this argument, writing that he had erred in assuming that the “homosexuality” he had observed among the Sambia “was the ‘homosexuality’ found everywhere.” However, unlike homosexuality in “our” society, Herdt wrote, “This same-sex behavior does not last throughout life and is not seen as antithetical to masculinity—quite the contrary. . . . Moreover, the Sambia do not possess the concepts ‘homosexual’ or ‘gay,’ and they do not understand the idea that two men or women could be culturally recognized as sexual partners” (2006:xv).

A related problem that quickly emerged in the field, then, regarded how to name or label the very object of its inquiry. Even though “*lesbian* and *gay* are not context-free categories but express subjective understandings of gender, sexuality, and social location closely linked to the historical emergence of North Atlantic capitalism and to the politics of cultural pluralism during the late modernist period,” unfortunately, Lewin and Leap observe, “much work in lesbian and gay studies overlooks the historical location of these categories and refers quite casually to *lesbian* and *gay* identities and desires outside of, as well as within, North American domains” (2002:8). There has proven to be no easy way out of this dilemma; the phrase “same-sex” or “same-sex sexualities” can be vague and clumsy as well as improperly implying sameness among potentially different

understandings of sexual identity and desire and exporting a Western emphasis on sexuality (8–9). Confining or contorting all mentions of words such as “homosexual” or *gay* in scare quotes or italics is also awkward in practice. Even resorting to the exclusive use of native or indigenous terminologies poses its own problems. As Weston remarks, “Although intended as a corrective to ethnocentrism and overgeneralization, the use of ‘foreign’ names constructs the subject of inquiry as always and already Other” (1998:159).

One solution to the perennial “naming problem” within gay and lesbian anthropology has been the use of the word “queer” to describe non-normative sexual behaviors, desires, and practices (Boellstorff 2007). However, in addition to being an alternative catch-all to what Tom Boellstorff calls “the logic of enumeration” in which every sexual and gendered minority group is designated by its own letter of the alphabet such as “LGB, LGBT, LGBTQI, and so on” (27), the word “queer” also carries with it a particular postmodernist theoretical and political orientation as well as a specific body of literature (mainly located within disciplines such as English, Cultural Studies, Film Studies, etc.) known as “queer theory.” Although growing in popularity both outside and within anthropology (in 2010 SOLGA was rebranded as the Association for Queer Anthropology or AQA), due to its association with “a complex gender politics that transcends differences in bodies, erotic practices, and desires identified by such terms as *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *transgender*, and the like” (Lewin and Leap 2002:11), many anthropologists (myself included) have yet to entirely warm to the term “queer,” partially due to their regarding “the queer label as being too closely tied to the detached theorizing of literary studies and cultural studies” (10). Lewin and Leap write that the feeling is

sometimes mutual, arguing that many “self-identified queer scholars [have] tended to keep their distance from anthropological research In particular, their formulations were only infrequently informed by ‘empirical’ approaches. Typically, queer theorists saw invocations of ‘the real world’ as evidence of an unhealthy preoccupation with facts and data” (11). However, as Boellstorff argues, due to its increasing popularity both within and outside of anthropology, “Even those who reject it must acknowledge the influence of queer studies on ‘lesbian and gay anthropology’” (2007:18).

Field Site and Methodology

In March 2007 I started the process of locating a suitable field site for my dissertation research project. Apart from a general desire to avoid cities located along China’s more developed and cosmopolitan eastern seaboard, where almost all of the anthropological and sociological accounts of sexuality and gay and lesbian culture in contemporary Chinese society have been based,¹ I had no idea where I would end up. Dr. Joan Kaufman, an expert in HIV/AIDS and public health policy in China who was then affiliated with Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, the Harvard Medical School, and the Heller School for Social Policy and Development at Brandeis University, initially helped put me in touch with the leaders of several Chinese grassroots gay men’s groups. One of these, a man I would later come to know as Tianguang and who was the founder and leader of Tong’ai, a gay men’s group located in a large urban area in northwest China, expressed an interest in my project and a willingness to host me during my first preliminary field trip in the summer of 2007.

¹ For example: Beijing (Engebretsen 2009; Ho 2010; Rofel 1999); Shanghai (Kam 2013); Guangzhou and Hong Kong (Chou 2000; Kong 2011). Wei’s (2000) consideration of changing gay identities in Chengdu is one notable exception to this rule.

Tong'ai and Tianguang ended up being exceptional hosts, and I quickly fell in love with the city they were located in, which I had known very little about prior to beginning fieldwork. Due to the politically and socially sensitive nature of my research, in order to protect the identities of my friends and informants in the field I am unable to identify the city by name, nor am I able to include any details about its long and fascinating local history, cultural and physical geography, and the like, as doing so would make the location of my field site more readily identifiable.² In place of such local details, I can only offer a broader and more generalized description of the region as a whole. Northwest China is comprised of two autonomous regions, Xinjiang and Ningxia, as well as three provinces, Shaanxi, Gansu, and Qinghai. Together they comprise some 3 million square kilometers and contain a population of approximately 95 million people. Although northwest China altogether makes up almost a third of China's total area, it only accounts for some 7 percent of China's total population. Relatively less economically developed than China's more prosperous and densely populated northern, eastern, and southeastern regions, in 2006 the average per capita GDP in northwest China was about 10,154 RMB (\$1,235), roughly 20 percent of China's per capita GDP at the time of 55,575 RMB (\$6,761) (National Geographic 2008).

The gay men's group where I made my home during fieldwork has been operating locally since 1998, making it one of the earliest and longest-running grassroots gay and lesbian NGOs in China. Two institutional review board-approved summer preliminary fieldwork trips spent with the group enabled me to develop close working relationships with Tianguang, the group director, as well as several of the group's volunteers who later

² For the same reasons, unless otherwise noted, all proper names used within the text are pseudonyms.

became key informants and close friends. During my first eight-week preliminary fieldwork trip in the summer of 2007, I participated in the daily activities of group volunteers engaged in office work, meetings, and community outreach events, observing the behaviors and interactions of group volunteers and recording daily field notes. In that first summer I also conducted eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants that I later transcribed and analyzed. I returned to the field for another eight weeks in the summer of 2008, during which time I conducted several more preliminary interviews and participated in and observed several collaborations between the group and local health department officials, including several peer educator training sessions and a national HIV/AIDS voluntary testing and counseling campaign that was conducted in local gay bars, clubs, and bathhouses. This second visit was important in enabling me to demonstrate my dedication and commitment to the project to my hosts, as well as to continue to establish familiarity and build rapport with members of the group and the local gay community.

Some of my significant initial findings were that, in addition to working to combat the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among their peers, many gay men were also using the AIDS epidemic as an opportunity to promote what they regarded as physically and emotionally healthier sexualities as well as to gain greater acceptance of homosexuality in wider Chinese society. Although all the gay men's group volunteers I spoke with stressed the importance of preventing HIV and AIDS, many indicated that doing this work also provided them with opportunities to pursue a broader agenda, including community building, cultural development, and the eventual achievement of greater social recognition, acceptance, and rights for Chinese

gays and lesbians. Despite the fact that the group sometimes cooperated with local, provincial, and national government officials and health departments in various HIV awareness and testing projects, many volunteers hoped that their work would contribute to the development of a stronger and more robust Chinese civil society (*gongmin shehui*) that might even lead to increased democracy (*minzhu*) and human rights (*renquan*) in China over the long term.

In September 2010 I returned to northwest China to conduct an additional thirteen months of fieldwork, with the approval of the Brandeis Institutional Review Board and funding from the Fulbright Program and the National Science Foundation, hoping to explore the emergence of grassroots gay and lesbian community, culture, and activism in the context of economic and social reforms and a looming HIV/AIDS crisis among gay men as well as investigate the extent to which such efforts were examples of a new form of civil society in China. In order to gain access to the field, I obtained an extended research visa through an affiliation with a local university that my contacts in the gay men's group and the office of the Institute of International Education in Beijing helped me to arrange. Although I was assigned an official Chinese academic advisor who was meant to supervise me and my work, as luck would have it he turned out to be rather absent and inattentive, and I was largely free to independently conduct my research project with very little outside interference or control.

Because of my extensive preliminary fieldwork preparations, instead of having to spend weeks or even months looking for a field site or attempting to gain access to a particular location or social group, when I returned to northwest China to begin extended fieldwork in the fall of 2010 I was able to immediately begin conducting intensive

research within the community I was studying. Indeed, upon picking me up from the airport after a long day of travel, instead of taking me to a hotel or a restaurant, my contacts in the local gay men's group brought me directly back to the NGO office, where I right away began to take notes and engage in the core research methodology of cultural anthropology, "participant-observation," which involves simultaneous participation in and observation of the daily life activities of the social group or groups that the anthropologist is studying. Within three days, I had found and rented a small studio apartment that was located on the 18th floor of a residential building situated literally across the street from a similar complex that housed the office of the gay NGO. I could make the trip between my home and the gay men's group in under ten minutes, which greatly facilitated my access to the site, especially when (as was often the case) I was notified at the last minute of a group meeting or activity, or when something unforeseen or unexpected occurred.

During fieldwork, my time was largely spent conducting daily participant-observation in the office of the gay men's group, which consisted of anywhere from around a dozen to 30 or so active volunteers and staff members. I was present at the group during almost all of its official working hours from two in the afternoon to ten in the evening or later. In order to facilitate this work, I took on the role of a group volunteer, working alongside the other group members, helping with daily office tasks, and taking part in group activities and community outreach events. Over the course of my research, I also spent considerable time in local gay and lesbian meeting places and establishments such as bars, bathhouses, and cruising areas in public parks, one of which was located a short walk from my apartment and the office of the gay NGO. I also

attended and documented meetings between members of the gay men's NGO and local government officials. Additionally, I was often invited to spend time "hanging out" with my gay and lesbian informants and friends in their private homes and to accompany them as they went about the ordinary and mundane tasks of their daily lives including shopping, eating, working, and socializing. These times were some of the happiest and most productive I spent during fieldwork, as they provided me with many opportunities to access what Bronislaw Malinowski describes as the "imponderabilia of actual life" (1984:24).

Apart from daily participant-observation, my other main fieldwork activity consisted of arranging and completing ethnographic interviews with a variety of informants, including gay and lesbian NGO leaders and volunteers, other community members, and local government officials. In all but two instances, I asked for and received informed consent from my interviewees to have our conversations audio recorded. Although knowing that their words were being recorded may have influenced what my informants told me during our conversations, I think that this drawback can be minimized in ethnographic interviews when the researcher has developed rapport and a relationship with person being interviewed, and I believe that in most cases being able to have an accurate record of an informant's verbatim statements is worth any tradeoff in terms of candor. I found that informants sometimes shared their most interesting and revelatory remarks during the period of time after the recorder was switched off and we were engaged in a more casual conversation; in these cases I recorded as much of this information in my interview notes as I could. Altogether I interviewed 51 different people, including seventeen current and former members of Tong'ai, six of them multiple

times; nine members of UNITE, a local lesbian NGO; four leaders and volunteers from other gay and non-gay NGOs who were also engaged in HIV/AIDS testing and treatment work among MSM; two local government officials; two other local gay community members; and seventeen leaders and members of gay NGOs in other parts of China.

My research schedule was separated into three distinct phases. In the first phase of fieldwork, from September 2010 to January 2011, I concentrated mainly on performing exploratory and preliminary research, focusing on daily participant-observation, developing rapport with key informants and building familiarity with my field site, conducting informal interviews, and collecting general and background information about the gay and lesbian groups and their members. In the second phase of my research, which began in February 2011 after I returned from a trip to the country home of a key informant where I celebrated Chinese New Year with his family, and lasted until around July 2011, I began concentrating more on completing in-depth qualitative interviews with current and former gay and lesbian group leaders and volunteers while continuing to engage in daily participant-observation and beginning to identify preliminary themes and trends in the data I was collecting. At this time I also made several trips to other regions of China to visit and conduct interviews with leaders and volunteers of other grassroots gay men's groups, in order to gain a larger perspective on the nationwide gay men's movement, and to place the research I was doing in northwest China within a larger context. During the final phase of fieldwork, which lasted from August to September 2011, I worked feverishly to wrap things up, chasing down elusive interviews, identifying and trying to fill gaps in data collection, and struggling to persevere with daily participant-observation and maintaining my field notes. Throughout my fieldwork, in

addition to taking field notes I also maintained a detailed diary of my daily experiences and activities that served as a valuable emotional outlet and has also proved useful in helping me recall events.

Fieldwork was primarily conducted using Modern Standard Chinese, although some of my informants from time to time engaged in dialogue using the local dialect, often briefly and in informal or joking situations which grew easier for me to understand and even take part in over time. Although none of my informants spoke English with me, from time to time they would drop an occasional English word into a conversation or interview. In my translations in the following chapters, I place such words in italics to indicate that they were uttered verbatim by my informants. During fieldwork I took great pains to record, jot down, or commit to memory the exact words, phrases, and language used by my informants; in the following ethnography I often include the exact Chinese words and phrases spoken by my informants as I believe, with Malinowski, that such “ethnographic statements,” “characteristic narratives,” and “typical utterances” constitute the very “spirit” that animates ethnographic understanding (1984:22, 24).

Positions, Limitations, and Challenges in the Field

As all works of ethnography inevitably are (Clifford 1986), my account is partial and limited in a number of respects. My experiences in the field, including the kinds of situations and data I had access to as well as how I interpreted and understood them, were ineluctably shaped by my position as an openly gay, white, cisgendered man from the U.S. in his late twenties and in a long-term, monogamous relationship with someone who is ethnically Chinese. Although I do not argue that my being gay gave me a privileged insight or empathic connection with my informants, most of whom identified as gay or lesbian in their own ways, I do think that it helped to reduce the ethnographic distance

between me and my informants and allow me (at least partial) access to a variety of situations and information that would have not otherwise been as readily available had I identified as straight. One of the first things that people would almost always ask of me was whether not I was “also” gay. Sometimes the chance that I might also be homosexual never entered into people’s minds; in such situations my friends and informants in the field would quickly tell them not to worry, “He’s also [like that] (*Ta ye shi*).”

Although it is likely that being male prevented or hindered me from accessing information from my lesbian informants in ways I cannot imagine, I was surprised by how little an issue my gender was while conducting fieldwork in lesbian groups and settings; indeed, the members of the local lesbian NGO quickly seemed to claim me as one of their own, calling me their “little sister” (*meizi*). It is also likely that my being what Lila Abu-Lughod calls a “halfie,” or someone whose “national or cultural identity is mixed” in such a way that “the ‘other’ that the anthropologist is studying is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self,” prevented me from preserving enough “distance” between myself and the subjects of my study and caused me to “slide into subjectivity” (1991:137, 140–141). Indeed, I do not deny that in many ways I identified with both my informants and the causes to which they were dedicated. It is also possible that my age helped (or hindered) my access and biased my data collection and analysis, as most (but not all) of my informants were of a roughly similar age to me as I was in the field.

However, in many contexts (especially when everyone present identified as gay or lesbian), other aspects of my identity became more salient, such as my language abilities, my race, my nationality, and my relationship with my boyfriend. I routinely encountered

examples of a defensive nationalism, especially in my interactions with Chinese gay men, many of whom were suspicious of a U.S. plot to keep China down or who pointed out how easy it was for people from the U.S. with little or no Chinese language skills to come and study or work in China, whereas it was much more difficult for Chinese to visit the U.S. People were often much more informed about the intricacies of the U.S.-China relationship than I was. On one occasion it took me several minutes to figure out what a gay man I was chatting with in the NGO office was trying to communicate to me; it turned out he was asking my opinion about the latest U.S. naval maneuvers in the Pacific (not, it turns out, one of my linguistic strong suits). On the other hand, others gravitated toward me when they learned that I was from the U.S., using my presence as an opportunity to voice their frustrations with China to what they assumed was a sympathetic ear.

Upon seeing a picture of my (Canadian) boyfriend, many people would initially appear confused and say, “But he looks Chinese! (*Ta xiang Zhongguoren!*)” However, most people seemed to think it was only natural that, being interested in Chinese gay culture, I would also be attracted to someone who was Chinese. More than the ethnicity of my boyfriend, it was the duration of our relationship—our ten-year anniversary took place halfway through my extended fieldwork trip—that people usually found striking or difficult to understand, as emic understandings of male same-sex relationships saw them as limited to a much shorter period of time such as a few months or at most years. People in the gay NGO often held my relationship up as a model for others to emulate, which I strenuously discouraged. However, while my own gay relationship may have biased or limited how people interacted with me, it also frequently served as a useful conversation

generator, which I believe helped me in my quest to understand my informants' own ideas and expectations regarding love, romance, and relationships.

One challenge I encountered early on in my research was how to include the experiences of women in my analysis. Although aware of and sensitive to critiques made in the literature (Blackwood 2002; Boellstorff 2007) that much of the growing body of gay, lesbian, and queer anthropology tends to focus primarily on men who identify as “gay” and ignores or overlooks the experiences of “lesbian” identified women, due to an unfortunate lack of lesbian contacts and organizations in my field site I initially planned to justify my focus on gay men and gay NGOs by situating my work within an expanding critical anthropological literature on men, masculinities, and male sexualities (Gutmann 1997). However, a few months after I began my extended fieldwork I was delighted to discover that a grassroots lesbian NGO had recently been founded in the city where I was based, and I quickly made every effort to make connections with the leaders and volunteers of this new group and to include them in my research whenever possible. Happily, the women in the group were extremely welcoming and supportive of me and my research, inviting me to participate in and observe their monthly group meetings, activities, and events, and to spend time with them in their homes and daily lives. Because of the smaller size of the lesbian group, its lack of a central and regular meeting location or office, and the relative infrequency of its activities, as well as the fact that my research had originally been based in the gay men's group where I had more contacts, most of the data I collected during fieldwork pertains to gay men's perspectives, a bias and limitation that is reflected in this ethnography.

Another challenge I faced was the perennial problem of what words to use to refer to the sexual orientations or identities of my informants, both in my own writing and in my translations of conversations I had with people in the field. As I discussed above, some solutions other ethnographers have used are to resort to indigenous vocabularies or corral all words like “gay” or *lesbian* inside scare quotes and italics. In his ethnography of gay and lesbian lives in Indonesia, for example, Tom Boellstorff utilizes italics to remind his readers that words like *gay* and *lesbi* (an Indonesian word derived from the English term “lesbian”) “have their own history and dynamics: they are not just ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ with a foreign accent.” Boellstorff describes italics as “a graphic device” that he uses to “hold [such terms] at arm’s length, defamiliarizing them while highlighting that they are lived concepts, not just analytical conveniences” (2005:8).

There are a variety of terms and phrases, both indigenous and appropriated, that are used to refer to same-sex sexual attractions, behaviors, and identities in contemporary China, including *tongxinglian* (“homosexual”), *tongzhi* (“comrade”), *ku’er* (“queer”), *quan’er nei de ren* (“people who are inside the circle”), gay, and lesbian. Although each of them carries its own particular history and set of meanings, they are also frequently used interchangeably or synonymously with one another. How to capture this complexity while also staying true to the way my informants used and understood their own language is a difficult task. However, I would argue that walling off words like “gay” and *lesbian* inside scare quotes or italics implies that Chinese gay men and lesbians’ own uses of the terms are somehow “Other” or inauthentic, while also making the not-in-scare-quotes, un-italicized (Western or U.S.) uses of the words seem more authentic, culturally consistent, and ahistorical than they in fact are. Just as the words gay and lesbian have

different meanings and significances in different social and cultural contexts in the West, the same is true in China (and elsewhere). At the same time, there may exist many important commonalities in sentiment and meaning in the use of words like gay and lesbian across different cultural contexts that could be obscured or ignored by insisting on quarantining them inside scare quotes or italics. Therefore, I would argue that doing so is both unnecessary and unwise. In the ethnography that follows, my un-scared and un-italicized use of the words gay and lesbian should not be taken to somehow imply that I believe that these words have a single meaning that can be applied across all social, cultural, and historical contexts. In fact, for ease of presentation, in the text that follows I often translate words like *tongzhi* and *tongxinglian* as “gay” or “lesbian,” depending on context and original meaning.

Chapter Outline

The structure of my dissertation runs along two main lines of movement, one spatial and one temporal. On the one hand, I steadily zoom out from an initial focus on the historical and ethnographic context to a detailed look at the history and development of the grassroots gay and lesbian NGOs I studied and worked with, and the stories of the people I met and got to know inside them. I then move to a wider examination of the kind of civil society environment that is taking shape around issues of gay and lesbian advocacy and HIV/AIDS prevention, concluding with a consideration of the effects of the priorities of the state and international donor agencies on the relationships between the various NGOs working amidst the MSM community as well as on the internal dynamics of grassroots gay men’s groups themselves. On the other hand, this ethnography also moves forward in time, tracking the emergence of local gay and lesbian cultures and communities alongside state policies of reform and opening up, and the beginnings of

China's HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. I move through the founding of gay and lesbian community-based organizations in the late 1990s and 2000s, and the personal histories of my gay and lesbian informants, including how they discovered and began coming to grips with their sexual orientations, in part through founding and joining gay and lesbian NGOs. I examine how these groups and the local civil society environment have changed in the late 2000s and the early 2010s, growing from a single grassroots gay men's group to a confusion of competing and cooperating organizations, and how one gay men's group has transformed through time, moving from a volunteer-based community organizing model to an aspiring, semi-bureaucratized professional services center, and the effects of these changes on daily life inside the group itself and its members. Although any ethnography in its essence is a rather static snapshot of a limited social and cultural context taken from a particular point of view and at a specific point in time, of course social and cultural life are far from static. It is my hope that this scalar and diachronic approach will help make this ethnography a more faithful and accurate accounting of the lives and stories of the people it shares.

The opening chapter prepares the groundwork for my ethnographic analysis of contemporary Chinese grassroots gay and lesbian culture and activism by sketching a brief history of gender and sexuality in pre-modern and modern China. I show how "traditional" values and beliefs remain highly influential in structuring how people understand and experience their gender and sexuality in the present, and chronicle how throughout Chinese history anxieties over issues of national strength, morality, and modernity have often been connected to the state regulation of what constitutes "proper"

or “desirable” expressions of gender and sexuality, particularly during periods of political and economic uncertainty and transition.

In my second chapter, the first of four ethnographic chapters, I trace the historical emergence of gay and lesbian cultures and communities in one northwestern Chinese city alongside government policies of “reform and opening up.” I pay particular attention to generational differences within the gay community, as well as individual experiences and narratives concerning gay men’s early sexual experiences, their stories of discovering that they are gay, and how they found and became a part of local gay cultures and communities.

I continue this exploration in my third chapter, concentrating on how feelings of love, intimacy, and family are imagined and practiced among gay men in the post-socialist era. Although the monogamous, long-term, romantic relationship is idealized by many gay men, it is also seen as unattainable due to emic conceptions of same-sex love as essentially impermanent. This understanding of same-sex intimacy stems from a lack of legal and social recognition of gay relationships as well as enduring traditional family and social expectations regarding heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Unable or unwilling to “come out” to their biological families, many gay men fashion alternative intimacies, including “show marriages” with lesbian women as well as elaborate gay “families.” At the same time, most gay men are either married to (straight) women or plan on getting married and having children in the future.

In my fourth chapter, I pivot from the exploration of gender and sexuality to an examination of grassroots gay and lesbian activism, NGOs, and civil society in northwest China. Focusing on two grassroots gay and lesbian NGOs, I show how social and

economic reforms, as well as the global AIDS epidemic, are creating opportunities for many gays and lesbians to come together in pursuit of common goals such as fighting HIV/AIDS and working toward greater social awareness and acceptance of homosexuality. I also explore the trope of being a “volunteer,” including why people decide to become volunteers in gay or lesbian NGOs, what volunteering means to them, and how they see their involvement in grassroots gay and lesbian social movements fitting into the wider social and political transformations that are taking place in post-socialist China.

My fifth and final chapter takes a closer and more critical look at the character of the emerging (un)civil society that is being created through grassroots community AIDS activism as well as the recent arrival of large international organizations and foundations that have increased the funds available for HIV/AIDS prevention among MSM. Examining growing divisions within and among local gay groups as well as increasing competition between gay and non-gay NGOs in the area of HIV/AIDS testing and treatment, I argue that these changes are linked to the promotion of a neoliberal public health model in which the state and international donor agencies contract NGOs to offer HIV testing and treatment services to MSM. I also explore the positive and negative effects such pressures are having on grassroots gay men’s NGOs and their ability to respond effectively to the immediate threat of HIV/AIDS in their communities as well as to continue to work toward their long-term goals of creating social change in China around issues of gender and sexuality.

Finally, I end my dissertation with a brief afterword that contains a summary and discussion of some of the main themes and arguments developed in the text.