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By Mahlon Meyer | Sep 17, 2001 | 1016 words, 0 images

The protest certainly made for good TV. Last month gay activist Noel Chen was led--tied up, hooded and pulled by a leash--to the gates of the central police station in Hong Kong. His comrades bound him spread-eagled to the iron fence in order to protest a recent police raid on a shop selling S&M paraphernalia. When cops came to untie him, Chen mugged for the cameras that had gathered, writhing and moaning as if in ecstasy.

The stunt was broadcast not just in tiny Hong Kong but across southern China, where news from the former British colony is carried on local Chinese stations. And there Chen's antics had far more than entertainment value. Homosexuality, for decades considered a disease by authorities, is one of the most enduring taboos in China. But in the industrial south especially, where some of the country's greatest social and economic changes are occurring, a vocal gay community is beginning to assert itself. Individuals are learning to explore and take pride in their sexual identities. Groups are coming together to form loose-knit organizations and draw support from each other. And increasingly, they are doing so under the influence of the vibrant gay and lesbian culture in nearby Hong Kong. "Only a small part of Noel's protest was shown here on television," says Lee Laoshi, a gay man from Guangzhou, "but it gave us courage."

The fact that the former British colony is serving as a beacon of hope is somewhat ironic. For most of its history, Hong Kong maintained some of the strictest "anti-buggery" laws in the world. But as part of their preparations for returning the colony to China, the British watered down those laws and promoted new ones to ensure freedom of expression and organization. That encouraged Hong Kong gay activists to speak out and publish; at the same time, relaxed visa restrictions have allowed mainland activists to liaise with their brethren in Hong Kong. Books by Hong Kong author Chou Wah-shan about sexual identity and coming out have been so influential on the mainland that they are now known as "the bible."

Until now the greatest challenge facing most gays on the mainland has been ignorance. Ah Hui, a 19-year-old with floppy hair from a small village in Guangdong province, first became aware of his attraction to men when he was 13. But that knowledge gave him mental problems at school. "Whenever anyone laughed, I was sure he knew I liked men and he was laughing at me," he says. "I grew furious." His mother took him to a village doctor, who prescribed medicine for epilepsy. Finally, after he experienced strong side effects, his family sent him to Hong Kong for further medical treatment. There Ah Hui sought out Rainbow of Hong Kong, the city's most active gay and lesbian organization, and attended peer-support groups. "I learned that it was OK to love men," he said. "And I met my first boyfriend."

Hong Kong groups supply experience and support to the wider community as well. Rainbow brings mainland gay activists to conferences in Hong Kong, and sponsors a telephone hot line. Callers from all over southern China ask for advice about everything from recognizing their sexual orientation to how to come out to their families. "Sometimes they want us to help them find a boyfriend," says activist Chen, who founded Rainbow. Hong Kong academics and authors who study gay and lesbian issues regularly travel to China and discuss homosexuality with local scholars and students.

Given its reach, though, the freewheeling Hong Kong press probably has the greatest influence. Gay magazines published in Hong Kong can sometimes be bought on newsstands in Guangzhou, and are more often brought by gay men deep into the Chinese hinterland and shared with friends. Restrictions

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over broadcasting news from Hong Kong have relaxed in recent years, and demonstrations like Chen's spread-eagled protest are regularly carried on news programs in the region. Last year a series produced by Hong Kong's government-sponsored TV station RTHK, telling the true-life story of two high-school lesbian lovers, was shown in parts of Guangdong. Hong Kongers Timothy Lee, 17, and his lover, Po Chen, 18, have appeared on television and in print, discussing the pressure they face from their families and society in continuing their relationship. "We just want people to know the truth," says Lee.

Gays and lesbians across the border say that under the influence of such shows and magazines, a new culture of openness is emerging. Hong Kong gay chat rooms have become forums for homosexuals in southern China, and have inspired a half-dozen local spinoffs in Guangzhou. Sixty-year-old Lee Laoshi had his first homosexual encounter 30 years ago, while he was married. (He later divorced.) But he only recently came out to his family--after meeting with Noel Chen during one of the activist's visits to Guangzhou. Now Lee holds weekly gatherings of his own in Guangzhou teahouses for gay friends. "We can now talk about our relationships openly at restaurants," he says. "This is the beginning of a whole new China."

He may be overstating the case. Even though officials removed homosexuality from the list of diseases last year (it has never been illegal), Hong Kong-style protests and conferences are still too politically sensitive for the mainland. Even most openly gay Chinese men and women still refuse to tell their families about their sexual orientation. "I am the only one I know who has come out to his family," says Zhang Yi, a Beijinger who organizes gay social functions. In Hong Kong, the parents of teenage couple Lee and Chen refused to talk to them for a month after learning about their relationship.

The unfortunate fact is that the greater awareness of gay issues often extends only to the gay community itself. "The question many parents will ask is, 'So, when are you getting married?'" says Rainbow's Chen. "They don't understand what being gay means." Still, not long ago the same could have been said of many closeted Chinese homosexuals. At least the education process--for everyone--has begun.

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