

WALTER WILLIAMS ACTIVIST INFLUENCE IN CHINA

Along with Dr. Wan Yan Hai, one of China's leading LGBT activists, USC Professor Walter Williams had a major influence from 1997 to 2001, in helping to persuade the China Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. Since that beginning, attitudes in China began to change. This subject is included in an online article published on the internet in 2010.

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In China, where tradition reigns, homosexuality is no longer taboo. What is the view from those living in the country?

在传统思想主导的中国，同性恋已不再成为一个禁忌的话题。现在生活在中国境内的同性恋人群对这一现象又有什么看法呢？

Today, 35-year-old Joe Lam is the publisher of *Dim Sum Magazine*, Hong Kong's first gay magazine, as well as festival director of the Hong Kong Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. Though his parents struggled with the idea of him being gay at first, Lam said they have come to accept it. "My mom said to me, as long as you're happy, I'm fine," Lam said.

While Hong Kong has long been ahead of China, Lam's story is an example of China's changing attitudes towards homosexuality. In a country where homosexuality was once a taboo subject, increasing numbers of Chinese are becoming more tolerant of homosexuality. Homosexual intercourse has been legal in Hong Kong since 1991.

As for mainland China, well into the 1990s, homosexuality was considered both a crime and a mental illness in the People's Republic. Gays were prosecuted under the "hooligan" law while the Chinese Psychiatric Association labeled it a mental disease.

In 1997, the Chinese government abolished the hooligan law, an act considered by most to be a decriminalization of homosexuality. In 2001, the Chinese Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list. The association's evidence included a 1999 study that followed the lives of 51 Chinese gays and lesbians over the course of a year. The group found that only six of the subjects had emotional disorders.

Since then, the Chinese gay community has rapidly expanded, with dozens of gay bars and hangout spots across the country, hundreds of Chinese gay websites, and many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) organizations. These groups help organize gay rights campaigns, HIV/AIDS prevention efforts, film festivals and pride parades.

Public attitudes are also changing, with many people growing more accepting of gays. The vast majority of educated, young people in urban areas have no problem with homosexuality. "You've got 50 and 60-year-old men coming out, young teenagers coming out, everyone coming out," says Kenneth Tan, a native Singaporean who has been living in Shanghai for the past seven years. "There is a lot of energy in the scene right now because all these people are coming out for the first time in their life, in the life of the community and the history of modern China. There is a great sense of freshness to the scene."

Fudan University in Shanghai offered China's first undergraduate gay studies course in 2003. A China chapter of PFLAG, an organization for parents, family and friends of lesbians and gays, was established in 2007. Gay publications have sprouted up as well as other "gay" businesses, restaurants and shops frequented by mostly gay patrons.

Tong Yu, known as Common Language in English, is a Beijing support and rights group for lesbian and bisexual women founded in 2005. Its founder, Xu Bin, says that at the time there were no lesbian groups and only about thirty gay groups. Now she estimates there are several hundred gay and lesbian groups throughout China.

The Beijing LGBT Center, founded in 2008 by four LGBT groups including Common Language, even began issuing symbolic “marriage certificates” to gay couples. Hong Kong hosted its first gay pride parade in December 2008, attracting approximately 1,000 people. The second parade was held in November 2009....

Kenneth Tan, who serves as editor-at-large for the popular website Shanghaiist.com, has watched the Shanghai scene grow up. “When I first came here, the bars were hidden and had to be very quiet, and now it’s like we’ve got huge bars that cater to different segments of the population,” he said. “If you’re a middle-aged Chinese gentleman, you go here. If you like big burly men, go here. The scene has developed to the point that you see very measurable social stratification going on.”

China had its first gay pride event in Shanghai in June 2009, consisting of plays, film screenings, discussions and parties scattered throughout one week. The event, called Shanghai Pride, attracted a few thousand people from all over China.... “People didn’t think it was possible,” says Tan who served as one of the masterminds behind the event. “We had a small, humble start, but it was a good one. These individuals have been coming out for a while and this pride event gives them a reason to come out collectively as a community.”

Even new terminology for the gay community has emerged. Gays have commonly been referred to as “tongzhi” (同志), a term meaning comrades. Lesbians refer to themselves as “lala” (拉拉). The word “ku” (酷) or “ku’er” has also been used to mean queer, but also carries a double meaning as the word “cool.”

Walter Williams, a University of Southern California professor who has been studying gender and sexuality in Asia since 1983, says, “China right now is very similar to the U.S. in the 1960s, in regards to homosexuality...but I think that at the rate China is moving along, we will see China at the forefront of gay liberation.”

Homosexuality has been documented in the country since ancient times. Daoism emphasizes maintaining a balance between yin and yang. Yin was regarded as feminine while yang was regarded as masculine. Every man was considered to contain some yin in him, thus feminine behavior was not considered unnatural.

And though Confucianism emphasized traditional duties of marrying and bearing children, it did not include homosexuality in its list of prohibited practices. Scholars have even concluded that many emperors had male concubines. “Historically, once the role of getting married and having children was filled, people were free to do what they wanted,” Williams says.

Williams says that many of the negative attitudes toward homosexuality in China are a byproduct of Western colonialism. “Many people think homosexuality is a European import, but actually it was homophobia that was a European import,” Williams says. “A lot of it was a direct influence from the British coming in establishing colonial power. Many of them were against homosexuals so to avoid persecution, the Chinese took similar attitudes.”

One difference between China and other countries may explain the increasing tolerance of homosexuality: the one-child policy, implemented to stem China’s overpopulation. “Gays and lesbians fit in quite nicely with China’s population programs,” Williams said. “Why punish people who don’t reproduce when their natural inclination would be to remain non-reproductive? They are model citizens as far as the population policy.”

Another key difference is religion. In the United States, the debate against homosexuality is fueled by Christianity while in Southeast Asia, it's Islam. However, China has no dominant religion and most Chinese are secular. "Lack of religion means China in some ways is more accepting," Williams says. "Any time there is a big cultural change, there will be elements that continue the old way. But to not have a strong institutionalized religion against it allows a gradual evolution of thoughts."

"Religion doesn't play such a huge role in social and cultural discourse," Tan adds. "They don't look at this thing through a religious or moralistic standpoint. When you come to me and say what I'm doing is a sin, there can be no more discussion because you say what you believe in because God tells you. But in China, there is room for discussion."

Some attribute the growth of China's LGBT scene to the influx of expatriates in China. Hannah Miller, an openly gay woman from the United States who lived in Shanghai for seven years, started the group Shanghai LGBT, which now has 1,000 members. She also helped jumpstart and organize Shanghai Pride. Miller says that though the Chinese gay movement was progressing long before she was there, the presence of expatriates allows the community to be more open in organizing events. "If I get in trouble, I can leave," she says. "Whereas, Chinese people have families, jobs, they're subject to laws. So having expatriates helps them to be more public in organization."

In a country where most newspapers are government-owned and gays aren't portrayed on television, the internet provided homosexuals with a way to find current information about the gay community and understand their sexuality. Lam thinks the internet has been a catalyst for the gay community, especially the younger generation. "Because of internet, younger people know what's going on in the world," Lam says. "The younger generation is much more open-minded and willing to stand up and fight for rights."

For some gays like Robin who remain closeted to everyone, the internet has served as their only outlet. Robin uses gay websites such as gaydar.co.uk to meet gay friends around the world. "For me, it's everything," Robin says. "For many Chinese, the Internet is the only way to contact and find gay friends. We don't need to hide ourselves on the Internet. I can't imagine how bad my life would be if I could not use the Internet. It has changed my life."

Though activists want more discussion on gay rights, the lack of public discussion has had a surprising benefit—there is less violence toward gays in China. Tan said. "You don't hear of someone getting killed because they're gay in China." Lam attributes the lack of violence to the Chinese culture, saying, "Chinese people are less aggressive. Even if people don't like something, they won't do anything."

In the 1990s, China turned a blind eye to the problem of HIV infection, however the government began cooperating with gay groups to address the issue. It is believed that the 2003 SARS epidemic sparked these efforts, demonstrating the importance of public health. "The Chinese government has improved its attitude toward HIV/AIDS," **Williams said.** "They used to deny the reality, but they have realized it's not productive to ignore social issues."

Williams says that in comparison to countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, China is far ahead. Malaysia enforces anti-gay laws, sometimes leading to police beatings, harassment and bloody floggings. LGBTs are not allowed to appear on television or any state-run media while the Islamic faith ensures that most people consider homosexuality immoral.

"There is a cautiousness about the Chinese government," Williams says. "They don't want to make waves. They're not rabid against homosexuality, they don't see it as a threat to the future."

They just want people to do their work, get along and be a good citizen. That's great progress compared to decade ago."

The majority of people acknowledge that the government has made great improvements over the years and predict that the government will eventually adopt a positive stance toward homosexuality. "I remember when it was so bad that I'm just so grateful for the changes that have been made," Williams says. "People's lives are so much better than 20 years ago. I think what we will see is a move from negative to neutral to positive."

While the government hasn't necessarily supported gay rights in China, Williams thinks the government has come a long way. "China has changed more than any other government in the world in as short a period of time," he says. "It's certainly one of the shortest turnarounds than any government in the world. Not that China is perfect, but it has made great strides compared to decades ago."