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Chinese Trans Advocates Organize Nationally: A Conference Report

The trans movement in Mainland China is at its early stages and rapidly growing. Particularly in the past two years, there has been a strong increase of trans activism and advocacy. There have been more trans individuals willing to be publicly visible as well as more efforts within the larger LGB community to support the articulation of trans communities. In December 2016, a two-day conference with trans activists and advocates was held in the Eastern Chinese city of Ningbo, aiming at, on the one hand, facilitating exchange to support participants' work, and, on the other, initiating a community-based consultation to map out the current situation of trans people across the country. This paper seeks to present the qualitative information gathered during the event in regards to the communities' most pressing needs in order to better inform the direction of the trans movement in the country.

Keywords: Chinese trans people, sexual and gender diversity, China, transgender

Introduction

Queer, or *tongzhi*, activism in China started as early as the 1980's, while the 1990's saw the adoption of the word *homosexual* in public discussions (Wan 2001). Much of *tongzhi* organizing was on the rise in the 1990's with gay man Li Jianquan giving a speech at the New York World Lesbian and Gay Conference in 1994 calling for decriminalization and depathologization of homosexuality (Wan 2001: 47). A National Women and Men *Tongzhi* Conference was held in 1998 (He and Jollie 2002; Wan 2001), and active community building was on the rise. Nevertheless, there was little public awareness of trans people until the year 1995, when rising celebrity Jin Xing, who had won a prestigious and rare state scholarship to study modern dance in the USA, underwent gender-affirming surgery in China and making national news (Rahman 2016). It took until 2001 for homosexuality to be removed from Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders (CCMD-3) (Ma 2003), but "transsexuality" remains classified as a disorder, and this diagnose is a requirement for hormones and gender-affirming surgeries to be legally prescribed to trans people by clinicians as "treatment" (Asia Catalyst 2015: 3).

While limited attention to trans issues has been paid within the gay and lesbian *tongzhi* communities, the past two years have seen an emergence of diverse trans voices in China. Trans Center, a national trans advocacy organization, was founded in the Southern city of Guangzhou in 2016. A refuge in Nanjing opened doors to homeless trans people in the same year. Online trans communities have blossomed and organized; trans forums, which have always been one of the most important platforms of community support and information exchange, have grown with the spread of mobile phones and increased trans awareness. Individual trans activists,

such as Chao Xiaomi, appeared on popular mainstream TV shows to talk about trans identities and recognition, fueling a nationwide media interest and challenging false myths of what being trans in China meant (Qian 2016). The year 2016 saw the first trans job discrimination case be filed and accepted in court (Li 2016). Many of these efforts have emerged as individual initiatives in different parts of the country, with few connections between people and/or organizations. At the time of writing there are five active trans organizations: Trans Center, Trans Life, Young Tree, Trans Talks, and Trans Refuge. Most of the activism done by these five organizations has focused on trans communities' services and public awareness building.

Additionally, efforts encouraging trans-led projects have been made in some organizations that work with LGBTI activism and advocacy, the most prominent of them being the Beijing LGBT Center. In collaboration with UNDP (United Nations Development Fund) and the Beijing University, the Beijing LGBT Center published a report on the overall situation of LGBTI people in China, the findings of which concluded that trans people, "face the greatest forms and levels of discrimination, whether within the family, in schools or in workplaces" (UNDP 2016: 8). A follow up report by the same collaborators was published in 2017, becoming the first quantitative research survey to analyze 2060 answers from respondents who identified as trans men, trans women, genderqueer, or cross-dressers (China Development Brief 2017). The report uncovered difficulties in accessing trans-specific healthcare, violence and discrimination in families, intimate relationships and social spaces, poor mental health, and barriers when accessing education and employment.

The authors of this article have been active in gender diversity and trans awareness training for a few years, and the idea of holding the first nationwide trans activist and advocate conference, *Trans China 2016*, emerged once we realized that most of the people doing trans advocacy and activist work, or those providing services to trans communities, had never met each other. Peer networks are part of self-care, as social support from other trans people has been shown to moderate the effects of anxiety and depression (Bockting et al. 2013). Besides connecting people for wellbeing, empowerment and inclusive conversations of different activists and advocates, we believe that it is also crucial to create a platform for people to inform each other of their ongoing efforts. The conference aimed at facilitating a common understanding and awareness of the needs of trans communities, identifying skillsets needed to address them, and encouraging intra-organizational learning. Ningbo, a city in the Eastern province of Zhejiang, was chosen as the event location due to the contacts previously established in the area when two of the organizers lived there. This article is both a report of the conference organizing processes and a qualitative inductive thematic analysis contribution to the field of trans studies in China. The thematic analysis part of the article will provide more in-depth explanations of the legal and social issues that trans communities in China face using experiences of the conference participants, and crystallize the main topics of discussions during the event.

Methodology

The examples of community organizing given by Minkler (2005; Minkler, Roe, and Robertson-Beckley 1994) started on the premise that the communities already have all the knowledge that is needed and, therefore, the facilitators should only serve as a platform to encourage conversations and provide a space for learning. This was the core value throughout the conference, and communities' members were also encouraged to take responsibility for most of the facilitation. The people who initially conceptualized the event were a white European queer woman and a white Latino trans person. After reflection on our positionality in this research project (Bourke 2014), and wanting to maximize the space for Chinese trans activists, we invited Trans Center and several active community members to be part of every step of the research design, participant recruitment, and event organizing. They quickly took the role as co-organizers and main decision-makers. All written outputs of the event also involved active participation of Chinese trans activists. Furthermore, a conscious effort was made to avoid discursive hegemonization and objectification (Mohanty 1988) of the participants of *Trans China 2016*.

Snowball sampling was used to identify trans activists and advocates who are leaders or co-organizers from LGBT or trans organizations; that is, invitations were made based on direct references from initial participants themselves. 21 participants were able to attend the conference. While the number of participants is low, so is the number of organizations in China at the moment. The trans people invited were key informants and, therefore, we believe they were able to voice the main challenges and needs of some trans communities. Several community members joined the meeting to observe and learn, but their results are not included in this analysis. Lukas Berredo (Transrespect Officer, TGEU), H.c Zhuo (Executive Director, Trans Center, Guangzhou), Joanne Leung (Executive Director, Transgender Resource Center, Hong Kong), and Pipi (trans activist from Northeast China) were invited to facilitate community-training sessions. Two main goals of the conference were established as: 1) facilitating impactful training sessions to support the work of trans activists and advocates, and 2) initiating a community-based consultation into the present situation of trans populations across the country in order to identify the most pressing common needs and issues they faced. The first day of the conference focused on identifying the most pressing issues, and the second on developing measures and solutions to tackle them. Training sessions were made interactive to fuel conversations. Participants were informed about the audio recording of the conference prior to arrival, and consent forms were signed before the start of the event.

Inductive thematic analysis was chosen as methodology (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006) as there were many different outputs from the conference participants in the form of conversations, lists, mind maps, and feedback, and the three largest topics were identified and further analyzed in depth. The conference outputs were recorded, translated, and coded reflectively. Thematic analysis allowed for flexibility of looking

into different types of outputs and identifying the larger themes of the conference.

While there is a wide variety of gender diversity identification words in China (Chiang 2012), 跨性别 (kuà xìngbié), which would translate as *transgender* or *trans*, is the word used in this article as it is currently commonly used by community members. In this article, *China* is referred to as the territory of the People's Republic of China, excluding Taiwan and Hong Kong. It is not a political statement but rather an effort to acknowledge the different developments of trans movements in what we might perceive as one unanimous *China*.

Demographics and discussion trends

There were 21 people who took part in the conference: two identified as women and trans women at the same, five as trans men, nine as trans women, and four people filled in their gender identities as gender-fluid, assigned 'female' at birth but 80% male and 20% female, queer, and genderqueer. One person did not specify their gender identity. The conference participants were relatively young: eight were between 21 and 26 years old, nine between 27 and 36, three were older than 36, and one participant omitted the age section. The majority of participants had experience of higher education: 18 participants had started and/or finished higher education, 2 had completed high school, and one participant did not answer the question. The limitations posed to the research due to the small sample size are discussed in the *Limitations* section below. Participants were also asked about the length of their involvement with community activism and advocacy work. Twelve of the participants stated having less than two years of experience: this coincides with the increase of trans-led public activities in the past two years. One participant stated 2-4 years of experience, three 4-6 years of experience, one 8-10, and three participants skipped the question. Seven participants identified as founders of trans organizations.

The conference was structured to provide a scope of different topics on the first day (namely, International Advocacy and Advocacy tools, Strategic Network Development, Basic Fundraising and Proposal Writing, Self- and Community Care, and Strategic Direction for Trans Rights Advocacy), and semi-structured discussions on the second day. Discussion topics outside of the three main ones summarized in the next section included difficulties in finding an intimate partner, living life without disclosing own history of transition, and loopholes in the legal system.

Community-based inquiry: pressing issues

The first day of the conference focused on facilitating discussions about the most pressing issues for trans communities around the country. At the beginning of the conference, all participants were asked to think of and specify one issue that they saw as the most pressing in their immediate work and communities. Those were discussed during the course of the second day. The sessions were recorded, transcribed, translated, and mind maps, notes, post-its were photographed. This provided a large

amount of qualitative content to analyze, and the themes were identified and crosschecked by the three authors of this article. There were three themes that emerged from the sessions, which were later repeatedly brought up in group discussions, namely: trans-specific health care and legal issues, lack of anti-discrimination laws in employment and education, and mental health.

Trans-specific health care and legal issues were part of some of the most heated debates during the two days. A report published by Asia Catalyst (Bernotaite, Zhuo, and Berredo 2017) states that, although the current law grants the right to pursue gender-affirming surgeries and legal gender recognition under extremely rigid requirements, it does not offer protection against discrimination in employment, education, and health care services. The lack of basic health care provisions for trans people in China was by far the most pressing issue for many. The *2017 Chinese Transgender Population Survey* also outlined the necessity for standardized system for provision of hormone therapy and need for full depathologization of trans people in the mental health system, which in turn would allow easier access to gender-affirming surgeries and legal gender recognition on Chinese ID cards (China Development Brief 2017: 25). The same source also lined the present inaccessibility of gender-affirming surgeries to poor mental health outcomes. Erickson-Schroth and Carmel observed that, “treatment by affirming providers can be lifesaving, and resilience building can happen both in and outside of the office” (2016: 331). An urgent need for support from professional providers was palpable during most of the conversations. There is a widespread lack of knowledge and understanding about trans-related issues that prevent doctors in hospitals to prescribe hormones. As a consequence, all the participants who had taken hormones had self-medicated.

While interactions with general hospitals were a major source of distress for the participants, most conversations focused on the urgent need of modifying the laws in order to allow trans people to modify their bodies irrespective of family consent as well as to ensure quality trans-specific health care (Gorton and Grubb 2014: 215-220). Participants have stated that only those who had officially changed the gender marker on their ID cards could go to the hospital for hormone tests and prescriptions.

A community organizer, Ellen Shao,¹ commented:

Especially among trans women, there is not enough understanding about hormones. The way many of them use hormones is not very regular. Also, many people come and ask me: “Will my beard disappear if I use hormones? Will my voice feminize if I use hormones?” A lot of people think that using hormones will change everything.

¹When quoting participants in text, nicknames will be used.

Cherry Lin, who runs a trans service and advocacy organization, joined to comment on her experience of self-medication:

Older sisters told me: “If you take this medicine, you will be able to grow breasts”, and I followed their advice. After that, I did grow two hard bits—they were really hard, and would hurt if I would touch them. Then I injected myself with progesterone and then really went crazy—it was like I got my first period.

It was clear from the conversations that self-medication was the most common way of using hormones, mainly acquired from clandestine and/or unregulated channels. Some uncommon exceptions were people traveling abroad to purchase hormones with the recommendation of doctors. Some of the trans men in the group have had negative legal experiences purchasing testosterone. The gaps regulating the purchase of hormones opened pathways for those who had access to testosterone to sell them for extremely high prices, pushing trans men to use much more than they should, and thus raising health concerns in the communities. Discussions on hormone purchase and use were concluded with the sentence, “hope that there is more advice on the use of hormones”.

Body modification, with particular focus on gender-affirming surgeries, was of interest to a part of participants. Legal gender recognition—i.e. “the official recognition of a person’s gender identity, including gender marker and name(s) in public registries and key documents” (Köhler and Ehrt 2016: 9)—is not a reality in China unless a person has gone through gender-affirming surgeries and a confirmation certificate is issued. The legal gender recognition process is under two regulations: “Approval of issues relating to changes in household registration after gender change” (Rule 478, 2008) and “Ministry of Public Security on the implementation of transsexual changes in the registration of sex items after the registration of gender issues related to the issue of approval” (Rule 131, 2002). While gender-affirming surgeries are legally available and regulated by the “Sex change operation technical management standard” (变性手术技术管理规范), which was first published in 2002 and then updated in 2008, the process still functions under an oppressive set of requirements: notarized parental agreement, divorce if married, and Gender Identity Disorder diagnosis (GID) from a psychologist (which would also confirm that the applicant is heterosexual), are all compulsory (Bernotaite, Zhuo, and Berredo 2017). The conditions mentioned above ignore the human right of self-determination as the guiding factor of policy making (Köhler and Ehrt 2016: 6). Among them, parental agreement was the one that came up most in conversations, as this means that trans people requesting gender-affirming health care services need to get full support and approval of their parents. A trans-led business owner, Rick Hu, commented on the situation:

Parents need to sign an agreement even for a simple surgery like mastectomy. We

are adults, we know ourselves, and we can be responsible for our own actions. But now, in China, we are still obliged to provide notarized signatures of our parents.

Overall, trans people trying to access hormones and/or gender-affirming surgeries as well as legal gender recognition do not have their voices heard in the decision-making process of the law. The lack of basic health care provisions for trans people in China was by far the most pressing issue for many, leading people to undergo self-medication, self-surgery, the rise of clandestine channels for hormones and gender-affirming surgeries, and put people seeking these products and services at great risk. It also means that the Chinese trans rights movement must focus on the basics of influencing more inclusive policy making as a core part.

Lack of anti-discrimination laws in employment and education was another very important topic, as many struggle with finding a stable job. These conversations helped uncover legal limbos, which might put trans people in precarious situations affecting their health, employment, education, right to privacy, and quality of life in general. The issues uncovered portray a complex web of discrimination where many issues are interconnected. Trans people are visibly vulnerable and exposed to discrimination and violence on many occasions of public life.

Even simple things like opening a bank account or getting a driver's license had the capacity to turn into situations of violence. Monica Sun, from Northeast China, shared a personal story:

When I was passing my driving test, I needed to go to the police to register my certificate. And one person there said: "It's not you on the ID card - if you are a man, take your trousers off and show me." I had no other way - I took my trousers off for him.

Inability to disclose trans status for fear of losing employment was commonplace in all industries. Most of the participants who were not running their own organizations hid their identities from employers, living under constant stress and anxiety. Monica shared another story about navigating employment search:

Before, I danced for a long time, always in bars. Sometimes, if I didn't disclose my identity to the employer, I would be able to stay and work there for a while. But then, if I would tell employers, they would not even consider me.

There is also currently a gap between educational diploma and legal gender recognition regulations. As mentioned in the previous section on trans health care, one can only undergo gender-affirming surgeries at the age of 20, meaning that the soonest one can change a gender marker on identification documents is 20 years of age. Usually, Chinese youth enrolls in higher educational institutions right after

secondary education (Davey, De Lian and Higgins 2007). Needing to get enrolled in a higher educational institution with a specific gender marker that cannot be changed after legal gender recognition creates a limbo, as many do not wish to enroll in university at a later age. This is another legal gap that needs to be diminished either by reducing requirements for legal gender recognition, for gender-affirming surgeries, for higher educational institutions, or for all of the above. A conversation between Nick Qiu and Niman Qiang illustrated the desire to change the present situation:

- *We need to let people become more aware about the fact that changing to one's true gender is connected to educational diploma. Therefore, the Ministry of Education should provide such pathway for changing educational certificates. We can initiate more advocacy around this issue.*
- *We talked about one more thing: there is a part of the Chinese law that is already really respectful to trans people: it is possible to change ID documents. Therefore, the Chinese Ministry of Education should follow this law and allow for changes in gender markers, as education is such a huge part of everyone's life.*

In further discussions among the participants, it became clear that many trans women worked in the sex industry. Asia Catalyst had commented on the destructive cycle that is created without employment protection as many trans women are pushed into sex work, which is illegal in China (2015). According to a recently published report, “The high representation of trans and gender-diverse people in sex work around the world undeniably results from widespread structural, institutional, and interpersonal violence experienced by them from early in their life onwards with regards to accessing education and alternative employment” (Fedorko and Berredo 2017: 4). Many participants voiced their concerns about their communities’ experiences with police violence against trans people, and examples of prison guards mistreating trans women and ignoring harassment against them were shared. Criminalization of sex work “negatively impact trans sex workers’ wellbeing and access to services, exposing them to police violence, incarceration, and dangerous working conditions” (2017: 11).

The topic of **mental health** was also one of the many issues that came up in conversations. Sociocultural factors play an important role in how people perceive themselves, as negative attitudes toward sexual and gender diversity tend to lead to the internalization of negative feelings associated with their orientations, identities, and expressions. For trans people, pursuing an authentic life could mean disappointing their families by not fulfilling important duties that are socially and historically expected from them. This reflects the conservative characteristics of a Chinese society where children have been inculcated for centuries with Confucian values of filial piety.

Stigma and psychological distress have been found to be tightly connected (Bockting et al. 2013). The rates of depressive symptoms and anxiety among trans people are far higher than those of the general population (Budge, Adelson, and Howard 2013). Rejection by family and friends, discrimination, victimization, or violence hugely contributes to the elevated prevalence of suicide attempts (Haas, Rodgers, and Herman 2014). This situation is greatly aggravated in societies where traditional cultural values strongly prohibit non-heteronormative and non-cisnormative expressions. People who do not fit this binary system will probably experience intense negative feelings, including shame, guilt, and depression associated with their sexual orientations, gender identities, and/or gender expressions.

Among the community organizers were three people working in the field of mental health: two as counselors in public institutions and one answering a trans hot line. Issues arose both on a personal level and in relation to mental health service provision. Papi, who was one of the most experienced participants in the group, noted the underlying feelings of helplessness:

The biggest difficulty I face is that I can talk to many people, but I cannot necessarily help all of them. This makes me feel powerless.

Another mental health counselor, Linda Liu, commented on her everyday work:

I'm a mental health counselor, and some patients think that I should be a patient instead. There are many who do not accept trans people. They think that we have mental disorders, and they think that I am ill too. So it's not easy at all.

Many of the participants talked about their experiences of perceiving stigma in public spaces, sometimes pushing them to points of desperation. Many of the activists and advocates have narrated personal experiences, as well as experiences from the communities they talked about, of strong minority stress (Hendricks and Testa 2012), including depression, anxiety, self-harm, substance abuse, risky sexual behaviors, self-harm, and suicide. Relationships with family members were complicated for many participants, which often added an extra layer of stigma and pressure. The youngest of them, who is still attending high school at the time of writing, was the only one who had full support of their parents.

Discussion

The thematic analysis of the conference records real-life experiences of Chinese people navigating their lives in the jungle of legally complex and non-standardized regulations around transition and social stigmatization of trans people. The conference allowed voices of trans people to emerge while sharing their experiences with the barriers within legal and social norms, thus humanizing what it actually means to be living realities of structural oppression. Mental health was one of the major concerns

for many community organizers, and we suggest further research to explore the link between the observed poor mental health outcomes and the legal and social pathologization of trans people in the country.

During the discussions, it became clear that laws and policies referring to trans-specific health care need to be modified and expanded as soon as possible, including the elimination of the pathologizing language used in the current regulation. The lack of legal hormone provisions has created an unregulated market with little guidance of how certain medications should be taken. Self-medication and misinformation provided by profit-driven sellers were found to be two of the major concerns of the participants. Additionally, gender-affirming surgeries need approval from police bureaus, families, and mental health care providers, and also limit the accessibility of these services only to those who are above 20 years of age, unmarried, and heterosexual. While changing gender marker on identification documents is possible, that is not the case for university diplomas, birth certificates, and a few other documents. Those legal loopholes illustrate the difficult bureaucratic system that trans people need to navigate in order to be able to access basic human rights.

With no legal protections from discrimination based on gender identity, many trans people find themselves in difficult situations. Few educational institutions are trans-friendly, and diplomas matching one's gender identity are a rarity. Activists and advocates have stated having trouble supporting themselves despite many running their own organizations. Participants, especially those with ID cards that did not match their gender identities and/or expressions, noted facing constant and blatant employment discrimination. As there were a few people in the conference who had previously been doing sex work, many stories of discrimination against trans sex workers were shared. While participants were upset about the lack of the aforementioned legal protections and the abundance of social discrimination, most were also well equipped with ways of countering them while using certain loopholes in the system and supporting each other on- and offline.

Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be taken into consideration. Firstly, there were only 21 participants, all part- or full-time community organizers. As activists and advocates for trans rights, they were able to share many valuable lessons. They were all above 18 years old, so most had finished or started higher education. Additionally, as the conference facilitators were highly focused on legal advocacy, the conference topic was led in that direction. Adelman and Woods explain that, "for youth who are 'out', or who are judged by peers to fail in their performance of heterosexuality or hegemonic gender, taunting and harassment, isolation, and marginalization are daily occurrences" (as cited in Payne and Smith 2010). Despite knowing the difficulties faced by trans children and youth, it must be noted that the summit did not address in depth their specific issues, and thus little was discussed

about their situation regarding homelessness, domestic violence, and access to education. There were also only three people above the age of 36, and no participants were of pension age; therefore, the research is not representative of Chinese trans elders and their specific issues. All the participants were well educated, none of them having not finished secondary education: that also poses a limitation of representation. Overall, although by no means representative of the diverse trans communities in China, this article should be viewed as one of the first attempts to visibilize the experiences of trans people in the country through qualitative thematic analysis.

Conclusions

Trans China 2016 became a platform for Chinese trans activists and advocates to connect and share experiences. The participants' and their communities' daily experiences revealed the contribution of stigma and discrimination to the high levels of stress among trans communities. It highlighted the urgent need for change in the laws and policies to allow self-determination for trans people accessing trans-specific health care, as well as the need to eliminate gender-affirming surgeries as a requirement for legal gender recognition. Being able to access education and employment were urgent issues for the participants. Unsurprisingly, with the lack of legal protections and high reported social discrimination, mental health was the third most discussed topic of the conference. At the same time, it was clear that community organizers were knowledgeable of how to serve their own communities and support each other. This article voices a fraction of experiences of trans people while navigating difficult situations created by systemic legal and social oppression.

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