

Playing Gay:  
Organizing Tongzhi Fun and HIV/AIDS Politics in Southwest China

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## ABSTRACT

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Over the past thirty years, we have seen a rise in sexual self identification and group affiliation based on sexual identity across the world, but particularly in China. Much of the research on this topic has focused on the role capitalism and urbanization has played in producing the circumstances under which *tongzhi* (gay men) could come together, which has necessarily prioritized processes of transnationalism, class aesthetics and geographic emphasis on coastal areas. This project expands the literature on *tongzhi* assembling by focusing on the legacy of HIV/AIDS organizations in the province of Yunnan in helping to bring important funding and political opportunity to emerging *tongzhi* social groups. Through presenting detailed ethnographic data, I argue that the organization's leaders engage in a form of fragmented authoritarian politics which involves balancing between localized bureaucratic political demands and organizing opportunities of fun for *tongzhi* men who may lack other spaces and times to meet. In this dissertation I will discuss how activities of play allow these groups to balance between dominant discourses and pragmatic social interactions.

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MAPS, GLOSSARY AND REFERENCES

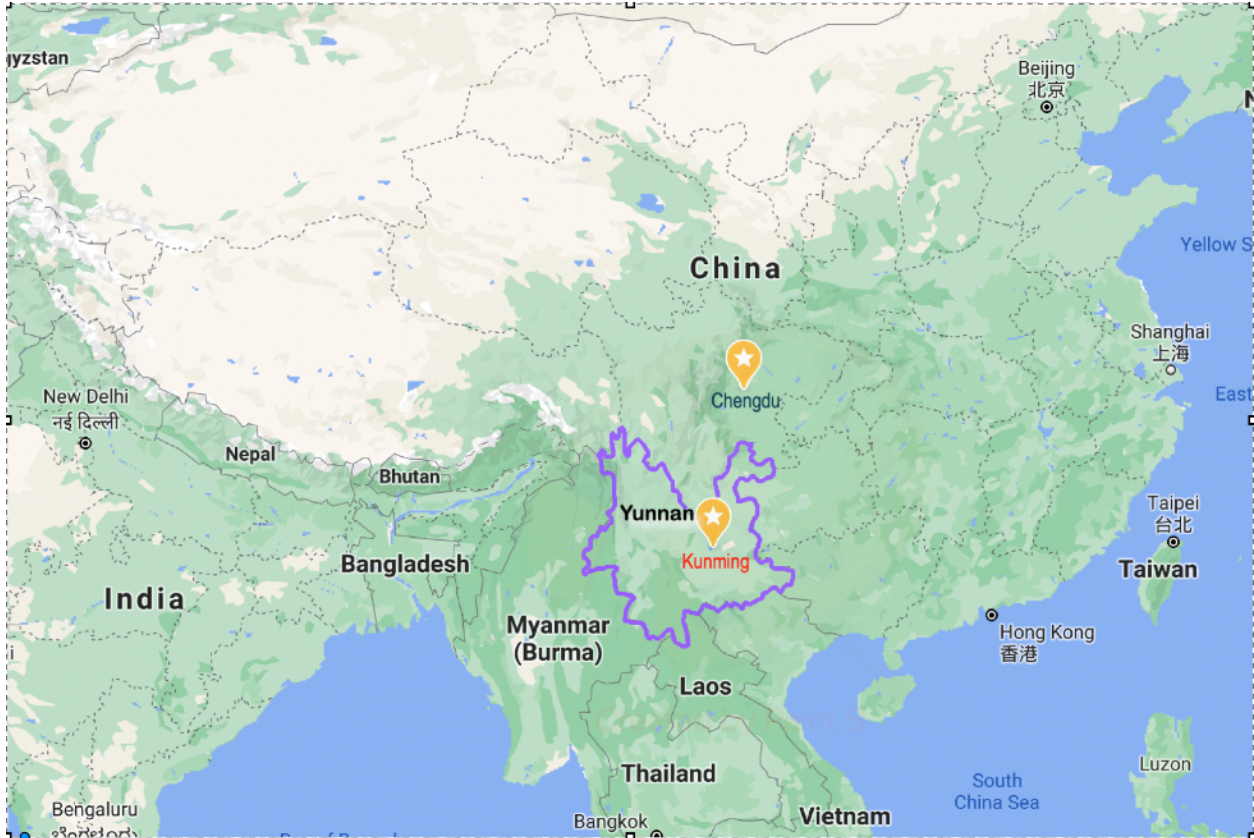


FIGURE 1: Map of Yunnan, China

## Chinese Local and International Terms for Sexual Identities

### *Most Commonly Used in this Dissertation*

*MSM*— Public health workers have often avoided using terms of identity when they produce demographic categories and tend to focus on specific at-risk behaviors. Thus instead of using terms like ‘homosexual’ or ‘gay’, they often use the term ‘Men who have Sex with Men’ or MSMs.

*tongzhi* (同志) —Originally the term is the Chinese communist terms for ‘comrade’, and then somewhat satirically adopted by Hong Kongnese gays. Authors such as Chou (2001) and Bao (2018) have analyzed the term ‘tongzhi’ and argued that it localized ‘gay’ to fit the specific cultures of people in China. It is the most widely used term used amongst these groups.

*tongxinglian* (同性恋)— literally translates as same sex love, but is often translated as homosexual, this was one of the first terms to officially denote men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women. Discursively the term was originally used in many psychological and medical literature in the early 20th century to describe homosexuals (Chiang 2010). Perhaps due to this early usage, the term has an official or medical connotation.

*nantong* (男同) and *nvtong* (女同)— a combination of the character for man (*nan*-男) or woman (*nv*-女) and the character for same (*tong*-同) which is also shared in the terms *tongzhi* and *tongxinglian*, this term also just means a gay or lesbian. It puts more emphasis on gender in case the term *tongzhi* or *tongxinglian* do not make it clear.

*lala* (拉拉)—internet slang that is the common phrase to mean a lesbian. (see Engebretsen 2013)



*trans- kuaxingbie (跨性别)— the translation for the word transgender. Kua-跨 means to straddle between two things, and xing bie-性别 means gender, so its a relatively direct translation. The English word 'trans' is also frequently used amongst young people.*

*gay— most directly meaning men who have sexual or romantic desires for other men, this term is also frequently used amongst people in China, perhaps as often as the Chinese term tongzhi. Gay has a bit more of a universal quality, referring to an identity that is thought to exist across the world, where as tongzhi feels more specific to Chinese culture. However, many men told me that the terms gay and tongzhi could be used interchangeably.*

*LGBT—An acronym that literally stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, but is often added to with other letters such as I-intersex, Q—questioning or queer, A—asexual. The acronym is in a sense supposed to be inclusive, while also marking differences in terms of unique identity categories that people may affiliate with. Its usage for this paper suggests two important things, one is that LGBT+ often becomes a kind of inclusive list of people that you *should* make sure are represented in your organization. It also makes linkage to international discourses, particularly surrounding the term 'LGBT rights'. When I use the terms I am trying to evoke a more global and historical implication.*

*queer, ku er (酷儿)—Many scholars will use 'queer' to try and defy identity categories, especially in response to the ongoing addition of new letters to the LGBT acronyms, and refer to all non-normative sexualities (Wilson 2019). However there is an ongoing tension between those who try to keep 'queer' a verb, a positionality statement, rather than an identity, which has been the trend (Weiss 2016). It is meant to suggest that within the culture there is a kind of dominant norm—straight, cis, married, and queer helps us to study that is not that. (Weston 1993). Queer promises to be universal, but in fact it carries the same kinds of Western-centrism as many of the other terms. Perhaps more significantly though for my project, it was a term that my informants rarely used. Even the Chinese translation of the term 酷儿—*ku er*, was seldom used, and frequently we would need to have discussions about what queer meant, with many different understandings. To the extent that I use the term it will be to try and describe particular kinds of relationships of power and sex.*

*One of us, our group*—In some places and for some men they did not identify as gay/tongzhi, and may only participate in these groups peripherally. When I observed organizers talking with these men, they obviously didn't mention MSMs, nor did they say coded language like tongxinglian, instead they would tend to speak more euphemistically, saying things like 'people like us' or 'yeah that foreigner is one of us'. The 'us' (我们) is clearly doing a lot of work in these situations.

*The following are terms that I do not use much in this paper, but whose meaning I want to preserve for future research.*

Niang Niang (娘娘)—a very sissy kind of gay man

G-you (基友)—very close friend of the same gender, which became to be used amongst tongzhi men to mean a longterm partner.

pao you (炮友) —cruedly put, a fuck buddy. Someone that you just met, maybe once or regularly for sex.

ji lao (基佬) —Cantonese slang for a gay man

gao ji (搞基) — engaging in gay sex (a verb)

0 (领)— a man who prefers to be submissive during sexual intercourse, chosen in part because the zero resembles an anus

1 (一) — a man who prefer to be dominant during sexual intercourse, chosen in part because the one resembles a phallus

piao piao (飘飘) —a Chengdu local term that connotes a flower blowing in the wind, means a wandering man, or a 'confirmed bachelor', euphemism for a homosexual man. (Wei)

duanxiu (断袖) —literally means 'cut sleeve'; a historic term for loving or romantic relationship between two men, comes from a famous story where an emperor would rather cut off his sleeve than wake up his male lover (Hinsch)

fen tao (分桃)— literally means 'half eaten peach', another historic term for a romantic relationship between men, refers to a story of an emperor who was so in love with one of his male concubines that he was willing to accept the other man's half eaten peach

## List of Chinese Terms and Concepts

*These are terms that I use frequently in this dissertation, often choosing to use the Chinese word and when possible Chinese characters, because I think it captures the meaning better than the English translations. Here is a place to refer back if you forget what the word or characters mean.*

报备 (bao bei)— means to report to a govern official, usually for permission to do some activity

挂靠 (gua kao)— to be affiliated with or attached to a supervising organization or government department

关系 (guan xi)—literally relationships, reflects a complex Chinese understanding of reciprocity and helping one another to over come obstacles

骨干 (gu gan)—literally dry bones, but used to mean old hands/old timers, or core members of a group

狼人杀 (langren sha)—‘kill the werewolf’ is a popular game amongst young people that is similar to the Western game of Mafia

两会 (liang hui)—‘two meetings’ that happen every year between the Chinese government and the Communist political party and set the governing agenda for the year

社区 (she qu)— ‘community’, but refers to a small collection of neighborhoods (小区) that are governed by a local board made from members within those neighborhoods

社群 (she qun)—‘community’, means a group of people, sometimes people will refer to the LGBT community using this word

素质 (su zhi)— ‘quality’, is something that a person has and reflects education, class, manners and culture (Anagnost 2004, Jacka 2009)

同志 (tong zhi)—‘comrade’ but the most common Chinese word for gay

舞场 (wu chang)—‘square dancing’, a kind of evening ritual amongst mostly Chinese 大妈—aunties, where they do synchronized dancing together in the public squares

小区 (xiao qu)—‘neighborhood’, but more specifically a collection of apartments that share a common gated community, security guard system and make up a 社区

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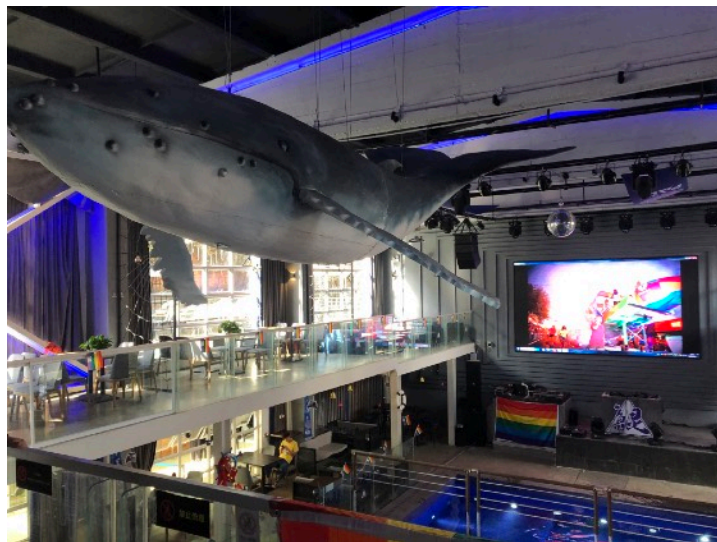
my love, Deng Hui Chuan, who have helped to keep me going, listened to my long rants and indetermination and given me the strength to finish. Thank you all so very much!

## INTRODUCTION

### Chapter I: HIV Tests and LGBT Play

It was the first weekend in June and the big day had arrived for Colorful Spring, they would be hosting the opening event for this year's 2020 Kunming Pride Celebration. Colorful Spring was an MSM (men who have sex with men) HIV prevention organization, but beyond focusing purely on public health they had put a lot of energy and thought into hosting exciting expressions of LGBT life in Kunming. This year they had rented a giant indoor swimming pool that was equipped with a fashion runway, DJ station, dance club-style lighting and a giant, life-sized blue whale hanging from the ceiling. My friend Xiao Mei, who had been put in charge of the event, was anxious the entire month of May to make sure that everything was perfect. He made sure there were singers and dancers, games to play in the pool and a popping DJ that would keep everyone dancing.

The event was well attended with over a hundred young *tongzhi* men<sup>1</sup> coming to see what Pride was all about. The program took advantage of the runway, having muscle men promenade along the catwalk, lip sync performances and a traditional Chinese style dance show. Most of the young men jumped in the pool, and hosts came up with fun games to try and help men flirt with one another, finding playful excuses to touch each other's bodies. The room was adorned with rainbow flags, and it was easy to envision yourself in a Pride party in any cosmopolitan city around the world.



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<sup>1</sup> Tongzhi is roughly the Chinese word for 'gay.' However, based on the work of Chou and Bao, I try to use it to more specifically to identify a sexual identity within a particular cultural context. This will be explained later in the chapter.

I got out of the pool to take a sip of my drink, when my research partner, JR, ran over and pulled me aside. 'Have you seen the group of middle aged ladies on the balcony?' she asked. I had noticed them, but wasn't sure who they were. 'They are from the Center of Disease Control!' JR said in a scandalized voice. 'They keep pulling some men aside and interviewing them. I think you should go up there and try to figure out what they want.' I followed JR's advice and volunteered myself to be interviewed by the women, only to discover that they were actually government cadres from the Drug Control Bureau who were working on a project about drug use amongst MSM partygoers. Liu Laoshi, the leader of Colorful Spring, had agreed to let them come so they could interview us and collect data about whether or not we used poppers and if that had any relationship to HIV transmission.

I was a bit taken aback by this revelation. For months Liu Laoshi had been trying to make the distinction that where other organizations were puppets of the Centers of Disease Control (CDC), his organization dared to host independent LGBT events. Previously that year, Colorful Spring had gotten in trouble with the police for hosting an Anti-homophobia Day, and the Pride Events were in theory supposed to signify their bravery to host LGBT activities in spite of government warnings. This event was framed as bringing *tongzhi* men together, not fulfilling some government program to collect data. So then was this all a ploy? Did he actually just host this event to gain funding from the government to do HIV research?

Since the fall of 2019, I have been living and doing research in Kunming, Yunnan with several MSM HIV prevention Community Based Organizations (CBO). These leaders must maintain a precarious balance between the government contracts they have to host HIV interventions and perform HIV tests and personal desire to support an 'LGBT community'. As Liu Laoshi explained to me: "If you call yourself an LGBT organization you need to do the job! The money from CDC gives you a special opportunity. I'm not saying you take advantage of AIDs, it's not an opportunity in that sense, but that it gives you the chance to actually do something for LGBT people." In this way, all across China--but particularly in the province of Yunnan--HIV organizers are trying to figure out the best way to maximize this opportunity, to find the intersections between public health and sexual identity.

While many have written about these MSM HIV CBOs, recent scholarship has been frequently disappointed in their efforts, or at times even quite critical. An incident like the one I described at the pool party would be viewed by some scholars as evidence of these organizations' complicity in government projects or desire to just make money. What is more, the ongoing focus on HIV is often described as

'stigmatizing' to *tongzhis* as it presents an unhelpful image to the greater Chinese public about the relationship between homosexual men and disease. Instead recent scholarship has pivoted away from HIV organizations and focused on the flow of 'transnational discourses' as they move through artistic expression, activism and pink economies. However, what this focus often misses is the ways in which these transnational discourses about LGBT rights and public health change and adapt to particular situations as a matter of necessity. In the pool party anecdote, Liu Laoshi is bringing together the transnational ideas of LGBT Pride events with demands from the state and trying to adapt both to fit the cultural understandings of *tongzhi* men in Kunming. It was not that Liu Laoshi was just hosting a Pride event to help the state, nor was he just giving permission to the CDC workers in order to make money, rather he was blending the concepts to assemble a particular group of men in Kunming.

Based on my research data, I set up a Latourian project in which I traced out how these groups of men come to be assembled together, and once they gather together what norms and ideas govern these groups (Latour 2002). What I found is that the intersection of LGBT community-building discourses and HIV/AIDS public health outreach leads organizers like Liu Laoshi to host a series of apolitical events to have fun, or as I will argue, to gather around forms of play. Play in anthropology is a complicated and at times ambiguous phenomenon to study, an activity that we all feel like we know when we are doing it, but often cannot describe it when it happens (Sutton-Smith 1997). Bateson points out that play has a somewhat paradoxical relationship with the truth, in that it often pretends to be one thing, while at the same signaling that it is not in fact that thing (Bateson 1973). This, as it turns out, becomes important as these organizations balance between competing discourses and institutions of power. In their dealings with the CDC, for example, the event organizers can plausibly claim that a transnational-esque Pride Event is necessary to attract MSMs for the drug survey. At the same time, the organizers can tell the *tongzhi* men that they needed to play along with the ladies from the Drug Control Bureau in order to get money and permission to hold the pool party. The strategies of play allow for these men to frame their activities as not so serious, as just for fun, even as they use these moments as creative spaces to develop new normals (Varenne & Cotter 2007).

In this introduction, I will lay out the historical creation of 'sexual identity' as a discourse that has become the basis for many men and women to assemble together. I will then explain some of the most common representations of *tongzhi* gatherings, and why scholars have preferred to focus on activism, artists and 'pink economies' over HIV organizations. From this I will make an argument about why these



HIV organizations continue to be an important place for the creation of new *tongzhi* normals in China, and how my research helps to explain these assemblages through a focus on play and the state.

### *The Discursive Production of Tongxinglian*

It is now a well-established historical maxim that sexuality as an identity marker is a modern concept to categorize and group people, and therefore should not be reified as “natural”. Many scholars have followed in the Foucauldian tradition to explain sexuality-making as an important epistemic shift that originated in the Western world. In Foucault’s telling Catholic confessionals, Victorian morality politics and finally 20th century Freudian psychologists have created the category of ‘sex’ and the subcategories of ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ as technologies of the self in need of disciplining (1978). Even as people began to embrace such categories they would do so only after and because these discourses compelled them to look inward towards their desires to establish the truth of their identity. We thus begin by tracing out a brief genealogy of how ‘sexual identity’ came to be an important component in the lives of people in China.

In the history of sexuality in China, most scholars start from the premise that historically there was no terminology for sexual identity, and that the current articulations of sexual identity in China are mostly a product of the 20th century (Chou 2000, Lao & Ng 1989, van Gulik 1961). Many of these histories stress that discussions of sex in imperial China (extending from pre-Modern times all the way until the Qing dynasty in 1912) were more focused on eroticisms and pleasure, as opposed to identity or gender. Throughout the Zhou (1122 BCE to 256 BCE) and the Han dynasties (206 BCE to 220 CE) accounts of flamboyant dukes, beautiful male concubines and lustful generals appear throughout the major texts with little hint of stigma on the basis of their sexual desire or gendered expressions (Hinsch 1990). Stories like the “half-eaten peach” or the “cut sleeves”<sup>2</sup> even indicate a valorization of the romantic feelings between men (Hinsch Chapters 1&2). Unlike Judeo-Christian countries, these sexual acts or practices were not considered a sin, and the major religious traditions of China either ignored homosexual

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<sup>2</sup> The stories of the ‘half eaten peach’ and the ‘cut sleeves’ come from the Zhou and Han dynasties and depict a relationship between nobility and beautiful male concubines. In each story the nobility forsakes traditional hierarchy—such as eating the leftovers of a peach, or cutting his sleeve off so as not to disturb his sleeping lover, because he is said to be so in love with his male concubine. During these times phrases like *fen tao* (粉桃)—half a peach and *duan xiu*—(断袖)00cut sleeve, came to be popular references for men who deeply loved one another. (Hinsch 1990)

acts or treated them the same as heterosexual transgressions (Faure 1998). While homosexual acts were not particularly stigmatized, within Confucian ethics sexual desire for a person was not a sufficient reason to forgo your obligations to your family to get married and have children (Pan & Huang 2011, Chou 2000).

The 20th Century thus saw a dramatic shift in the way sexuality was discussed in China as imported sexologies from the West would mix with Maoist ethics and eventually individualized consumer culture. Many scholars have argued that both the formation of homosexuals as an identity in China, as well as stigmatization towards homosexuality, has its antecedents in the Republic Era (1912-1949) (Chiang 2010, Dikotter 1995, Sang 2003, Zheng 2015). The efforts by Chinese medical professionals to learn and incorporate the ideas of modern Western science, and subsequently sexology, meant that they imported many new theoretical conceptions of 'sex' and 'identity' (Pan & Huang 2011). During this time, terms like *tongxinglian* (同性恋) were invented to translate the concept of homosexual into the Chinese language (Liang 2020), and Chinese sociologists began to do survey studies to produce statistical documentation of "non-normative" sex practices in China (Mann 2011). Homosexuality was treated as a psychological condition that needed to be cured and was often used by self critical Chinese reformers to explain why China lagged behind Western nations (Li 2006, Wu 2003). The creation of homosexual identity categories in China was associated with political modernization efforts and public health campaigns. These discourses have shaped some of the ongoing stigmas surrounding homosexuality throughout the 20th Century.

During the Maoist era (1949-1976), homosexuality was discussed less as a mental disorder and more as a bourgeois indulgence that disturbed the public. *Tongxinglian* was classified as 'hooliganism,' a legal category closely associated with other "deviant" sex acts like rape and sex work (Dikotter 1997, Ruan and Bullough, 1989 Tanner 2000). However Communists under Mao rarely targeted homosexuality specifically, and typically treated it as part of a larger project to end non-necessary (i.e. non-procreative) expressions of erotic desire (Honig 2003, Jeffreys 2006, Worth et, all 2019). Even as homosexuality was removed from the list of punishable offenses and psychological diseases in the Post-Mao era, these earlier forms of discrimination still persist. President Xi Jinping still talks about reclaiming Chinese masculinity (Allen 2021), textbooks still refer to homosexuality as a psychological condition (Wee 2020) and bans on homosexual content in media persist in order to maintain public decency (Hernandez & Mou 2018).

However, during the post-Mao period there has been an important shift in the ways individuals relate to identity categories like *'tongxinglian'*, as this term has gone from being a stigmatizing label that medical experts or government officials used to police bodies and desires, and has been reclaimed through new terms like *'tongzhi'* as a way that people actively self identify (Chou 2001). Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and 'opening up' to the Western world led to what many scholars have described as a shift in the Chinese moral landscape (Kleinman 2011, Zhang, Kleinman & Tu 2011) and China's own version of a 'sexual revolution' (Zhang 2011). If Confucian Chinese society is said to have been organized around responsibilities to one's kin networks (Cohen 2005, Fei 1944, Hsu 1948), and if Maoism then oriented one's responsibilities primarily to the nation (Diamant 2000, Hinton 1983, Honig & Zhao 2019, Ruf 1998), the Reform Era is thought to prioritize individuals (Yan 2020). Urbanization and a growing middle class in cities along the coast fostered the growth of industries built around personal consumption and pleasure, changing the way young people date and have fun (Farrer 2002). Meanwhile 'neoliberal discourses' (Rofel 2007) and shifts in educational philosophies (Hansen 2015, Kipnis 2011) have produced a growing emphasis on personal desire and individual accomplishment over obligations to the family. Young people growing up during this time have more opportunities to flirt, date and have sex before marriage, and have increasingly prioritized romantic fulfillment over parental approval (Yan 2003).

It is within this 'sexual revolution' that scholars of Chinese sexuality have mostly focused on the ways that transnational flows of capital and ideas have fostered an upwardly mobile class of men and women who are sufficiently distanced from kinship networks and can thus pursue romantic and erotic relationships based on objects of desire (Pan & Huang 2011, Zhang 2011,). In neighboring Hong Kong and Taiwan and coastal cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, centers for 'queer' culture began to flourish (Kong 2011, Bao 2020), and young people proudly declared their sexual identity as a way to represent China's modernization and hopes for the future (Rofel 1999, 2007). The term *tongzhi* refers to the specific intersections of gay cultural identity in China. Hong Kong activists appropriated *'tongzhi'* from the communist terms for 'comrade' (Bao 2018), as a way to de-medicalize and even de-sexualize terms like *tongxinglian*, and describe a cultural association of men with particular constraints and historical traditions that are localized in China (Chou 2001). This is part of a broader global trend, in which an LGBT subjectivity has emerged globally, closely tied to particular performances of gender and desire and associated with certain kinds of consumption meant to express modernity and cosmopolitanism (Altman 1997, Eng 2010, Morris 1997, Puar 2002), as well as a shared struggle to both localize sexual identity

while reforming their 'traditional cultures' (Altman 1996, Boelstorf 2005). The formation of such assemblages of people raised important questions about the ideas of universal or global governance verses localized citizenship to a culture (Ho 2008).

#### From Sexual Discourses to Assembling Tongzhi Men

At times these kind of histories can almost feel deterministic, in which the logical sequence follows that opening to the West and capitalist reforms produced a discourse of the self, which then yielded a subjectivity based around sexual identity. However, my project seeks to demonstrate that the ways in which these discourses are used to bring people together are not necessarily so predictable and more about how people organize one another rather than producing a disciplined self. If you read Foucault's work, not as a critical scholar, but rather as a Durkheimian, you might say that what Foucault and these genealogies of 'sexual identity' have really done is to describe the creation of a 'social fact' (Durkheim 1952). According to Durkheim, a social fact is an external constraint that is tied to a society and is beyond the immediate control of the individual, yet requires certain responses of that individual (Durkheim 1982). While a social fact is an invention of a particular history and arrangement of power, it is treated by the given actors as a necessary reality, whose significance cannot be willed away simply because it is a 'cultural construct.' It is true that sexual identity is historically and provincially contingent, but its existence for any particular individual is often felt and experienced as something deeply natural.

Even as the existence of social facts are beyond the direct control of an individual, the particular ways that people end up reacting to a social fact and modifying it to fit their particular situated pragmatics is often the site of human creativity and ingenuity. To borrow from Varenne and McDermott's metaphor, social facts exist like a wall. They clearly impose barriers and shape the landscape that cultural actors can operate within. But the existence of the wall does not tell us how people are going to use it. Walls can be used to 'make good neighbors', it can be destroyed to symbolize the fall of Communism or casually leaned upon by listless youth thinking about their crush (Varenne and McDermott 1998, deCerteau 1980). There has been a lot of fruitful scholarship about the production of sexual identity as social facts, the building of the walls, but the work of the anthropologist then is to figure out *how* discourses around 'sexual identity' are then used to assemble people together and what they will do with these facts while they are together.

In Kong's history of sexual identity making, he identifies three important institutional reactions to the social fact of sexual identity that then had the effect of assembling together *tongzhi* groups (2020). The first are political and legal reforms from the state (Liu & Rofel 2010) and I might include the political activism of *tongzhi* groups. Second, the role of HIV/AIDS organizations with their international funding and expertise as well as the Chinese government's willingness to treat homosexual actions as a medical problem. Finally, the circulation of media representations of sexual minorities and the creation of capitalist and cultural institutions. Of these three institutional factors, my project clearly centers on the second, but at this point I want to describe the first and the third in a bit more detail and the problem that arises from studying the political and cultural factors that have contributed to the rise of sexual identities in China. From this discussion I will return to the ways that HIV/AIDS has been written about as an organizing approach and why my research is helpful in thinking about the literature on sexuality and China.

Politically the first major shift towards allowing for *tongzhi* groups to organize came in 1997 with the revision of China's Criminal Law which no longer classified homosexual actions as 'hooliganism' (Worth, et al 2019). This meant that gay bars and LGBT centers could assemble without worry of too much state intrusion (Kong 2011). The second major political reform occurred in 2001, when the Chinese medical association decided to remove homosexuality from China's list of mental diseases (Kong 2016, 2020, Wu 2003). In important ways both of these reforms signaled potential shifts in public attitudes towards sexual minorities and a growing willingness to accept *tongzhi* identities. Around this same time (1990s and 2000s), the ethics of *tongzhi* activism became prominent in urban Chinese centers, particularly Taiwan and Hong Kong. Globally we can see that political causes frequently inspire and encourage LGBT and queer people to gather together to affect change. These political struggles often become the basis by which new associations based on sexual identity are actualized (Dave 2012, Engebretsen 2013). Taiwan and Hong Kong have been major centers of *tongzhi* activism and been important points of comparison to mainland China (Kong 2004, Liu 2015, Liu & Rofel 2010). This was particularly visible in Taiwan, where LGBT activists have rallied people around the cause of same-sex marriage, winning a major referendum in 2017 and becoming the first Asian nation to legalize 'same-sex marriage' (Ho 2019, Jeffreys & Wang 2018). The People's Republic of China's authoritarian political structure, which lacks voting mechanisms and has increasingly controlled public demonstrations and critical publications after the Tiananmen Square incident, has meant that mainland Chinese *tongzhi*

activists have had to develop different tactics to gather and contest political issues. Many passionate youth in mainland China have thus focused on other forms of political discussion, such as salons to raise consciousness amongst members and mediate family struggles, or the creation of queer Chinese cinematography and hosting Queer Film Festivals which explore new queer theoretical concepts through a Chinese cultural lens (Engebretsen 2015, Bao 2018, 2020). It is perhaps not surprising that many anthropologists and humanities scholars have gravitated towards activism as a frame for discussing queer organizing in China, as it fits with their theoretical and ethical commitments (Eng and Puar 2020).

In a very similar way, focus on the proliferation of capitalist institutions (like gay bars or gay travel agencies) (Kong 2011, Puar 2002, Wei 2012) as well as media or discursive portrayals of sexuality fits well into common queer theory approaches to the study of identity. During the post-socialist reforms, bars and clubs became spaces for gay men to gather, form social networks and express new consumption (Kong 2011). In 2012, Blued, the first Chinese-founded gay dating app, quickly became the most used gay dating app in the world, connecting Chinese language speakers to new possibilities for sexual engagement (Miao & Chan 2020, 2021). These commercial institutions both created the spaces to actualize homosexual desire and also fomented that desire. Since political activism often seems risky and ineffective to many *tongzhi* men in mainland China, there has been a large role for 'pink economies' to express sexual desire and perform sexual identity (Kong 2004).

Closely linked to these capitalist institutions are the productions of a Chinese discourse of sex, desire and identity through cultural institutions like literature, film and television. Media representations of sexuality, both imported from abroad and created within China prioritize the confession of true desire as a form of 'self making' (Zhao 2011). Many scholars have used *tongzhi* literature and film as a way of exploring the interior lives and mental processes of *tongzhi* life. Taiwanese literature like the *Crystal Boys* or *The Membrane* explore the worlds of underground *tongzhi* societies, masked from the broader public, just waiting to be revealed (Martin 2000, 2003). Films such as the *Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Farewell my Concubine* (1993), *East Palace, West Palace* (1996), *Happy Together* (1997) and *Lan Yu* (2001) all explore the Chinese man whose desire or affection for other men are put in tension with societal morals and obligations. Also during this time we see the Sinicization of the Boy Love genre of internet story telling which creates fantasies of young men falling in love with each other (Xi 2020, Xu & Yang 2013, Zhang 2016). In literature and film, homosexual desire is being elevated for its potential world making and self making possibilities.

Even as scholars celebrate acts of resistance and marvel at creative expressions, both the political and cultural factors of *tongzhi* identity formation are subject to strong post-colonial critiques. Emphasizing that the categories of 'sex' and 'sexuality' have Western hegemonic origins, critical scholars have pointed to the fact that "sexuality" as a discursive category furthers a Western epistemology and can lead to divisions within societies that did not previously exist (Eng, Halberstam & Munoz 2005, Gopinath 2006, Grewal 2005, Massad 2007). For instance, in structuring a *tongzhi* politics around concepts like LGBT rights, in a country whose legal framework is not premised around individual protections from the state, creates unreconcilable epistemic tensions between activists and political institutions, whose only solution (at least for the activist) is to adopt Western liberal democracy (Duggan 2004). Similarly cultural depictions of *tongzhi* selves in literature and film, frequently prioritize a Western idea of the self in relation to family, as opposed to Confucian concepts that might emphasize the value of filial piety. Finally, capitalist institutions become problematized as perpetuating a bourgeois, non-working class sensibility towards sexuality (McRuer 2015), where 'being gay' is as much a consumption pattern as it is an oppressed group (Floyd 2009, Hennessy 2000, Liu 2020). The intersection of 'gay-ness' with cosmopolitan sensibilities and international education institutions become evidence of how these identities can be seen as elitist and Western. There is a real concern that creation of identity groups around sexuality signifies the spread of a Western epistemology which threatens to erase indigenous ontologies (Morris 1997, Povinelli & Chauncey 1999).

Post colonialists would also argue that discourses of "sex" and "sexuality" not only compel the adoption of Western epistemologies of the self over localized understanding, but also were produced using orientalist tropes that either depict the "other" as erotic exotic or as overly conservative and repressive (Stoler 1995). Activists and culture creators run the risk of reproducing the tools of their own colonial oppression. Focus on LGBT politics and cultural struggles can create what McRuer calls a 'pink haze' which clouds out other conversations about race or class, by celebrating urban, cosmopolitan subjects (2015). It rewrites the histories of such places as to impose the framework of 'white gay men saving brown gay men from brown straight men' (Eng & Puar 2020 paraphrasing Spivak 2004). In this form of critique the Chinese activists and culture creators that I have described are examples of local informants perpetuating problematic understandings of 'sexuality' and the 'self' through incitements to discourse (Massad 2007).

The transnationalists who have focused their attention on activist and culture creators, often find themselves in the challenging position of defending the local. They must demonstrate how even if these concepts have been genealogically tied to the West, they are producing something “Chinese” (Kong 2020). Scholars like Petrus Liu push back on these criticisms of sexual groups by emphasizing the intellectual and creative efforts of Chinese queer scholars and artists to bring together understanding of sexuality with East Asia’s history of Marxism (2015). While acknowledging that sexual identities have a transnational trajectory, Liu demonstrates how scholars like Josephine Ho (2008), Ding Naifei (2006, 2010) and Cui Zi’en (2010) have used a Marxist framework to illustrate the ways that sex and desire intersect with work and class in critical ways that a liberal framework of sexual rights often times misses. Similar work is done when Bao argues that the usage of *‘tongzhi’* demonstrates a socialist commitment that Chinese activists have to linking class struggle to sexual identity (2018). “The Foucauldians,” Liu decries, “have taught us much about the sexual history of China. The point, as Marx said, is to change it” (2010, p. 316). For the transnationalist Queer Chinese scholars (Liu, Bao, Kong), the point is not to stop with origins of sexual identity making, but to look forward towards how these concepts become indigenized, and how China, Taiwan and Hong Kong will shape global understandings of sexuality in the future (Liu 2010).

I appreciate Liu’s forward looking approach to the study of sexuality, however what has struck me as unsatisfactory, is that even as he argues that Marxism represents a Chinese indigenization of Queer theory and sexuality, he uses a version of Queer Marxism more similar to Western scholars like Kevin Floyd (2009), than what I understand as Chinese Marxism (Barlow 2002). More specifically, in Liu, Bao and Kong’s account, the role of the state in shaping desires and practice is mostly neglected or only featured as a representation of power which may be oppressive towards their subjects. This seems contradictory to a Chinese version of Marxism, or more generally a Chinese theory of politics, which has often viewed political institutions as important to shaping the lives of individuals (Ames 1994). How then can you simply ignore the state as a productive agent in this version of sexual assemblages? While HIV/AIDS group formation must still be studied in terms of transnational histories and linkages to Western epistemologies, the prominent role of the Chinese state in funding and organizing these groups opens the possibility of studying assemblages that are not grounded in academic class elitism or capitalist free market logics, but within Chinese bureaucracies. In trying to return to a form of group making in which the Chinese state plays an important and active role in organizing these groups, we might point to a way



of being *tongzhi* that differs from global LGBT histories in important ways and may prove generative for queer theorists interested in studies of sexuality beyond the West.

Beyond critiques that have tied these forms of group making to a Western project, the focus on activists, artists and businesses has also reflected a bias towards urban and economically mobile forms of group making. In these narratives, it can also appear that *tongzhi* socialization is confined to a privileged group based on class, education and geographic locations. In interior regions of China and in smaller more rural cities market forces have not produced the kinds of capitalist and globalist institutions that have defined much of *tongzhi* life in the coastal cities. In the vacuum left by the market, the state (however unintentionally) plays a role in creating spaces for MSMs/*tongzhi* through the project of HIV/AIDS disease control. It is time that research on sexual identity assemblages move beyond fetishizing urban centers as the most important and significant sites of queer creativity, and look towards rural and less economically developed spaces (Brown 2008). Within this framing, I return back to Kunming and use the work of HIV organizations as a site for *tongzhi* assembling.

#### *The MSM HIV CBO*

Since the days of Sima Qian's *Shiji*, Yunnan has been understood as peripheral to the larger Chinese empire (Christian & Ma 2020). Even the Han name of the province, translated as 'south of the clouds', locates the province in relative terms to the idea of the imperial center (Yang 2009). Some scholars (Harrell 1995) have conceptualized the region as a kind of Chinese 'frontier', the last outpost of Han Chinese rule. In contemporary times, Yunnan has also been on the frontier of economic and urban development, with very few manufacturing jobs, international companies, or highly ranked universities (Wu, et al 2015). This has meant that when it comes to *tongzhi* culture making the province has also been considered marginal.

However, beginning with the first known cases in 1989 and through the early 2000s<sup>3</sup>, Yunnan province has been the center of China's HIV/Aids crisis (Jia, et al. 2010). Bordering Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, Yunnan is part of the 'Golden Triangle' (Chin 2009), an international drug market largely focused on the circulation of heroine. In the 1990s the usage of drugs through needle injections in Yunnan

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<sup>3</sup> To some extent we can say that Yunnan and southwest China more generally continue to be the center of the HIV pandemic in China, however I mostly historicize the idea because over the past decades tremendous progress has been made, largely through decreasing transmissions through intravenous drug users, to the extent that I would not call HIV the 'crisis' that it once was (Wang, et al. 2020).

reached severe levels (Breyer et al. 1997) and rapidly spread the HIV virus through the province. By 1999, despite only having 3% of the national population, Yunnan had 34.8% of total HIV cases in China (Jia et al. 2010). Even though sex was not initially a primary vector of the spread of the virus, the expanding number of cases and a reduction in drug use meant that within 10 years sexual transmissions became a primary transmitter of the disease (Wong, et al. 2006), and today accounts for 96% of new transmissions (*China's Yunnan Continues to Report Fewer New HIV Infections*, 2019).

The most common ways to spread the HIV come through forms of play, albeit play which is commonly thought to be deviant (Sutherland & Hsu 2012). By the time the Chinese government began trying to control HIV/AIDS in 1986, scientists had identified three target activities that were the main methods of virus transmission: needle injecting drug use, sex work and homosexual sex (Jeffreys 2018, Sutherlands & Hsu 2012). All of these activities are done, *in theory*--although certainly not always in practice--to bring some sort of pleasure to the participants, and yet are also, in China as well as elsewhere, not widely practiced by the majority of the population and are highly stigmatized (Hyde 2007). It is thus not surprising that early efforts to deal with the virus were largely punitive (Wu et al. 2007), with marginalized groups becoming victims of excessive incarceration and police harassment (Liu 2011). It was not until 2001 that a series of news reports were published about poor farmers in Henan province becoming infected after they sold their blood plasma, that public sympathy towards AIDS victims began to change (Anagnost 2006, Kaufman 2011).

During the early 2000s, the Chinese national government and the Yunnan provincial government made the unprecedented decision to allow international NGOs and foreign funding agencies to enter the country and assist in containing the virus (Wang 2012). The influence of international donors encouraged the creations and development of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) that would mobilize 'peer educators' to share information and perform interventions (Bartlett 2020, Hildebrandt 2013). Early funding initiatives targeted MSMs as a key demographic for peer educator interventions (Chow et al. 2014, Miller 2016a, Zhang & Chu 2005) and multiple MSM organizations were established in Yunnan. These HIV organizations were an important opportunity for some *tongzhi* organizers to not only address the threat of HIV, but to gather men together with other *tongzhis* (Micollier 2006, Miller 2016b).

Since 2012, the access to international funding for HIV/AIDS has largely retreated from China and today these CBOs have transitioned to operating under government contracts (Hsu & Teets 2016). Local, provincial and national Centers for Disease Control (CDCs) will pay groups of *tongzhi*/MSMs to do

HIV testing, education events and positive patient support groups. While the groups that I studied did all of these things, they also did much more. Generally, their most popular activities had nothing to do with HIV, but rather involved bar nights, board games and excursions. Whereas groups that I studied in Chengdu, or those that have been documented in Beijing and Shanghai (Bao 2018), have more independence and have been able to develop their own politics, the groups in Kunming largely rely on keeping productive and harmonious relationships with the government that avoid direct criticism or resistance. The threat of HIV/Aids creates an ongoing external condition that requires that the state and these *tongzhi* groups continue to cooperate with one another.

As noted in Kong's list of factors bringing *tongzhi* men together, HIV/AIDS CBOs are well established as part of the history, but they often do not inspire the passionate discussions afforded to political activists or artistic creators. This is in part because the writing about HIV/AIDS work is often times marked by a convention of scientific 'neutrality' and public health discourses (Jones 1999). For example as Liu wrote:

The PRC government conflates the issues of AIDS prevention and homosexuality. The state's understanding of homosexuality as a public health and social order concern is consistent with its modern legal framework, which prosecuted sex between men under 'hooliganism' rather than sodomy...As long as queer activism remains constrained by the framework of public health, the *intelligibility* of homosexuality is predicated on the material funding of AIDS research and regulated by a surveillance network of national experts and international NGOs. (2015, p. 37)

HIV/AIDS research in China then becomes conceptualized as non-theoretical and non-critical, becoming too closely linked to political projects of control and surveillance, not an opportunity for building up community networks of resistance. Research on sexuality in China itself, has largely depended on funding and permission through justifications of doing HIV/AIDS prevention work, and has similarly needed to accord with strict understandings of empiricism and 'scientific data' (Li 2006, Zhang & Chu 2005). This style of research has not interested many more activist minded scholars, who often complain that framing *tongzhi* sociality around disease such as HIV/AIDS further stigmatizes the group in the broader public's mind. Conveniently many public health related researchers in China also would rather separate their work from the more radical scholars to help them continue productive relationships with the state.

During the mid 2000s, some scholars tried to work on researching these MSM organization and were optimistic about their role in organizing *tongzhi* assemblages. Take for instance Wei Wei's work with grass-root HIV CBOs in Chengdu in 2004 where he writes, "the appearance of HIV/AIDS in Asia provided

a window of opportunity for gay organizations in countries where government and society strongly disapprove of homosexuality...the crisis generated both financial and human resources that local groups could use to get started” (2015, p. 197). Or Hildebrandt’s survey of MSM CBOs in which he writes, “Changes in the state policy toward gays and lesbians probably have less to do with concerns for these individuals’ human rights and more with the desire to combat a health epidemic...opportunities to mobilize around issues such as HIV/AIDS can allow organizations to combat homophobia.” ( 2013 p. 30) And Miller’s research where he writes, “Chinese queer NGOs not only challenge bureaucratic indifference toward the existence and survival of queer men, but they also contest their exclusion and erasure from hegemonic and heteronormative social and state institutions through the creation of alternative families of care” (2016b p. 55).

However much of this research seems to be tempered with a strong disappointment in the perceptions that these organizations were not able to accomplish the kinds of elevation of a *tongzhi* community that they had initially hoped. For example Wei concludes his chapter on HIV CBOs by saying, “Like other NGOs in today’s China, the fear of offending the government had become the major constraint in CGCO’s gay advocacy work. As a result, the CGCO’s role in the future would likely continue to focus on HIV/AIDS service delivery rather than on outright gay advocacy” (Wei, 2015 p. 214). In later work Hildebrandt reflects that despite international expectations that the development of CBOs and a civil society would act as a counter force to the strong Chinese state, more often than not NGOs became a way of strengthening state power, not weakening it (Hildebrandt 2016, 2018) . Perhaps there is no better example of the disappointment scholars have for these organizations than Zheng’s chapter on HIV MSM organizations in which she writes: “Their (HIV MSM CBOs’) collaboration with the state mitigates their *tongzhi* activism, leaves the social norm unchallenged, and allows further stigmatization of their *tongzhi* identity. Consequentially, AIDS politics and *tongzhi* politics stand in tension, associated yet disassociated at the same time.” (2015, p. 140).

So why then should we relook at these organizations and continue to think about their role in identity formation? Is further celebration of this cooperation between the state and MSMs only perpetuating stigmas and state control? In this research project I approached these organizations through several key interventions, which have lead me to thinking about their contributions in different ways than some of the prominent literature on these groups. The first intervention is to not look at them from the perspective of disease control but rather as a participant in the events that they are hosting. It is here

where I have developed the framework of play as the important site of *tongzhi* group formation. I was often told by the leaders of these organizations that they rarely mentioned HIV/AIDS during the events, because the participants were well aware of the ideas and the topic was too sensitive. Instead their position was that they would attract people through fun and play, and then hopefully after building up trust, people would come for HIV testing and private consultation. This means that the events themselves were almost exclusively about having fun and not about public health. To the extent that state framing around HIV was present, it was done differently depending on a particular audience. To the state all events could be interpreted as HIV interventions, but to the *tongzhi* participants the linkages to HIV were often invisible. For instance the ladies in the back of the pool party collecting survey data would report back to their bureaus that they hosted an event to collect data for public health. While the people participating in the event may not have noticed the researchers and could easily focus on the games and the shows. As a researcher, I did not prioritize the state discourse at the expense of the participants' experiences during these events.

This has led to my second intervention, which is to think about how activities of play, and play as a theoretical concept interact with dominant discourses or ideas of sexuality. If we treat these events as less of a public health project and more in terms of the ways that they are a form of socialization, then we should also analyze the ways in which they must react to and utilize dominant understandings of sexual identity discourses. In this way I can compare the specific kinds of conversations, interactions and events that occur through these organizations with other types of *tongzhi* groups that have been discussed in other regions of China, and compare how the particular frames of play and public health shape the use and understanding of these discourses.

Finally, this project tries to analyze the relationships to the state not as they are represented, but through common interactions between state organizers and local cadres. In official documents these organizations have a lot of restrictions about the kinds of activities they can do and certain expectations about what they need to accomplish. However the more observations that I did with the organizations showed that many of the rules and expectations could be ignored, while other unspoken rules required special attenuations by the participants. The job of the anthropologist then is not to reify the theoretical relationship, but rather to document how these actually work. In doing so, I argue that rather than being disciplined appendages of the state, they managed to work harmoniously with the state, not only to achieve certain public health goals, but also move resources into *tongzhi* activities. Rather than making

this community more visible to the state, this often involved a form of collusion, in which local cadres and organizers agreed to a certain version of the truth that may differ from the events in important and consequential ways.

### *Play in Theory*

In Varenne's work he has demonstrated that 'messing around' and play are actually far more significant to social change than one might expect (2019). 'Messing around' on the one hand frames behavior as inconsequential, and thus not threatening, but also takes particular social structures and norms and inverts them, reconfiguring them and imagining what they might look like in a different way (Varenne & Cotter 2007). This is very much what these men are doing with these HIV organizations. In the same way that 'pink economies' are popular in China because they are viewed as non-threatening or apolitical, play events can be framed as neutral or sometimes even helpful to state interests, even as the configurations of people and the new normals agreed upon create shifts in the lives of the participants. For those interested in how queer groups produce new normals, you would be wise to look closely at how these moments of play become important spaces for creativity. Taking discourses and social facts from elsewhere, including the discourses from urban Chinese centers, these men can play around with them and make their own internal cultures.

Often, as Varenne notes, these changes may only exist within specific times and places, and may even be erased from public records (Wessler & Varenne 2019). In fact much of what these men are doing with the state is to take these moments of fooling around and erase them, and represent them as HIV interventions and not *tongzhi* community building. The ongoing existence and resilience of these spaces is dependent on the recognition that they could not exist this way to a broader public, and thus the need to 'mis-represent' themselves to key audiences. However, we as researchers should not be fooled. In focusing on how these groups represent themselves to the public, as public health organizations and state partners, we become complicit in the state and organizers attempts to erase the social work they are doing in assembling *tongzhi* men together. We miss the opportunities to track how new normals are being made in these peripheral spaces. Even as the official reports or public statements do not reflect what happened during these events, the men who participate remember these jokes, relationships and commentary on sex, and it creates a potentially subtle but important change in their lives and futures.

Playing around is not really resistance, nor is it radical in many ways. In fact play relies on preset orders and understood symbols that can then be scrambled in new ways (Huizinga 1950, Levi-Strauss 1966). Play must be aware of the rules that govern it, and even if they do not directly challenge it in a 'serious' way, they open up new possibilities. Play then is a non-threatening way for people to both express their ambivalence towards such powers, while also not getting in trouble for doing so. While these acts may seem small and inconsequential (partially through design), they actually allow for the reconfiguration of norms in subtle ways that require an attention to the details of everyday conversation and interactions.

### Outline of the Dissertation

In this dissertation, I argue that through the events of play that these organizations are allowed to host, under the guise of HIV/AIDS work, they adapt dominant discourses to fit localized contexts and through this 'messaging around' create important norms for how to live as a *tongzhi* in Kunming. These worlds are created through the materialist work that they do with the Chinese CDC, however in analyzing the institutional and interactional dynamics of this work, we see that rather than a form of governmentality, there is much obfuscation and misrepresentation of the *tongzhi* situation as there is mapping out the queer subject. After living in this world for the past year, it is easy to understand it as somewhat stable and harmonious creation of *tongzhi* worlds within the larger Kunming society. However, this belies the fact that groups and people outside of this assemblage do not necessarily approve of the norms that have been constructed. In the final section I demonstrate how after accomplishing all of this important social work, there is always a threat to this delicate balance from the outside world.

In the first section of this dissertation, I look at the use of play in these organizations to assemble groups of *tongzhi* together. As I explain in the history of Rainbow Skies, the legacy of play and peer educators is that the state will allow a certain amount of messaging around if it is in the service of achieving their public health goals. Activists might complain that 'play' represents a sexual subject that is not politically activated, and is limited in the ways that they can change the social. However, through a close examination of some of the different kinds of playful activities that they host, we see these organizations grappling with dominant ideas about sexuality and identity, and adjusting them to fit their particular situation.

In Chapter 4, I describe the Piao Piao Bathhouse and the two MSM organizers who run an office in the back. The gay bathhouse represents, as I further develop in Chapter 12, the stereotypical idea amongst many Chinese of the chaotic homosexual who only cares about sex. Even within the bathhouse we see men reproducing and grappling with this disciplining moral discourse. However, in looking at the bathhouse ethnomedologically, we see that in fact what appears to be chaos, is actually quite organized. What is more, the participation that these organizers engage in with other players in the bathhouse actually produces more structure and order than might originally appear. This creates a new normal, which in fact manages to balance between sexual desire and personal health.

In Chapter 5, I address a similar Chinese discourse around the idea of quality (*suzhi*). Popularized by Lisa Rofel (2007), there has been a great amount of work to show that *suzhi* has been used by urban gays in China to tie their sexuality to appropriate desire and modernity. This discourse, while mediated through ideas of Chinese citizenship, has also been influenced by neoliberalism and ideas around appropriate capitalist consumption. *Suzhi* discourse is projected beyond urban centers to rural or smaller cities, like Kunming, to contrast the high quality gay with the chaotic bumpkin in the bathhouse. In this chapter, I describe the kinds of humor and joking that organizers use to recruit and entertain their participants during regular events. What we see in these sexualized jokes is a response to the *suzhi* discourse, in which the problematization of 'sexual desire' as potentially too chaotic, is both contained through the movement of the sexual act to the domain of play, yet the recognition of the problematization of *suzhi* discourse for men in Kunming is similarly mocked through the same kinds of play. In this chapter, I argue that the dominant discourses of *suzhi* produce a double bind for these men, and the use of 'sexual play' is a Batesonian response.

Then in Chapter 6, I respond to activist critiques that these kinds of play are themselves evidence of these organizations complicity with the state. Whereas other groups have radicalized through political activism, the participants of Colorful Spring are more content with playing weekly board games. And yet, I suggest that such criticisms are projecting the scholar's own values onto these men, who have created their own normal lives within these spaces of having fun. Instead as scholars we need to look at the specific ways that assembling takes place and the social norms that are created in these spaces, rather than comparing it to an ideal type. Through my analysis of a typical *langren sha* board game night I demonstrate how the social fact of sexual identity constructs an association of people, and then through the specific work of keeping themselves together, *tongzhi* sexual identity is made normal.



In the second section, I analyze more directly how these organizations are linked to the state and the ways in which state power requires certain activities of these men. However, I insist that the use of governmentality and discipline misunderstands the ways in which CBOs have come to develop productive partnerships with the local government cadres. In order to do this work there is a great amount of collaborative data ‘moistening’ to satisfy the national and provincial governments and erase the kinds of regular play that happens in these organizations. In Chapter 7, I provide a detailed account of the kinds of tasks and activities that these organizations are expected to do to get money from the government. In this discussion, I describe how they transform moments of play into the fetishized statistical data that the state requires. Even as powerful institutions create social facts that these men must respond to, they also have methods and ways to ‘mess around’ with these requirements in order to fit their needs. Hosting regular *tongzhi* events requires the ability to transform such events into the medical and health language.

In Chapter 8, I analyze the structures of local government offices to argue that rather than deceiving the state, the process of ‘moistening data’ is a collaborative effort, especially with local cadres. This has important implications for how these local cadres are willing to turn a blind eye to a certain degree of sexual and playful ‘messaging around’, as long as they get help fulfilling the work they need to do to fulfill their professional requirements. This leads to a discussion of what a *tongzhi* politics in China might actually look like, in which organizations use the political relationships made available to them in order to acquire necessary resources. Rather than projected a liberal order, we see the use of *guanxi* relationships within the fragmented authoritarian system to alter policy during the implementation stages.

In describing the balance between hosting play to build *tongzhi* networks and reaching productive agreements with local cadres, it could often feel like these organizers had ‘gamed the system’, that is to say they had rendered real a kind of imagined world. One only needed to walk out of the bathhouse or accompany one of these *tongzhi* friends back to their hometown to realize that for many of them the kind of *tongzhi* sociality that they had created was constrained to specific spaces and times. It was a tremendous social accomplishment to create these events and spaces, and despite many warnings from scholars and activists outside of these circles, have proven resilient. However, midway through my time researching, I was reminded of the many potential actors that could disrupt these assemblages of *tongzhi* men. I investigate this dynamic through Clifford Geertz’ idea of ‘deep play’ (2005). In his description of the Balinese Cockfight, Geertz points us to the ways in which one can become so enraptured in play that it is easy to forget the threats posed once the play stops. In Chapter 9, I feature a reflection from my

friend JR after we went to a dinner with the mom of a young *tongzhi* son and our sex worker friends. JR describes this feeling beautifully in which we had become enmeshed into this *tongzhi* world in Kunming where queer identities and performances actually came to feel 'normal'. It was during this dinner that JR had the sudden realization that in fact this life was not normal to the broader Chinese society and could be taken away just as easily as we had dove into it.

In Chapters 10, I explore this phenomenon by describing the threat of Colorful Spring and the Piao Piao Bathhouse, posed by police interventions and raids. When Colorful Spring tried to host an event for the transnational LGBT audience and when an outsider reported the activities of the bathhouse, the police became involved and both threatened to shut down the organizations. As it turned out, neither police intervention amounted to much, leading to interesting questions about whether or not this truly was as deep of play as it seemed. Was this a threat, an instruction by the arbitrariness of the state to keep these events just play, and nothing too chaotic or political? Or was this part of the game that they played with the state that obfuscated and misrepresented certain activities in order to keep this world going. The confidence that the leaders gained from managing these breaches was later challenged when a prominent bathhouse in Chengdu was shut down. In this instance the public exceeded the amount of people willing to look the other way. This returns us back to the limits of this tactic of remaining private and avoiding discourses, and the ongoing double bind that these organizations have to deal with.

## Chapter II: Ethnomethodology's Response to Foucault's Aphorism

In an important way, I see this project as the beginning of a scholastic career in which I try to move queer theory and the studies of sexuality away from Foucault. This is not because I think that Foucault does not tell us some important things about the historical trajectory of 'sexuality' as a discourse, but that he inspired a circular focus of studying sexuality through the methodological and theoretical constraints he has "popularized". It is for this reason that much of this dissertation seeks to put scholars who have studied sexuality from a more Foucauldian point of view, focusing on the ways that discourses produce categories and regimes of truth and power, with ethnomethodology which tries to understand how people are interacting with one another through everyday practice. It is my ongoing point that discourses operate as social facts, and must be studied less in terms of their historical legacies, and more focus should be placed on what sort of questions or problems do they ask of actors and how do they become used as people organize themselves into networks of association. This theoretical concept also has important methodological concerns, as I push my object of study away from 'texts' as something that is read on its own, and more in terms of observing how people use texts within particular situated contexts to interact with one another.

### Tracing Social Facts and Discourses

By the Foucauldian tradition, I am specifically referring to a branch of critical scholarship which traces the genealogy of a discourse and links it to the idea that it produces regimes of truth, which have the impact of disciplining the subject. Importantly then for the Foucauldian is to suggest that the existence of the studied discourse produces a specific kind of power, frequently referred to as governmentality (1991). The typical approach then is to identify a concept, such as 'sexuality', 'health', 'mental illness' 'education', etc. and then to look at the ways in which the concept has developed throughout history and been applied through particular kinds of institutions. Take for example Foucault's work on 'discipline', when he describes how prisoners can be taught to behave themselves through the use of the 'panopticon', a kind of omnipresent technology which could view the prisoner at any moment, without warning (1977). The fact that such a technology was never actually used in the prisons is not important for the Foucauldian, because for him the important innovation is a theoretical move towards making subjects discipline themselves. However, in grounding his analysis in how the panopticon is to

work, as described in purely discursive terms, he does not have to think about the prisoners who learn the patterns of the panopticon and scheme around it. The point is that in Foucauldian terms, humans as potentially creative actors within the institutions he studies are inconsequential, as we become focused purely on the logic of power, as it is represented through discourse.

For the most part, the heir to Foucauldian scholarship have been literary critics, who studied culture through the reading of its texts. Take for instance Massad's *Desiring Arab* (2007), which I mentioned in the introductory chapter as one of the major post-colonial critiques of 'sexuality' as an orientalist trope (Said 1978). In his work he tracks the ways in which 'sexuality' enters the Arab world through popular literature, legal institutions and media representation of social scandals. The point he is able to make is that through the representations of the Arab world within the discourse of sexuality, Arab people are further produced as the barbaric other on the basis that they do not fully accept a foreign concept of sexual rights. What Massad never does, (despite making assertions like, "this book will chronicle how this intellectual episteme while hegemonic in intellectual and elite circles, has failed to become hegemonic among *the population*" (p. 49)), is try to figure out how non-academic people interact with hegemonic discourses on sexuality. Instead he grounds his scholarship purely in the "*intellectual history of the representation of the sexual desires of Arabs*". His thesis seems to be something like, Western hegemonic ideas about sexuality, and in particular "other's sexuality" has produced hardship for those Arab "populations" existing outside of these elite discourses, and yet he does little work to figure out who those people are and what they think about or do with these hegemonic and oppressive Western discourses. This is fundamentally my methodological intervention. The point is to acknowledge that these discourses have a history, but then to try and figure out how people are dealing with that concept in everyday interactions.

De Certeau makes the point that too often scholars confuse '*writing*' as productive, whereas reading is passive and assimilationist (1980). This allows for the kinds of histories that Foucault or Massad write, in which emphasis is put on the production of discourse and the assertion that institutions (in particular schools, prisons, psychiatric wards) are able to educate people to receive and learn these discourses (see also Althusser 1971). However, De Certeau goes on, "to read is to wander through an imposed system (that of the text, analogous to the constructed order of a city or a supermarket). Recent analyses show that "every reading modifies its object," that one literature differs from another less by its text than by the way in which it is read." (p. 169) This is to say that an emphasis on discourses and

institutions too quickly assumes that “*the population*” is to some extent passively receiving what is being told to them, when in fact what we know of readers, and people more generally, is that they take such concepts and ideas and frequently modify and interpret it in unique ways.

Fortunately ethnographers can rarely get away with books that purely focus on texts without at some point needing to present some evidence of how that text relates to people in the world. However, too many following the Foucauldian line of inquiry use analysis and genealogies of discourses as a way of interpreting what their informants are actually doing, unbeknownst to the informant. Take for example, Yan Hairong’s work on women factory workers in southeast China (2008), where she helps to explain the women’s disciplined adherence to this grueling work through the discursive logic of ‘*suzhi*’ (quality). In her analysis *suzhi* can be traced to the neoliberal economic reforms in China in the 1980s and 1990s, in which labor became understood as a way to improve the *suzhi* (quality) of China’s peasants. Thus the fact that the women often times expressed joy or empowerment by moving away from their village and earning their own living, was less taken seriously by Yan, and more offered as evidence of the impact of *suzhi* as one of the latest technologies of capitalism to prevent the women from attaining class consciousness. The problem with this approach to ethnography is that it assumes that the ‘texts’ of *suzhi* discourse are just consumed by the women, and the only one who can read the situation critically is the anthropologist who sees what the factory laborer cannot. This is deeply problematic if for no other reason than it once again prioritizes the interpretations of the researcher, as opposed to allowing for the possibility that the interlocutors are themselves “reading” the discourse and thinking about the institutions and trying to figure out what they should be doing within this particular situation. We should at least assume that they can read the relevant discourses as well as the anthropologist can who has only been living and thinking about these situations for a few years, as opposed to a lifetime.

The anthropologists often treat a discourse like *suzhi* or sexuality as cultural constructs which if suitably revealed to the participants or the reader can be challenged or ignored. However, as Garfinkel pointed out, these discourses are what Durkheim would call social facts, and taking social facts seriously means to understand that for the participants involved they are very real things (Garfinkel 2002, Durkheim 1952). For Arab “populations” in Massad’s work, or the women factory workers in Yan’s ethnography, the facts of “sexuality” and “*suzhi*” respectively do not go away by deconstructing the discourse, because the meanings of those ideas come from the ways in which they organize not just a particular individual, but the other people around them who will hold them accountable to these ideas. However, what this looks

like in the course of everyday practice is where the anthropologist can gain some insight and instruct their fellow scholars on the way in which people are negotiated and deliberated to determine the meanings of these social facts.

#### Ethnomethodology—From Discourse to Interactions

In order to demonstrate the kinds of data that I am collecting and the ways that I propose analyzing these pieces of information, let me return to an particular ethnographic vignette that I introduced in the introductory chapter. As you will recall, during the first weekend in June there was a pool party with the organization Colorful Spring to celebrate the month of Pride. Mid-way through the party, JR and I found out that not only was this a celebration of Pride, but the leader of Colorful Spring had also invited researchers from the Center for Drug Control to attend the party and collect survey data on whether or not MSMs were taking certain illicit drugs and if that contributed to risky sexual behavior. JR recommended that I approach the women and try to take the survey myself and figure out what they were doing at the party. Here is one of my field notes from the evening with some edits to make it more concise:

I went up to the balcony where the four middle-aged women were sitting and interviewing different party goers. I approached one of them that was sitting alone at a table looking for a person to interview, said hello and she gestured for me to sit down. [*After we exchanged introductions*] I asked how many people they were going to interview and she said they would try to interview as many as they could, hopefully everyone in attendance. I asked if she wanted to interview me and she said yes of course. She brought out one of her survey sheets and began to mark away. The first question was whether or not I had ever used Rush or any other drugs. I was a bit nervous about this question. The idea of admitting to any sort of drug use to a representative from the Chinese government seemed like an incredibly bad idea. I could honestly answer though that I had never used Rush and I hadn't done drugs in China. I told her that many many years ago I had tried Rush, but I really didn't care for it and knew that it was unhealthy so I never did it again. She applauded my decision, saying that in fact Rush was a serious drug. However, this seemed to not bode well for her survey and so she put down her pin and didn't fill out anything on the paper. It seemed that I was not a good candidate.

Shortly after another two women had finished their surveys and also joined us. While the woman I was initially talking to seemed to think that I was of little interest, one of the other women reaffirmed the importance of their quotas and the value I might have in just being another individual that they could report data about. She then took me to the other table to fill out the forms. She asked me a series of additional questions about drug use, explaining that they were mostly interested in Rush and G. She explained that many don't realize how dangerous Rush can be, and this is why they needed to do this study. With my questions mostly answered in the negative, she jotted down some information on the form and then thanked for me going along with her questionnaire. As we wrapped up talking it seemed that the ladies had completed the necessary amount of surveys they felt they could get for the evening and began to pack up their bags and head home.

In this interaction I had with the ladies from the Centers for Drug Control, there are several important social facts that organized our conversation and their attendance to the event. Obviously there were ideas about sexuality, and gay sexuality in particular, as it related to another social fact of disease control and transmission. This was all animated by a hypothesis that gay men are more likely to take certain kinds of drugs that will cause them to have riskier forms of sex. If we approached this interaction as a Foucauldian we might trace out the ideas of how the state assumes a role of collecting data, under the logic of improving the health outcomes for 'the population' and then produce regimes of truth about homosexual desire and risky or unhealthy behavior based on knowledge and information about drugs like Rush. We might look at how this survey data is turned into a government report meant to cause homosexual men to further police their own desires to use drugs or engage in certain kinds of sexual activity, and similarly further public stigmas of gay men as drug users and purveyors of casual sex.

However, in this dissertation I am looking at different moments in this interaction as telling us something important about how the social facts of surveys, drugs and sex order the women and party goers. Obviously the first thing to note is that a biopower logic of the Chinese government to collect data about the sexual and drug use habits of MSMs did require the women to go to the party and the participants to participate in their questioning. However, the attitudes about what data collection means in these situations is highly mediated through the particular women and how they interact with the person they are surveying (in this instance me). In the first interview, the woman very quickly determines that the fact that I do not use drugs means that I am not a helpful data point. In the second interview, however, her colleague calls attention to a different set of social facts, for her the important thing to notice is that they have to fill out a certain amount of survey data before they can go home, and regardless of whether or not I use Rush, I can be interviewed and help fill out one more form. The second colleague in a sense holds the first colleague accountable by instructing her that it does not matter that I am not Chinese or haven't used Rush, I can still be valuable data anyways, at least if the main point is to get home earlier.

We cannot predict how this data will be written up in a report, where and when it will be published and who and how any given individual will read and interpret this data. What I can say though is that these social facts and/or discourses were used to produce an empirical order between four employees for the Centers for Drug Control and a group of men that they were tasked to interview. In these particular social interactions, the arrangement of the particular social facts, their interpretation and relevance and then our deliberation about what we should do is empirically visible and can tell us something important

about how discourses become situated. For instance during the first interaction, the surveyor makes the discourse of drugs relevant through asking me if I have used Rush. However through the intersections of other social facts like her positionality with the government, I become wary of how I might answer. By saying that I did not use Rush, she both affirms that this is the correct response and yet also an unhelpful response in ending the survey at that point. The social interaction is ended. When the second surveyor joins the conversation, she reminds the first that actually my “no” answer is still useful, and returns to ask me about other drugs I do not use for the purposes of filling out more boxes. We thus come to understand that the importance of asking about drugs is to help the women get home early, not fully in terms of governmentality in that moment.

My methods of analysis are closely tied to the work of Harold Garfinkel and the field of ethnomethodology. Garfinkel challenges researchers of the social to take up the challenge of Durkheim’s aphorism (Garfinkel 2002), which is to locate social facts and understand their reality within a given social interaction. However, the point is not to understand these social facts as cultural constructions, but to describe the social work that goes into making them relevant through the ways in which the participants of a particular interaction hold each other accountable to those social facts. For Garfinkel then, the ways in which to understand how ordinary life is ordered is not by simply describing the existence of social facts and explaining their relevance to our interlocutors, but rather to observe how a social fact is interpreted through the way in which people hold each other accountable, or what Varenne I call the ongoing process of instructing one another (Varenne 2019). In the previous ethnographic vignette we see multiple instances in which the relevance of ‘drugs’ are being instructed, first to me by the initial surveyor, in which I am told that it is a good thing I don’t do drugs, but it is bad for her survey. And secondly by the next surveyor who instructs the first surveyor that drug use is mostly important for completing the paperwork for the night. Within these three moments of interaction, the significance of drug use goes through three different contextual meanings. The understanding and usage of ‘drugs’ is less about the initial hypothesis and more about the task of filling out a government survey so people will have enough data to go home.

Throughout my research I have been trying to locate social facts as evidenced through moments of instruction. Thus in the first section, I analyze certain discourses on sex in China, but locate them in specific moments in which those discourses are made relevant. At times ideas about chaos, *suzhi* or being *tongzhi* are taught to one another. We find out that *tongzhis* should read sexy magazines on Friday nights, not organizational reports and that you should be able to joke about sex without actually groping



people at a camping trip, unless you are groping someone ironically as part of a game. In this way *tongzhi* is less an ontology or an epistemology and more an ongoing practice that must be done repeatedly throughout time. Obviously the things that I have outlined are not necessarily part of being *tongzhi* for all people who identify with that name, across space and time, rather it is understanding how *tongzhi* is instructed to be in specific moments amongst specific people. The particularities that make these social facts relevant is exactly what I am trying to describe in these ethnographic moments.

Conversely then, what become important is not only what is being instructed, but also what is being ignored. So for instance, I will repeatedly make the case that the discourse about a thing is a public representation of the grouping of people, but is not necessarily what is most relevant to what is being done in the space. This becomes particularly important in the second section in which I discuss the relationship between the CDC and the *tongzhi* actors, in which we discover that the important types of instructions are in how a report is written, not necessarily how an HIV test is done. These two things should, in theory be the same, but in focusing on how and when the organizations are making things relevant, and what can be ignored, I make an argument that there is room for making a report to be one thing and the actual event that is being represented to be something entirely different. This is critical when we are thinking about the implications of a discourse, because it may be the case that the production of the discourse is a tactic, used to erase certain kinds of activities and behaviors. Relying on the representations tell us something important about public facing attitudes or understandings, but do not tell us how ordinary life is necessarily conducted.

In the initial stages of my research, I planned to focus on Bakhtin's concept of dialogics as a way of situating meaning and discourses (Bakhtin 1981, 1986, Holquist 2002). Using this framework, I planned to map out specific conversations and note some important concepts, like sexuality, in the contexts of these conversations. The trick then is not to tie these usages to the entire web of connotations and histories of the term, but to see which aspects of meaning become relevant in these spaces and what new connotations and meanings are added within specific interactions. How does the meaning of a term like 'sexuality' become understood within the conversations of a selected group of people? However, even as Bakhtin's dialogics continue to inform my thinking, the role of dialogue narrowly constructed began to change towards looking at interactions with institutions and networks of people. This shift occurred in part because my object of study needed to change due to the intervention of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

In the fall of 2019, I spent most of my time in Chengdu, attending salons on a range of topics dealing with sexuality for *tongzhi* men. These salons were designed to help men ‘accept themselves’ a topic that fits well into the Foucauldian fears of technologies of the self (1988). I was able to sit in on these weekly events and record conversations that people were having and think through how particular questions or topics became understood within the context of these salons. I hoped that I could then follow these men out of these salons and into other situations to see whether or not the ideas of self and sexuality are were being learned, that is to say whether or not men reproduced these discourses as a way of explaining and understanding the world. After trying for a month or so, I realized that this was difficult to do, as any way of trying to figure out if someone had learned a thing, was in a sense a way of instructing them about the topic. That is to say, if I observed people discuss a particular idea about open relationships in the context of a salon, and then asked them later in an interview about open relationships, then I was reproducing the knowledge and holding the interlocutor accountable for recreating the conversation had during the salon. This research was further complicated as the salons were frequently canceled by volunteers and it was difficult to become close friends with people outside the salons, when the salons were so infrequent. During some of the off weeks, I began to pursue some connections with organizations in Kunming, and by the time that the Covid-19 pandemic was at its worst and the salons were subsequently suspended for nearly a 6 month period, I had already more or less positioned myself in Kunming.

While I was excited to be back in Kunming, I originally did not intend to study public health or HIV, I was more interested in political organizing and moral discourses. However, I discovered that in fact an MSM HIV clinic proved to be an excellent place to study how discourses become situated into pragmatic situations. As I described in the introduction, these organizations occupy this challenging position of being both an LGBT organization and having to do this public health role with the government. As a result they are constantly being critiqued for not suitably doing what is best for the “LGBT community” from activists on the outside. And yet many of the leaders do think of themselves as being apart of this movement and vocalize many of the same discourses. However these organizers are fantastic heteroglosses (Bakhtin 1981); not only are they fluent in LGBT discourses, but they also can speak Chinese public health language. Methodologically then, my project focused on when certain kinds of rhetoric were being used (Bakhtin 1986), to whom and thinking about what people were trying to do together. Importantly though the question became not about the exact articulation of a discourse, but how

these discourses were being used in particular pragmatic situations and what aspects were people being held accountable for, and what things could be ignored.

### Actor Network Theory and Guanxi Xue

Spatially then, most of my time was spent located in the offices or attending the events of these MSM CBOs. I tried to take notes on daily conversations, jokes and humor, their jobs and labor, how they avoided doing work, and of course when 'sexuality' was invoked as a topic. In this way my ethnography is arguably about CBOs in Kunming. Over the course of my research I studied five different CBOs that are currently operating and one CBO that is no longer in existence. It is tempting to think of this then as a study of organizations and structures, however here I also hope to make an important theoretical and methodological distinction. My work is less based around the body of literature on organizational theory, and tries to build off of Mayfair Yang's idea of *guanxi xue* (1994) and Latour's idea of Actor Network Theory to study how people come together through these organizational events (2005).

Most of the work on CBOs in China have studied them as organizations (Hasmath & Hsu 2016, Hildebrandt 2013, Matsuzawa 2019, Teets 2014) focused on the specific legal requirements, the political economies and internal structures. I use much of this work to inform my own ethnography, however I take seriously Fei Xiaotong's observation that in Western society there are organizational associations and in China there are differential associations. In this point Fei is saying that the West put a lot of emphasis on the rules of organizations and how that in turn disciplines behavior (1944). Chinese associations, Fei argues, are based on feelings of responsibility and obligation based on the degree of intimacy. The specter of CBOs as the structure of these associations makes it tempting to study them as such, when in fact it is useful to think of them as collections of people with particular relationships. In fact it is this distinction between rule and governing structures of the CBOs and what *guanxi* allows for networks of human relationships to accomplish, that undergirds my argument about the use of formalism in *tongzhi* politics (Zhao 2007). These organizations, much like discourses on sexuality, exist as social facts, as well as legal facts, and thus have a large impact on what people should or should not do. However, as I argue in the second ethnographic section of this book, it is important to suspend the Western ideas about legalism and discipline and similarly understand how these rules are interpreted and implemented through varying degrees of making certain rules relevant and others ignored.

In order to help me rethink of these CBOs as networks of people I relied heavily on Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) as a method for thinking about how socials are assembled together. In ANT, one does not assume that a given social pre-exists, but rather trace out what work needs to happen by a given set of actors in order to bring together this particular configuration of people together. I thus spend a great deal of time in each chapter, but especially in Chapter 6, to try and list out who are the important actors in a given assemblage and what are they doing in that space to keep the social together. This again leads to important theoretical discussions about what exactly *tongzhi* means in the lives of people, as Latour would remind us that we cannot start from the positions that *tongzhi* assemblages exist without the difficult social work of bringing these men together. As I demonstrate through the history of Rainbow Skies, it actually takes a lot of social work to start getting Yunnan *tongzhi* to think of themselves as a community with shared interest and a reason to associate with one another.

#### Subjectivity and Theories of the State

For the most part my data is based on participant observation, which includes descriptions of events and office work, as well as some recorded dialogues between participants in these spaces. These observations were complimented by recorded interviews with key informants, that included some members who work in the organizations and peripheral participants who came to some of the activities. The interviews should also be interpreted dialogically, between myself, JR and the interlocutors. I conducted these interviews in order to gain background information on what was happening in these organizations in order to provide more context for what I was observing, as well as learn about important events that happened while I was not present. However, these interviews also become important as they gave interlocutors the opportunity to explain their own theories of the social and political landscapes that they were engaged in. As I mentioned earlier, I try very hard in this dissertation to not explain the social in ways that my interlocutors would not agree with, or make the argument that they simply do not understand their own positionalities. At times I will disagree with them and question whether or not this is correct, but I did so in the context of our discussions, and frequently include their responses to my disagreements. I would not argue that they are misguided by ideologies or 'opiates of the masses' to misrecognize the situation. Instead I hope this work reflect some of the ways that they have instructed me on how to be *tongzhi* and do *tongzhi* politics in Kunming.

This data is then unapologetically subjective, both in terms of my own observations as well as vocalizing the commentary and theories of my informants. That being said these individual subjectivities are moderated not only in the broader contexts provided, but also in demonstrated how they deliberate interpretations through discussions. If the key observations of ethnomethodology is to look at the moments of breaching in which people are instructing each other about how to behave, then often times we see multiple subjective ideas about what is happening in that given event. It is not the job of the ethnographer then to determine which interpretation is correct but to present as many interpretations as I am privy to, and then to try and document how deliberations are made. Often times we see ethical questions being raised among the organizers around what should be done with money, how to best serve the “community”, what is appropriate sexual behavior and whether or not a particular activity is fun. These contestations are ongoing, even if some decision to act is reached within that particular moment. For example with the drug surveyors at the Pride Event, I noted two moments of instructions—surveyor one telling me that I was right not to use Rush, and then surveyor 2 telling surveyor 1 that I should be surveyed despite by my answer. It is possible, and perhaps likely that the instructed did not necessarily agree with the instructions—I do not think that Rush is all that dangerous, and surveyor 1 still may think that collecting my data was not helpful. However, in these brief moments a decision was made, and a new normal was reached, no matter how brief. Throughout my dissertation we will see people organize around the subjective ideas that this is what social facts mean, and this is how we as a group must treat them.

In terms of notations I try to distinguish between things that I observed in my field notes and things that were quoted from an interview. Generally speaking if they are from a field note then it is not a direct quote, but paraphrasing the conversation that was had—after all everything needed to be translated into English, so nothing is an exact quote. During these paraphrased quotes I use the notation of a ‘single quotation mark’. If I take a quote directly from an interview, then I will usually use “double quotes” to indicate that this is a direct translation of something that they said from a recorded interview that was transcribed. At time I will use insert dialogues from either an interview or a field note as an indented space in the ethnography. Please note if I indicate that this is an interview, in which case the words are basically direct quotations from a transcript, or a field note, in which case they were paraphrased conversations.

### *Rentong Ziji* (认同自己): Recognizing Myself

As you may know by this point, I am an American, white man, in his early 30s, who is doing graduate research for his Phd in Applied Anthropology. As an openly gay man there were certain aspects of my perceived identity that made it very easy to enter these spaces and start conversations with people. As I discuss in Chapter 5, much of the humor that men used during events or casual conversations in the office was very easy for me to pick up, and they felt very comfortable joking with me about sexual topics or confiding in me with personal questions about their identity or relationships. At the same time, not being Chinese meant that I missed a lot of understood cultural references and norms, and thus needed to be instructed frequently on the differences between being a Westerner and being Chinese. At times I would ask a particularly clueless questions and I was told that I could not understand because I was not Chinese. I am sure that if a Chinese researcher did this same research project there are certain observations and explanations that they could make that I have been unable to do. However, I part of the value of cross-cultural anthropology is the researcher's tendency to breach social norms and through their own ineptitude require a certain amount of explaining by the locals about why "we do it what way". I try to use these opportunities as much as possible to learn and gain explanations from my informants about how ordinary life works.

My positionality as an outsider also oriented me towards observing certain kinds of activities. Personally I became very interested in the political economy and relationships that developed between these organizations and the CDC. However, many of the direct interactions that people had with government officers I was not invited to attend. This is for obvious reasons, since many of these organizations must deal with accusations that they are funded by international NGOs who want to stir up trouble. As a result I focus much of my attention on events, which has made play a central object of study in this dissertation. Overall I believe that thinking through different kinds of *tongzhi* play has been productive, as it offers a unique theoretical perspective on how people can maintain ironic relationships with challenging social facts. I expect that the work I have done to begin to think about play as part of human interactions will continue with me throughout the rest of my academic career.

In addition to play, this research project deals with the sexuality and subsequently the practice of 'sex'. Much like many ethnographers of sexuality, and many LGBT people, I intended this project to study sexual group making without needing to observe or deal with sexual interactions directly. However, as described in Chapter 4, following my informants and spending time in the different offices meant that I

ended up spending a fair amount of time in an MSM bathhouse, where people were regularly engaging in semi-public forms of sex. I was often times touched and invited to participate, but avoided direct contact in order to avoid ethical problems. I describe these sexual interactions in terms of the social work that proceeds and follows that act of sex itself, as part of the ANT analysis of what brings people together. To avoid the topic of sex, especially when it is an open part of socialization for some of the men, I think would be misleading. However it is a delicate balance to not depict these instances in ways that will be embarrassing or potentially stigmatizing to any of the men involved. Obviously I mask the identities of all of the people in this ethnography, particularly those in sexual spaces so as not to describe their personal lives. During the period that I was doing fieldwork, I avoided having any romantic or sexual interactions with the people who were working for these organizations or participating in any of the events. However, I should disclose that after I finished my research I did start to date one of the former employees and he has helped me translate some of the interviews that I did with other people.

In terms of Chinese language ability, I am decently conversant in everyday conversations, but far from fluent. I have taken two years of Chinese language courses at Columbia University, done intensive Chinese language courses in Taiwan and then have lived in China for over two years before starting this dissertation work. That being said, I think that for me learning Chinese will be a life long endeavor and I cannot claim that as of doing this research I was skilled enough to do the deep conversational analysis that I find to be the important bedrock of ethnographic research. For this reason I have relied heavily on translators to both help me understand observation in real time, conduct interviews and then check translations that I did later as I was reviewing my data. These translators have all been very good friends and include JR, Chuan Er, DK, Arthur, Ba Qian and Xiao Xiang. These friends of mine have influenced this project far beyond translations, and have been integral to helping me think through ideas and providing their own interpretations of events. In some instances (Chuan Er, Ba Qian and Xiao Xiang) they were members of these organizations and could act not only as translators but also as informants.

JR

I need to conclude this chapter with both a special thanks and acknowledgement, as well as a disclosure to my close friend and research partner, JR. At one point in our research, I asked JR how she would like me to introduce her to our interlocutors. Was she my translator? That seemed too limited. My research partner? She was pretty clear that she didn't want to write anything for this project. In the end

she asked that I call her my 'Chinese teacher'. Chinese teacher? I puzzled. But you aren't really teaching me Chinese. 'Yeah, but I kind of am, and what is more I'm often teaching you about Chinese culture and politics. So I'm kind of like a teacher.' A teacher she surely is. JR has had a career as a successful journalist prior to this project, awarded for deep reporting and investigations. Through this career she has not only developed excellent interviewing and research skills, but also a deep knowledge of the Chinese political and cultural system.

I had met JR in 2013, when I came to Chengdu to first investigate gay organizational culture. She was a friend of one of my gay friends and was in a lesbian relationship. Over the years we became closer, and I would run ideas by her and ask questions. When I moved to Chengdu last August however, we became much closer, frequently discussing my project, who I should talk to and where I should go next. At the time, I viewed her as too close of a friend to just ask her to be my translator, not to mention that she had a full time job of her own. However, in the fall her newspaper was bought out and she decided to quit. During this time she traveled with me to Jianshui and helped me do translation work. It was here that we really developed our working relationships. We would stay up all night discussing issues, and she seemed to never tire of answering my endless questions. When Covid-19 shut down the economy, JR indicated that she would have difficulty finding a job, and so I hired her to move in with me to Kunming and work as my research partner. She lived with me from March through July, and helped with my interviews as well as sat with me in offices, went to events and basically did everything that I did. We joked that she was my husband. More than just translations though, she really helped me work through my ideas. I don't think that many doctoral students get to have a devoted partner who will sit around with you and just talk through all of your ideas 24 hours for 5 months and make sure that your research is making sense. For that I am eternally grateful for her.

In this way I do feel like the final results of this project are very much a collaboration between the two of us, even though she did not want to write the paper. Her notes, her questions, her thoughts are sprinkled throughout this paper. To the extent I could, I try to site her explicitly, but I suspect that a lot of my thinking is just informed by our conversations. We have developed an incredible working relationship throughout this period, and I hope in the future I can find the funding and do another project with her. I hoped that when I did this project I would be able to collaborate with my 'interlocutors', to find something that we could write or do together. I suppose in some ways JR was an interlocutor and this project is a



collaboration, but in other ways it doesn't feel quite like that. It felt like working with a really intelligent, really talented good friend.

### Chapter III: Rainbow Skies: A Disassembled History of Serious Work

The current relationship between Kunming's *tongzhi*/MSM organizations and the local government is the result of at least two decades of work, learning and negotiations. In this chapter I will describe the historical sequence that constructed the institutions and current logics (Levi Strauss 1962) of the modern day MSM HIV CBO. Specifically I will analyze the creation of two logics that emerge from the earlier generation of internationally funded CBOs, the first being the attitudes that the state has developed in terms of how they should manage these organizations through the use of testing data as a form of evaluation. The second are the ways in which *tongzhi* learned how to use the funding opportunities and resources to host fun activities to gather together. The current iteration of MSM CBOs is highly influenced by the legacy of international NGOs who provided funding and training for these organizations to start. Leaders of today's organizations and bureaucrats in the CDC office have both tried to mimic certain logics from these international organizations (the use of testing and play), as well as make important revisions that did not fit well into the Chinese political structures. Put another way, this chapter describes the period of time in which international donors upended the public health ideas of the Yunnan political system, and what are the enduring ideas left behind after these NGOs have largely left China.

To tell this story, I mostly focus on the life and times of the first MSM CBO in Kunming, Rainbow Skies. This organization started through the collaboration of a team of bureaucrats in the Yunnan Provincial Health Education Bureau (PHEB) and the China UK Project, and then recruited one of the first groups of *tongzhi*/MSM organizers to execute their ideas. In their stories we see how the logics, values and goals of the different institutions (Chinese Center of Disease Control, USAID, the Global Fund) and cultural understandings (Western ideas of civil society and peer education, MSM ideas of each other, cadre ideas of how to spend money) are personalized through the specific decisions that these actors must make. This section tries to bring together some of the historical literature on HIV/AIDs and the creation of NGOs in China during this period with an oral history I have synthesized through interviews that I did with some of the main actors. From the PHEB, I was able to interview Zhang Laoshi, who still works there, and his former teammate Meng Laoshi, who is now retired. I also interviewed Ran Ran, a lesbian who took over Rainbow Skies during the final years of its existence, and her deputy Liang Liang, a *tongzhi* man. Both of them have moved on to working at another MSM HIV organization which I will refer to as Tong Xin. To help expand the perspectives of this history I also include bits from my interviews

with Xiannü, who was a young volunteer at Rainbow Skies, and also with some of the volunteers and organizers of the sibling organization Colorful Spring. While you will see in subsequent chapters, Colorful Spring's modern iteration is a major player in Kunming's *tongzhi* scene. During the time period of this chapter (2001-2012) the structure and dynamics of Colorful Spring were quite different than they are today, and more closely resembled the inner workings of Rainbow Skies. I was able to interview Tim Charles, who was one of the American trainers and managers of Colorful Spring until 2011, as well as his Chinese partner, Rui Wen, who also worked for the international NGO called the Family Health Initiative or more commonly just FHI. There are also some remarks about the Colorful Spring events from Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie, who currently run the MSM HIV operations for a district CDC and were young volunteers and performers for Colorful Spring.

While in subsequent chapters I will focus primarily on ethnographic vignettes that I believe demonstrate how these actors are taking cultural concepts and situating them into specific dialogues, in this chapter I must rely more on subjective re-tellings of a history. Thus there is something to be said about how these interviews reflect memory of such institutions and the emotional states of dealing with one another, and thus may differ from an objective account of what happened, or a subjective response to the events as they were happening. As I have alluded to, while some MSM CBOs, like Colorful Spring, were redesigned to fit the current moment, Rainbow Skies ultimately was not. Thus the legacy of Rainbow Skies is a bit of a contested space, in which during the interviews different informants are trying to shape the legacy of this organization. There is a rich body of literature in the fields of anthropology and public health that has also studied this period of time and similarly tries to frame certain decisions, policies and dynamics in terms of their direct commentary on contemporary events. In this chapter, I too will try to synthesize these lessons.

### *The Social Facts of HIV and MSMs*

The 'medical approach' to the study of the virus focuses on the epidemiological ways that HIV is transmitted. This has produced the following schema for the 'population' of people with HIV: HIV-infected drug injectors build up a 'critical mass' of infections through sexual networks, after which HIV spreads across the wider society (Sutherland & Hsu 2012, p. 21). The goal of the public health workers is to identify viral 'target populations' to prevent transmission before it reaches such a critical mass.

Obviously the primary target populations are drug users, but sexual conduits also become signified, in particular sex workers and homosexuals (Ibid).

It has also been the case that interventions to create ‘target populations’ and prevent risky behavior is filtered through political institutions and has also been tied into other projects such as imperialist ventures, moralizing about sexual behaviors and intensifying xenophobic rhetoric (Patton 2011). As Treichler writes:

AIDS is not merely an invented label, provided to us by science and scientific naming practices, for a clear-cut disease entity caused by a virus. Rather the very nature of AIDS is constructed through language and in particular through the discourses of medicine and science; this construction is ‘true’ or ‘real’ only in certain specific ways—for example, insofar as it successfully guides research or facilitates clinical control over the illness.’ (1999, p. 11)

Beyond the fact that HIV/AIDS is a “real disease, killing real people”, it also has social, cultural and political meanings based on the creation of knowledge around the disease. To put this another way, HIV/AIDS is a Durkheimian social fact, or as Treichler goes on to describe it “an epidemic of signification.” (p. 19)

For China, this social fact was highly mediated through a series of international institutions, which starting in the 1990s instructed the Chinese political state on the best ways to approach HIV/AIDS disease control (Kauffman 2010). The Chinese political system’s first reaction was to see the main transmitters of the virus as themselves foreign, and to map out where and how the virus might enter China and infect the population (Hyde 2007). ‘Foreignness’ initially described the idea that the virus came from abroad, however as time went on, foreign came to encapsulate any non-Han, non-normative group that was high risk of HIV, including ethnic minority groups, drug users and homosexuals, and the government took steps to try to prevent ‘dangerous contact’ between these marginal populations and the majority of the Chinese population (Hyde 2007, Jinhua & Kleinman 2011). However, international pressure began to build on China to work with the WHO to develop measures based on ‘international scientific consensus’ of the most suitable ways to respond to the HIV/AIDS threat (Yip 2014). This culminated in the ‘*Titanic Peril*’ report, written by the United Nations in 2001, which predicted that if China continued its current course of action, it would lead to an “HIV/AIDS epidemic of proportions beyond belief” (UN Theme Group on HIV/AIDs in China). China’s initial attempts to hide the SARS

epidemic from the WHO further added to the pressure for China to adhere to international standards for dealing with HIV/AIDS (Davis & Siu 2007, Kauffman 2010).

One of these “significations” created by the international understanding of HIV was the MSM, or men who have sex with men (Jeffreys and Gang 2018). Homosexual men were understood to have more sexual partners, be less likely to wear condoms and thus were identified as much more likely to be infected and pass along HIV (Chow et. al 2014). This is in part based on the Western experience of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, when in the 1980s and 1990s gay men were disproportionately impacted by the virus (Patton 2011, Treichler 1999). The images of sick and dying gay men became closely associated with HIV/AIDS in the popular imagination. Conservative Christian groups quickly painted the virus as punishment from God. Gay and lesbian activist groups mobilized around the virus, demanding visibility and government funding for medical research. Thus as researchers and NGOs developed information, recommendations and funding projects for nations like China to respond to the HIV/AIDS threat, it is not surprising that part of that response was tied to political interventions with MSM ‘populations’ (Choi et, al 2002, Jones 1999, UNAIDS 1999). It is important to note that one could construct other demographics of people, particularly people specific to Chinese culture, like Communist officials who engage in promiscuous sex acts as part of networking as an ‘at risk’ population (Uretsky 2016), but this would not fit into the categories and historical development of Western scientific knowledge.

As indicated in the introduction, MSMs in China, particularly outside of large, urban centers like Beijing and Shanghai, were largely invisible to both the broader public and the state (Zhang & Chu 2005). When it was considered a psychological disorder, homosexuality in China was not considered a problem for the state, but rather was the responsibility of families and individuals to remedy (Sang 2003). In its Maoist iteration, the understanding of homosexuality as hooliganism meant that the problem existed only to the extent to which it was disruptive (Tanner 2000). As a reaction to family stigmas and risks from police harassment, by the 1980s homosexuality was thoroughly hidden from public view (Pang & Huang 2011). The further association of MSMs with HIV/AIDS only increased the fear and stigmatization that many average Chinese people had towards homosexuality, and made public identification of homosexuals nearly impossible (Jinhua & Kleinman 2011).

The new social facts of HIV/AIDS meant that as homosexual men went deeper into hiding, it also became incumbent on the Chinese state to not only recognize MSMs as a demographic, but also to actively search out where they existed (Choi et, al 2002). This became even more true as international donors began to fund projects based on the idea of MSM peer education groups, which did not really exist in places like Yunnan (Chua & Hildebrandt 2014). By the early 2000s, a cohort of Chinese cadres were wandering through the streets and dark alleyways of cities like Kunming to find the underground bars and cruising locations in order to recruit volunteers to help them with their projects.

### *Partnership of the Chinese Government and International Donors*

As part of China's 'neoliberal' reforms in the 1980s and 1990s (Harvey 2005), much of the government services were moved from the national level to the provinces and local levels of government. While these government departments found themselves tasked with more responsibilities, they were not provided with comparable increases in financial resources, had restrictions on the amount of taxation that they could leverage and were prevented from running deficits (Teets 2014). Additionally during the 1980s the Chinese government implemented new requirements to evaluate and promote government cadres, with greater emphasis put on quantitative metrics for success and special incentives for developing innovative new approaches for providing government services (Teets & Jagusztyn 2016). As provinces began to run deficits there was a shift to find non-government partners who could provide services that the government could not. In particular, provinces like Yunnan developed new models for attracting international NGOs and donors to provide services to develop their economies and meet new public health objectives (Teets 2015).

Much like their entrepreneurial counterparts, international NGOs and non-profits were eager to get permission to enter China and start working on development issues. Deeply concerned with HIV/AIDS prevention, these international NGOs were eager to use their scientific knowledge and expertise to set up health operations across China (Uretsky 2016). In addition to their specific goals (e.g. HIV prevention, environmentalism or economic development), many of these Western NGOs saw this as an opportunity to build up a "civil society" that could act independently from the state and maybe even develop into a locus of power that could push back against certain draconian policies, or at the very least influence the Communist Party (Hildebrandt 2016). In the early years these organizations were largely constricted to experimental provinces, like Yunnan, that had been given special permission to develop

new schemas for how international NGOs would be governed in China (Zheng 2016). One of the major innovations was to require a partnership with local CBOs (Community Based Organizations) who typically were registered under the supervision of a government department (Matsuzawa 2019). While some international NGOs pushed back against this at first, they found that Yunnan's distance from Beijing and the local CBO's enthusiasm meant that in the early years they had more political room to try out new ideas (ibid).

The early 2000s were a period of "policy learning" for everyone involved (Noakes & Teets 2017), including the international NGOs who needed to figure out how to adapt their ideas to a Chinese context (Uretsky 2016), CBO organizers who saw new opportunities to form advantageous relationships and bring money to their particular cause (Hildebrandt 2012) and cadres and government officials who wanted to figure out the best way to manage this new human resource (Teets 2014). While many cadres began to develop productive working relationships with the CBO organizers and international donors, and learned many new approaches for development, they were still concerned about the potential rise of empowered activists, funded by foreign governments who would challenge party rule (Hasmath & Hsu 2016). The examples of the Color Revolutions, China's own political strife in Tiananmen Square (1989) and then later on the Arab Spring (2010-12), all served as warnings to the Chinese political establishment of foreign inspired democracy movements that threatened one party rule. For this reason even as China gave more economic power to non-government actors, they made sure not to make any major concessions on political power (Teets 2014). In fact, as they began to figure out what these CBOs did well, they instituted new rules that would provide the government with more oversight of their finances and required that they regularly reported to their government partners (Hsu & Teets 2016).

This would be an ongoing point of contention for the international NGOs and the Chinese government departments as they battled for control over these fledgling organizations. As Uretsky details, often times government partners would have certain political ideas, like adding a giant yellow condom into a Jingpo dance performance, despite protests from the local CBOs and the international NGOs (2016). She writes that the international NGOs were "mobile sovereigns", thinking that they could neutrally carry out their scientific knowledge to any place across the globe, and thus were perpetually irritated when the local governments slowed them down with "bureaucratic hurdles" or silly ideas (p. 175). In my own field research one of the former leaders of an HIV CBO explained that the Gates Foundation had gotten increasingly tired of dealing with the Yunnan CDC, and was looking for ways to more directly

partner with an independent organization. Eventually they found what looked like such an organizations called the Yunnan Provincial STD Prevention and Treatment Committee. However, later on it was revealed that this committee was entirely staffed by retired CDC employees who regularly reported back to their successors and was created for the purposes of seducing international donors like the Gates Foundation.

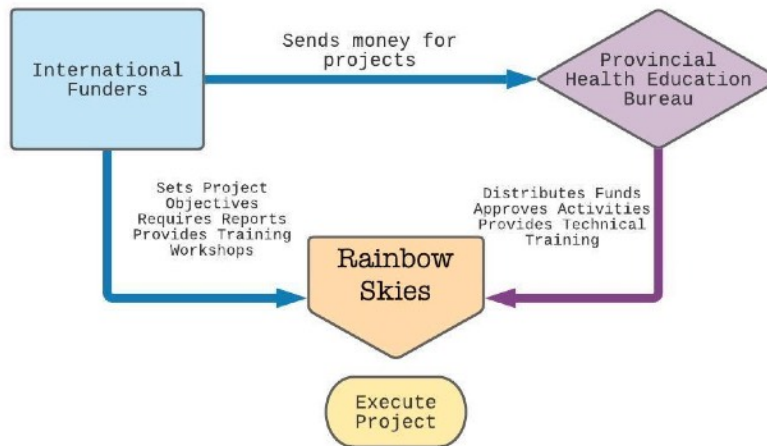
The desire on the parts of these international NGOs to partner with non-government “community members” or “civil society” members certainly was animated by their distrust and frustration with the Chinese government officials. It is an important legacy of these organizations that international NGOs elevated “community members” as uniquely qualified to lead these organizations and interventions. This almost certainly stems from the power of concepts like “peer education” to frame international NGOs work during the 1990s and early 2000s (He et. al. 2020). This was an important intervention, as China was not typically looking for “community members” to do such interventions. For instance on the topic of homosexuality, it was still largely seen as a disqualification for a homosexual to do research on homosexuals or to provide psychological counseling to homosexuals (Liu 2015). This was because for the most part a homosexual would be considered biased and part of the problem. How could a drug user help other drug users stop using drugs? How could an MSM stop men from having sex with men? Is an HIV positive person really the most qualified to teach other people how to avoid HIV? And yet this concept not only provided an opportunity for MSMs to take leadership roles in these organizations, but the legacy of peer educators has also continued as a framework for these kinds of interventions (Yan et. al 2014).

### *The Birth of Rainbow Skies*

It is in this environment, that the star of this chapter is born. In 2001, Zhang Laoshi was tasked with setting up Rainbow Skies after his department, the Provincial Health Education Bureau (PHEB) procured funds from an international NGO called the China UK Project to run an MSM HIV organization. As Meng Laoshi, Zhang Laoshi’s assistant, explained to me during an interview, “Actually at that time every provincial department was focused on HIV, the Public Health, the legal departments, even the prisons and the police. Every one of the departments all applied for the China UK Project.” It was clear that there was money and opportunity in doing HIV work during that time, and thus despite having little knowledge or connection to MSM groups, Zhang Laoshi, Meng Laoshi and two other ‘older ladies’

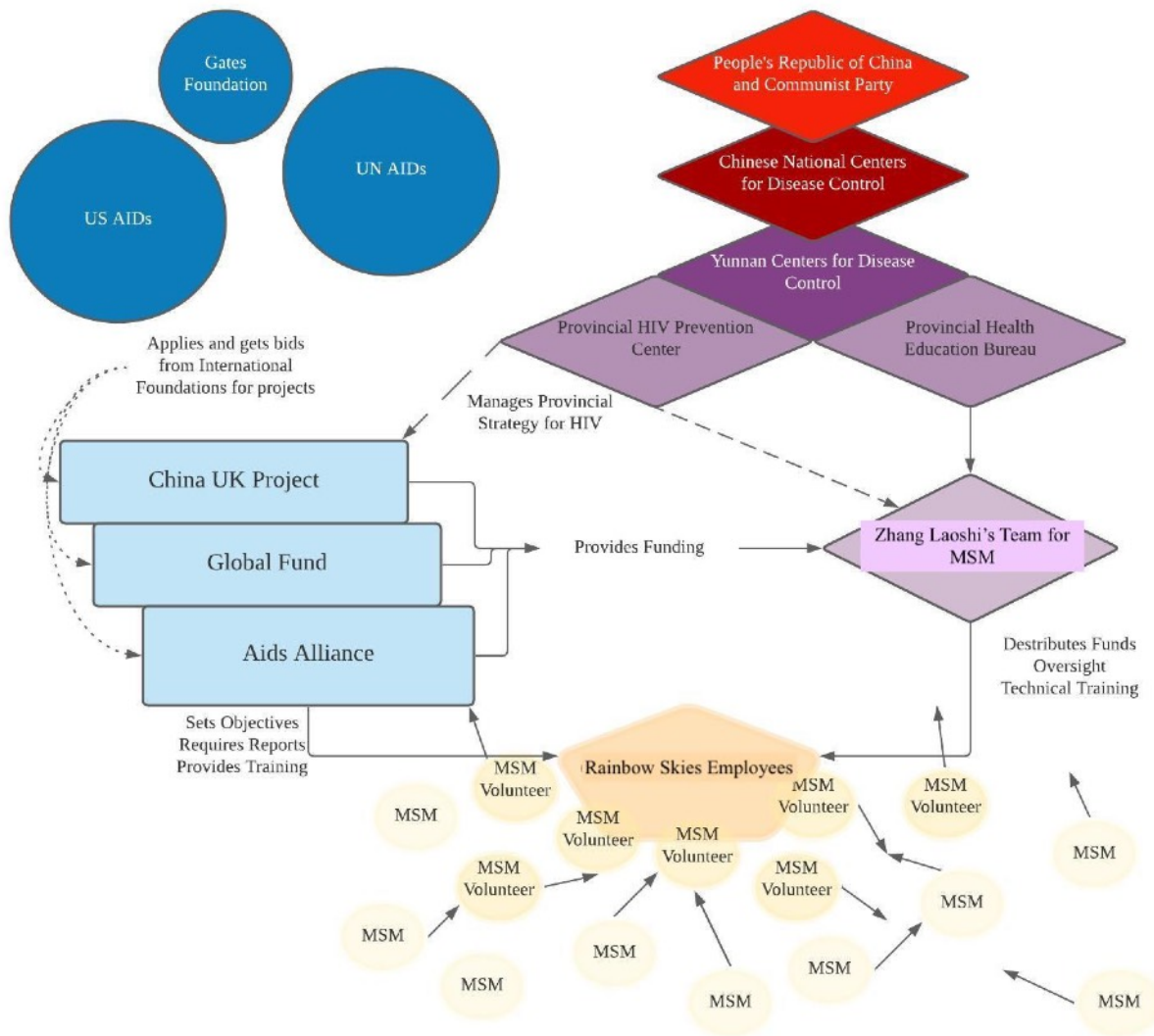


procured funds and began to figure out how to put them to good use. Based on their proposal the design of the project was intended to look like this:



Ran Ran and Liang Liang described the basic structure in which money would flow from the international funders to the PHEB, who would distribute the funds and provided “technical assistance” to Rainbow Skies, but who actually served as direct managers to make sure the project was being executed properly and approve the ways that money was being spent. It was also the international funders’ prerogative to set objectives for Rainbow Skies, require reports from the organization, and provide its own training. Rainbow Skies was then responsible for executing the projects. In the original conception the relationships were supposed to be equal to one another, but of course in actuality the dynamic was far from equal, with the international funders and the PHEB able to exert control of the situation, and the workers at Rainbow Skies at the bottom of a hierarchical relationship. Ran Ran would later use the metaphor that they were really like a kind of family, with the PHEB as the mother, the international funders as a kind of stepfather and Rainbow Skies as the child. The Chinese National Center of Disease Control was the actual father, who could come in at any point to exert his influence.

However Ran Ran and Liang Liang’s simplified model did not do justice to the complexities of different actors that would eventually organize the activities and structures of Rainbow Skies. A more accurate representation would look something more like this:



This rather messy model of the organization demonstrates that rather than unified entities, each of the actors can be understood in terms of their various other institutional commitments. Take for instance the International Funders (in blue). Rather than a single donor, with specific fixed commitments, Rainbow Skies would need to procure funds from multiple different international NGOs. Each of these donors would fund different HIV/AIDS initiatives over different lengths of time, often times encouraging Rainbow Skies to focus on competing goals. Direct funders like Aids Alliance or the China UK Project were also typically funded through larger grants offered by funders such as USAID or UN AIDs, which had ties to Western governments. They thus were also competing for bids from these larger donors and trying to tailor their project proposals and ‘deliverables’ to what their donors expected.

The purple and red portions of the graph highlight the Provincial Health Education Bureau’s placement in the larger Chinese bureaucracy. The PHEB had many other projects besides dealing with MSMs and HIV, including the development of Yunnan province’s health education curriculum. The PHEB also needed to work with other departments like the Yunnan Centers for Disease Control and the

Provincial HIV Prevention Center, who might set new policy initiatives that they needed to implement. Finally, cadres like Zhang Laoshi also hoped to work his way up within the system and potentially be promoted to higher levels of government power and security. He thus needed to think about how his work would be evaluated by higher level officers.

One might expect that Rainbow Skies itself (the yellow portion) would be more simplistic, with at most 6 full time staff and then around 10 core volunteers or *gu gan* (骨干)—literally translated as dry bones, but euphemistically means old hands. However, as Zhang Laoshi realized during the first 3 years of the organization, they did not know or have any ‘peer educators’ to do the work. What is more, the volunteers and employees that came to be affiliated with the organization were fluid, often moving in and out of their affiliations with the projects. Rather than a stable population, Zhang Laoshi would find out that the members of the ‘MSM community’ often did not think of themselves as a coherent or unified group. The lack of stability in locating MSMs and finding partners to do the work was an ongoing struggle for maintaining Rainbow Skies. Thus this became the first major objective for Zhang Laoshi and his team: to find MSMs to run the Rainbow Skies project.

#### *Where are the MSMs?*

For the first few years, Zhang Laoshi and his team tried to find this group of MSMs, but as Zhang Laoshi puts it, “Kunming was not so open.” They tried going to hospitals to recruit health care volunteers, but the volunteers were largely not interested in MSM populations. They opened a hotline, which was a popular strategy at the time, and while people would call in to ask questions about HIV, many were not *tongxinglian*, and even if they admitted to being one they wouldn’t want to do anything that risked their privacy. The people they called mostly they refused to volunteer. At most, they were willing to work on the hotline, where they could remain anonymous. The team, according to Zhang Laoshi, needed some “key figure” to help them break into the “community”. Zhang Laoshi, the China UK Project and the many other people involved at the time had assumed that a group of organized MSMs already existed in Kunming just waiting to be recruited and discovered.

One figure who did not assume such a thing, but actively lead the project of assembling a group of MSMs, was the scholar from Qingdao Medical College, Zhang Beichuan. Zhang was and is one of the foremost Chinese academic authorities on homosexuality in China, with a particular interest in HIV disease control amongst homosexual men. As part of his academic work (Zhang 1994, Zhang e. al 2000,

Zhang & Chu 2005, Zhang & Yu 2009) he traveled around China and worked with local partners to collect data on homosexual sexual behavior and promoted education that could teach healthier lifestyles. In order to find MSMs to interview, Zhang Beichuan started a magazine called 《朋友通讯》 (The Friend's Exchange), one of China's first *tongzhi* magazines. Through this publication, Zhang built out a network of mostly *tongzhi* men, who were interested in reading about other *tongzhi* men, thus creating a sort of invisible assemblage of *tongzhi* readers across China. Since Zhang had these men's addresses and phone numbers, he started reaching out beyond the publication and engage with them directly.

Zhang Laoshi, at a loss to find volunteers and employees for his MSM group, read the publications of Zhang Beichuan and others, including Li Yinhe (Li & Wang 1992, Li 1998), Guo Yaqi and Wang Yanhai, but "actually when we needed to put their ideas into practice, it was still very difficult". So with the resources provided by the China UK Project, they requested Zhang Beichuan to come to Rainbow Skies to provide a training session for the fledgling organization. During the session, Zhang Laoshi explained their problems and Zhang Beichuan got to work. Using the names and addresses from his magazine subscription list, Zhang was able to establish communication with several *tongzhi* men in Kunming. According to Meng Laoshi, Zhang told these men: "If you *tongzhi* can help the Provincial Health Education Project, then their work will to help you guys." Within a month or two, Zhang Laoshi and his team were setting up their first event with their first team of volunteers.

Still, even with these connections, the workers at the PHEB struggled to host events and get a steady stream of volunteers and employees to come. With the help of their new volunteers they were taken to bars like *lan meng* (蓝梦)—'The Blue Dream' and to parks, bathhouses and public restrooms where men would cruise for sex. Back then the PHEB employees did not know how to approach people in bars and recruit them to come to their events. As Zhang Laoshi told me

our employees would go inside and we could not distinguish who was an MSM, because in this place this group of people are too complicated. Older people also come here to play, female sex workers..ahh such strange places! Even though we have some understanding, we still can't fully understand. When we were preparing we read about so many gay homosexual cultural features, community particularities ah! But what book has this thesis of how to recruit homosexuals to join an HIV group?

Thus at the time they relied heavily on the volunteers to reach more people. As Zhang Laoshi also said, "I remember we would go to these parks, bars and they were fine, but if we wanted to visit some secret places special to this 'small group' then we must need the member's help, otherwise we could not get in."

But what also made this work challenging is that the 'group' of people that Zhang Laoshi and Meng Laoshi were trying to recruit was not really much of a collective group at the time. As Zhang Laoshi put it:

It's just that these male homosexuals have many different subcultures (亚文化), they have people with high levels of education, like company executives, and have more lower educated people, like laborers with no fixed income source. Also they have people we might call a little more 'sissy', including transgender people and crossdressers (异装). So it's not the same across the group. They also will discriminate between each other. Each subgroup does not talk with each other. There were times, we would convene a meeting and bring everyone together, and the male homosexuals (男同) would just discriminate against the very sissy (特别娘的) guys. The sissy guys would also be discriminated against in the public squares, they might see someone they like and that person just would not talk with them. "Aiya you can't invite *them*" our volunteers could tell us. "If *they* come then it will have too big of an influence on our group." But we definitely let all of them come. Because during our meeting we would say to them, it doesn't matter what subgroup you are in, you are all confronted with the risks of HIV. Our work with HIV disease prevention means that we are just a grasshopper on a string (一条绳上的蚂蚱) (we are all in the same boat).

Meng Laoshi also made similar observations. She in particular noticed the differences in education and class backgrounds between different groups, noting that in some instances there were gay men with a lot of *suzhi* (素质)--quality, while others may be older and from the countryside. For her this greatly complicated the kinds of events they could reasonably host. Whereas the educated volunteers may want to have lectures or salons, the lower-class men might 'just want to have fun'. She also seemed to think that these lower-class men were less likely to participate in events due to worries about their privacy. She noted:

Also it's just, those who would frequently go to the bathhouses and public toilets, they would just come to play and then they would leave. So they didn't really want to go with others to the public toilets, or go to the restrooms to talk. So when we would do events, some people would always look to see if they recognized anyone, and if they did then they would just leave. They didn't want to see anyone at the events that they had seen at the bathhouse or the parks.. Mostly they just cared about their privacy. Also high quality people and low quality people (素质高的人和素质低的) would not play together. They just would not have compatible thoughts with one another.

From a 'public health' point of view, these differences were inconvenient, an obstacle, a foolish social-cultural bias that prevented them from uniting around a common need to stop the spread of HIV. From this perspective the categorization of their sexual behavior (men having sex with other men) puts them all at risk. However, from a social standpoint, this behavior alone did not unify them enough to think of themselves as any kind of collective. Zhang Laoshi identifies how prior social markers such as education, class, urbanity, and gender expression pushes against the ideas of the MSM population as a coherent group. If they did not think of themselves as a collective, then who were the "peers" educating each other?

Perhaps recognizing the limits of their ability to recruit MSMs and with the encouragement of the international funders, the PHEB began to cede greater power to the volunteers to plan events. Despite Zhang Laoshi's warnings that they should bond together from the shared danger of HIV, the volunteers saw this as a great opportunity to have more fun, and with the support of the international foundations and the consent of the PHEB they started a performance hall for gay men.

### *The Performance Bar, an Appeal to Play*

Zhang Laoshi and his team had learned that MSMs did not fully exist as a cohesive communal group at the time, but rather needed to be assembled. The differences that existed between class and gender expression were not easily overlooked, and the threat of HIV/AIDS was not enough for MSMs to unify around a shared identity. The only thing that seemed to bring MSMs together were activities of play. Obviously sex as a form of play was the defining activity that they could all participate in, but more generally the excitement of flirting in the bathhouse, dancing together at a club or watching a drag show had broad appeal that could bring MSMs together. Zhang Laoshi and his team had also learned that cruising locations and bars were not easy places to discuss uncomfortable topics like HIV/AIDS, so the idea of creating a similar institution that was under their control was appealing.

Around 2005-2006, the Rainbow Skies volunteers asked Zhang Laoshi if they could start a performance bar with nightly shows to help spread HIV knowledge and to recruit people. Running their own performance bar promised to be an opportunity to merge the appeal of play with the serious work of HIV/AIDS education. Around this same time in 2007, Colorful Spring, another HIV CBO in Kunming, also petitioned their international sponsor to approve a similar performance bar. Rainbow Skies saw the opening of a performance hall as an opportunity to not only improve HIV outreach, but also to show off their skills as dancers, singers and actors. During this time performance bars were popular across Kunming not only amongst *tongzhi* men, but for many party goers. The shows at these bars often featured complex dance numbers, small comedy routines, fashion shows and dramatic songs. When Rainbow Skies's performance bar opened there was only one gay performance bar in Kunming, called the Blue Dream, but the volunteers at Rainbow Skies and Colorful spring thought that there was a market for more *tongzhi* entertainment.

The HIV *Tongzhi* Performance bar idea fit well with the international NGO thinking about peer educators and interventions (Broadhead, et. al. 1999). As Tim Charles, the representative for FHI (the

organization that worked with Colorful Spring at the time) explained to me, most internationally funded HIV clinics had what they called a 'Drop in Center' (DiC) where target populations could come and casually 'hang out'. In these casual spaces, volunteers and employees could answer questions about HIV/AIDS and provide useful guidance to improve sexual health. "This worked well for groups like sex workers," Charles went on, "because they frequently did not have anywhere to be during the day, but for MSMs this was a problem because for the most part they were at work or home with their families." The bar could serve as the Colorful Spring 'Drop in Center'. The DiC would be an office during the day. The employees could use the office to hold meetings and training sessions, and at night could host shows to attract new MSMs to invite back during the day for information and, eventually, testing. To preemptively assuage their donors, FHI reported the center as a 'tea house', not a bar, and because of this self-appointed designation were only allowed to charge 5rmb per person (less than 1 USD) and were forbidden from directly selling alcohol (although in later interviews Charles fully admitted that for all intents and purposes the DiC was a *bar*).

Part of the International NGOs' peer education model uses the concept of "edutainment", or the idea that you can use conventional, localized mediums of entertainment and add in an educational message to change behavior (Orozco-Oliver, et 2019). This is an interesting inversion of the 'nip' and 'bite' dichotomy (Bateson 1973), where you take an activity that is supposed to be play, i.e. an activity that is predicated around the idea that it is not serious, and then you slip in some 'bites', i.e. something that is in fact meant to be serious.

While these performance bars closed years before I began this research, it seems that throughout their existence they needed to grapple with enthusiastic volunteers that wanted to perform and donors or government partners who worried that health interventions were not being done. Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie two early employees of Colorful Spring, said they had shows nearly every night, with easily over 100 people in attendance. Ran Ran indicated that the Rainbow Skies Performance Bar was similarly popular, although she rarely went herself. The volunteers and employees of Colorful Spring and Rainbow Skies spent much of their time rehearsing and arranging musical numbers, skits and dances. The trick of course, was that they always needed to insert a certain amount of HIV knowledge into each show. Rui Wen, one of the Chinese collaborators that worked for FHI at the time, told me that they would do this in a couple different ways. For instance, they might have an interlude where they would do a brief demonstration to show the strength of a condom. First, they would have a charming performer choose an

audience member to inflate a condom like a balloon. Then, in order to demonstrate that lubricant can be a condom's greatest enemy, they would apply oil-based lubricants to show how easily the condom popped. In other instances, they would try to dramatize the horrors of HIV, acting out a scene about a young man cruising and thinking that he doesn't need to wear a condom with his handsome partner—because at the time there was a common idea that handsome people were clean. As you might expect the scene ended in ruin, with the protagonist becoming infected with HIV.

Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie needed to incorporate just *enough* HIV knowledge into their shows to keep members of the government bureaus and international donors satisfied. As Huang Cheng told me, “actually even the international donors were not so crazy about all the effort we put into these shows. But they were also not so strict, as long as we put in a bit [of information about HIV] they would let us do what we wanted.” When the performers worried that the HIV/AIDS content was not enough to keep their overseers happy, they would invite people from the Kunming Health Education Bureau or leaders from FHI to come to the shows and they would figure out ways to incorporate the overseers into their performances. At least temporarily, the representatives from the government and international donors could get so lost in the fun of being a part of the performances that they did not worry too much about whether or not they were achieving their HIV health related goals. Chen Xiaojie said that at one point he and one of the Kunming Health Education directors played husband and wife for one of their sketches. The officers enjoyed it so much that they wanted to video tape one of the shows and submit it to international film competitions.

For a while these bars were a success and everyone seemed to enjoy this exciting new project. The volunteers and workers had fun with the rehearsal and performances, a steady stream of show goers would come to laugh every weekend, FHI and the China UK Project could write up reports about the success and innovation of their peer ‘edutainment’ models and even bureaucrats like Zhang Laoshi could brag about their ‘innovative new models’ that attracted so many MSM participants. In fact, the celebration of these HIV edutainment performance bars was so promising that the Centers for Disease Control in other cities in Yunnan began to open up their own versions. In 2009, the Center for Disease Control in Dali opened up their own MSM Performance Bar, largely modeled off of the success of bars like Colorful Spring and Rainbow Skies(Chen 2009, He 2009, Liu & Zhou 2009, Yuan 2010).

Even as the performance bars were promoted in official reports and newspapers, the overall lifespan of these performance bars was relatively short, and gradually they became a source of political



discussion between different actors and institutions. While the Colorful Spring performance bar was allowed to keep running until 2012, it lost some of its appeal to the “mobile sovereigns”, like Tim Charles.

During our interview he noted that:

Yeah, and they [Colorful Spring workers] were very good at it [edutainment]. They would do games, or bring people up on stage and ask them questions that had some educational aspect to it. So yeah, they came up with lots of different ways to embed the key messaging into lots of the entertainment they were doing. Having said that, and now I’m going to shift tone a little bit, because we said that we were trying to give people a reason to drop in, and I think that it did do that. But over time, to me, and not everyone agreed with me about this, but what I started to see happen was, we were just kind of reaching the same group of people, over and over again. And there are only so many times you can put oil based lube on a condom and watch it explode, before it’s ok, message received. Nobody is learning anything new. Over time it became increasingly challenging to justify how this model was still important because it was not allowing us to reach new people and provide information that they didn’t already have.

Skepticism of the performance bar model was particularly pronounced amongst Zhang Laoshi and his team at Rainbow Skies. Of these kinds of events Meng Laoshi said, “we didn’t give them much money because we weren’t sure what they did was really helpful for interventions. They always carried out some activities in a bar and just sang and got drunk.” Things came to a head when Zhang Laoshi discovered that the volunteers organizing the performance bar were becoming less interested in HIV/AIDS prevention and were starting to strategize how to advocate for LGBT rights. He said, “we had another crisis because within the dry bones (*gu gan* 骨干)—core members, there were many organizing the spread of propaganda about homosexual rights...ah..this kind of political appeal deviated from our disease control function. But we told them that our main concern is about HIV-AIDs control in the country and to host a public health organization, so we cannot allow this kind of thing. So this lead to a division.”

That division ultimately led to Zhang Laoshi ordering the closure of Rainbow Skies’s performance bar in 2007 and the firing of some key employees. Most of the volunteers were so upset with this decision that they quit in protest. As Ran Ran noted, “Every Rainbow Skies core employee changed, the departure of the employees and the group members was very serious. The organization went from a lively place into something cold and cheerless. The small group was managed by the PHEB, who just sent out a decree suddenly, leading to this rapid interruption.” Ran Ran was well attuned to this change in attitude because as part of the transition away from the performance bar, Zhang Laoshi promoted her to lead Rainbow Skies. As a lesbian whose primary involvement in the organization was running the hotline,

Ran Ran seemed like a non-threatening leader to cadres who were frustrated with Rainbow Skies's direction.

Despite learning that the performance bars would not work under the current constraints, moving away from fun and engaging activities to attract MSMs to their events was something that Ran Ran could not disavow. Whether it be situating themselves deeper into cruising locations or bathhouses where men went to naturally have fun, or hosting film nights or interesting events, the idea that play was necessary to their work on HIV persisted. As Xiannü explained to me, the real appeal of Rainbow Skies was that “they always had the *xiao xian rou* (小鲜肉)—fresh meat, so I always wanted to go! It was especially delightful! Hahahahah!” During her first few years as the leader of the organization, Ran Ran was not only able to develop innovative new ways to teach HIV/AIDS information, but also made Rainbow Skies the most popular MSM group in all of Kunming, and nearly all of the key figures who shaped the organizations spent some time learning and playing with Ran Ran. For Zhang Laoshi and his team this use of play worked well with their demands, the only question was how to manage it to make sure that they stayed focused on public health.

#### *State or NGO Meddling?*

Another ongoing tension for these CBOs, were the differing goals and management strategies between the international NGOs and their government partners. Western NGOs were frequently trying to push CBOs to be more independent from the government agencies tasked with overseeing their programming (Hildebrandt 2012, Hsu & Teets 2016). Problems for Rainbow Skies began to arise again after they developed a closer working relationship with their direct funder, the NGO the AIDS Alliance. Throughout the interview, Meng Laoshi frequently said things like, “The Alliance wanted Rainbow Skies to break away from the PHEB, *which we were fine with*, but it just presented some problems like what to do with the financial matters?” Or “Rainbow Skies finally moved away to their own office, which we thought was great, *but* then the international funding withdrew and they had to move back.” There was this constant tone in the interview that seems to say, the NGOs think that it would have been so much better without us, but trust that we are relevant and necessary.

For Meng Laoshi, and even Zhang Laoshi, the idea that you could separate Rainbow Skies from their leadership made little sense. After all, they had started the organization. It was their baby. Expressing a similar sentiment as Meng Laoshi, Zhang Laoshi describes a moment where he says that the the AIDS Alliance's volunteers requested that Zhang Laoshi and his team not accompany Rainbow Skies's volunteers to do interventions for fear that PHEB representatives would scare off the more private men. Zhang Laoshi responded, "This is very interesting because the people out on the square all recognize me, speak honestly with me and always call out 'Director Zhang! Director Zhang!' because they all know me. So how can I negatively influence their work?" Meng Laoshi often spoke affectionately of her relationships to particular *nantong* (男同)--homosexual men. She spoke proudly of the time she helped a young *nantong* decide to stop deceiving his fiancée and break off the engagement. And she talked fondly of the many times she went to a bar night with Rainbow Skies and brought along her daughter. She told a funny anecdote about her daughter crushing on the men in the bar. She had to slyly explain to her daughter that she wasn't their type. She even spoke movingly about the many times *nantong* would ask her what she would do if her daughter came out as a lesbian, and she replied, "*shunqi ziran* (顺其自然)—Go with the flow. If this happened, then I would just have to accept it and move along." The point here is that for people like Meng Laoshi, involvement in these organizations was not just professional, but personal as well. They were part of the fun!

Ran Ran and the other 'dry bones', on the other hand, thought this close involvement in the day-to-day practices of the organization was overly meddlesome. This became particularly apparent when issues arose about specific financial control. According to the official governing structures, the PHEB (Meng Laoshi in particular) was supposed to approve the budget. Meng Laoshi even bragged that while she typically approved most of the funding for events, she would never give the Rainbow Skies volunteers all the money before the event. Instead she preferred to give them enough to set up the event, and then would attend the event itself with the remaining funds. If there were last minute expenses that came up she would pay for them

herself. This understandably could be a frustrating dynamic for the Rainbow Skies leaders who felt that the money was rightfully theirs to spend, and did not deserve this extra scrutiny. As Ran Ran noted, the Rainbow Skies workers were the ones that the international donors trusted, not the PHEB. Thus in later days Ran Ran began to circumvent Meng Laoshi and PHEB and go directly to the international donors for budgetary approvals. To this day Meng Laoshi is still clearly irritated by a phone call she got from the AIDS Alliance about a budget request they had received from Ran Ran that she had never seen before or had the opportunity to approve.

Teets makes a compelling case that during this time period cadres were learning a lot about how the CBOs would and should operate (2014), with some organizations like Rainbow Skies, being closely monitored by their government sponsors, while others, like Colorful Spring, were given a great deal of independence. The presence of the international organizations added to the confusion about how things should be governed. For the Kunming Health Education Bureau (which oversaw Colorful Spring), figures like Tim Charles and Rui Wen were in Kunming regularly, so the government cadres did not need to do much work. Meng Laoshi and Zhang Laoshi worried that while the AIDS Alliance pushed for greater independence for Rainbow Skies, their distance from the organization meant that they had no way to prevent the organizers from just spending the money on alcohol or start some activist group. They wanted to make sure that if and when Rainbow Skies's projects were evaluated that they would be successful. Unfortunately for Zhang Laoshi and his team, such an incident was not avoided.

#### *Testing: The Fetish for Data*

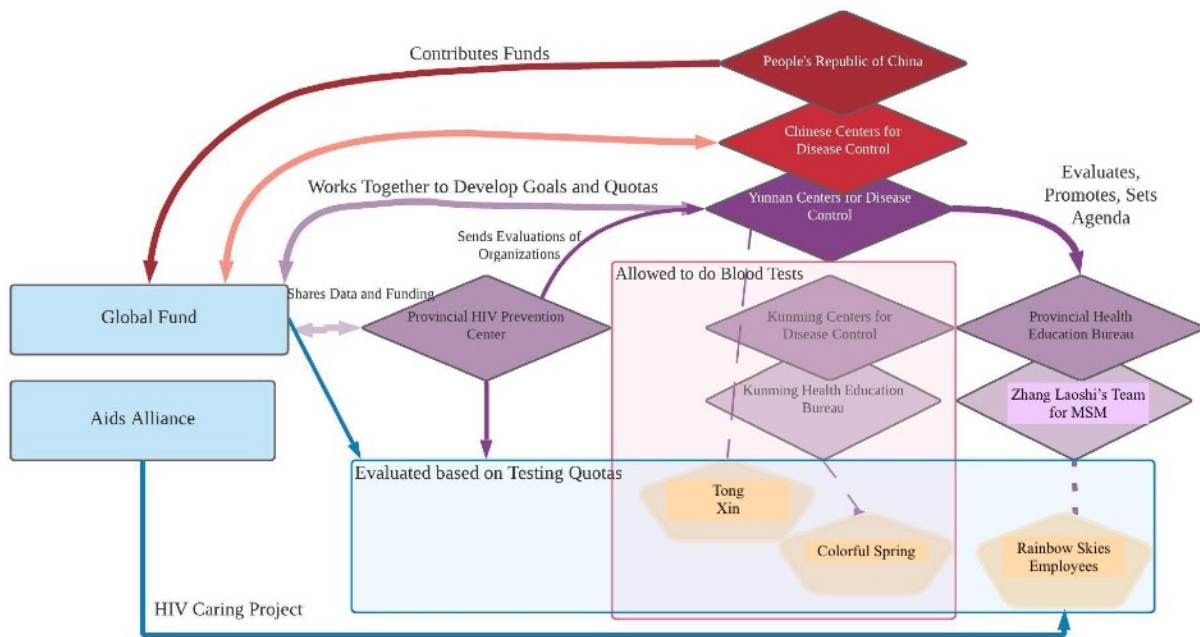
In 2010, Rainbow Skies had two primary funding streams. The first was an HIV caring project with the AIDS Alliance. This was considered a pilot project, as not many organizations had been tasked with the ongoing responsibilities of ensuring that HIV positive people continued to take their medicine and providing emotional support. The second project was from the Global Fund and was more concerned with testing MSMs for HIV.

The HIV test kit thus becomes another important actor in disassembling Rainbow Skies and reassembling the modern MSM CBO. In the early days of responding to the HIV/AIDS

crisis in China, both the Chinese government and international NGOs needed to map out the virus and try to make it visible (Hyde 2007). In the 1990s and early 2000s, HIV tests were one method for tracking the virus spread, but China was limited in this regard by restrictions on who could directly take blood samples (Wu et. al 2006, Wu et. al. 2007). Since rapid test kits had not yet come into wide circulation, most CBOs could not test people directly for HIV. Thus the state and international healthcare professionals needed to use other methods for gathering statistics on the virus, such as surveys about 'risky activity' and 'HIV knowledge' (Hyde 2007). When MSM CBOs were just starting, international donors were satisfied with supporting projects that focused on building up 'organizational capacity', trained volunteers on HIV knowledge and could do preliminary interventions like surveys and distributing condoms (ibid). However, after the first five years, donors began to push for more HIV/AIDS testing, which they saw as the most accurate representation of the extent of the virus in the population. Testing also fit into an internationalist development discourse at the time that prioritized quantitative metrics that could serve as a 'deliverable' to their donors (Miller 2016a).

For organizations like Rainbow Skies, bureaucratic restraints and a lack of 'professional qualifications' were major barriers to their task to conduct HIV tests on MSMs. When it had come to interventions, early surveys and creating HIV/AIDS curriculum, Rainbow Skies and their partnership with the Provincial Health *Education* Bureau were well positioned, but HIV testing at the time still required a medical professional. Officers of Rainbow Skies's government sponsor, the PHEB, were not considered to be medical professionals or qualified to do blood work, and were thus unable to do the HIV tests. As a result, Rainbow Skies would first need to find participants willing to get an HIV test, and then schedule them an appointment with the District E Centers for Disease Control. Regrettably the professionals at the District E CDC insisted on keeping a strict 9-5, week days only working schedule. Ran Ran and the volunteers at Rainbow Skies knew that the best time to recruit MSMs for testing was when they were playing in bars or cruising locations, which was almost always in the evening or on the weekend. This made the kind of testing requirements that the Global Fund required nearly impossible.

Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie complained about similar challenges when they too needed to fulfill greater testing requirements for Colorful Spring. However, they benefitted from two important allies. First, Tim Charles and the team at FHI quickly identified these problems and petitioned the Centers for Disease Control to send a nurse to the DiC a few times a week during the evenings and weekends. Second, the petition was possible because Colorful Spring was sponsored by the Municipal Health Education Bureau, now governed by the Kunming CDC. Colorful Spring was thus qualified to work with healthcare workers. Since the Provincial Health Education Bureau was still an independent government department, they could not make this kind of accommodations for Rainbow Skies.



Under these constraints, Ran Ran decided to primarily focus on the AIDS Alliance project, which she felt was more possible and more significant. She thought that building an expertise in HIV Positive Patient Caring may even be better for the organization in the future. However, this proved to be a major miscalculation, as the institutional pressures and demands that came from the Global Fund were more important to her government partners than she might have fully considered.

As you can see in this chart, the Global Fund worked closely with the Provincial HIV Prevention Center, which in turn influenced the funding and reputation of the other Yunnan departments that hoped to procure projects related to HIV/AIDS. The Global Fund also received part of its funding from the Chinese national government, and had an institutional philosophy of developing close working relationships with governments to coordinate projects and evaluations. In 2010, the Global Fund, in conjunction with the Yunnan Provincial HIV Prevention Center, published a report evaluating and ranking all of the CBOs in Yunnan based on their abilities to meet testing quotas. Rainbow Skies was ranked the absolute worst. This was incredibly embarrassing for Ran Ran and her team, but even more devastating to Zhang Laoshi and his team.

#### *The disassembling of Rainbow Skies*

Despite the PHEB's status as a province-level department and their reputation for success, in the Global Fund's report their organization ranked below the municipal and county organizations. The fact that this was in part due to the strange bureaucratic logic that prevented Rainbow Skies from having access to HIV test givers in the office was erased by this ranking. All that was visible was how poorly they did in comparison to everyone else. Zhang Laoshi and his team were incredibly upset with Ran Ran. According to Zhang Laoshi, the PHEB had made excuses for her when the Global Fund or other agencies had tried to check on Rainbow Skies, but even with their assistance, Ran Ran was unable to do what needed to be done to improve testing. Thus in only a matter of weeks, the PHEB grew increasingly cold to the Rainbow Skies workers and unceremoniously announced one day that they were withdrawing all support for the team.

Ran Ran and her deputy Liang Liang had to scramble. They quickly moved all their paperwork and projects into a rice noodle restaurant across the street to finish their projects with the AIDS Alliance. With the help of a friend from the HIV Prevention Center, they were able to procure the remaining funds and finish the HIV positive patients caring project. The AIDS Alliance was so impressed with Ran Ran's work that they gave her a special award for 'Overcoming Adversity.' This award was more of a slap in the face than a redemptive moment to people like Zhang Laoshi. Regardless of the pride that the award gave

to Ran Ran , or the frustration it gave to Zhang Laoshi, the significance of NGO's opinions was quickly rendered inconsequential. International Donors like the AIDS Alliance were leaving China, and their direct influence over the priorities of organizations like Rainbow Skies was waning. Simultaneously the Chinese national government had declared that they would be increasing their spending on HIV care and prevention and would thus be a more important player going forward. This meant that HIV Caring Projects and interventions in cruising locations would be less significant, and greater emphasis would be placed on metrics like HIV testing. Rainbow Skies's testing shortcomings were proof to people like Zhang Laoshi that Rainbow Skies did not have a future in this new environment.

### *The 'Retreat' of the International Donors*

Many scholars have written about the brief period in which international NGOs operated in China (2001-2012) (Hildebrandt 2013, Hyde 2007, Hsu 2017, Jeffreys & Gang 2018, Teets 2014, Uretsky 2016) often times from their own position of figures like Tim Charles as the foreign expert helping to instruct the organizer and state cadres. They often end their articles and books with foreboding sentences like,

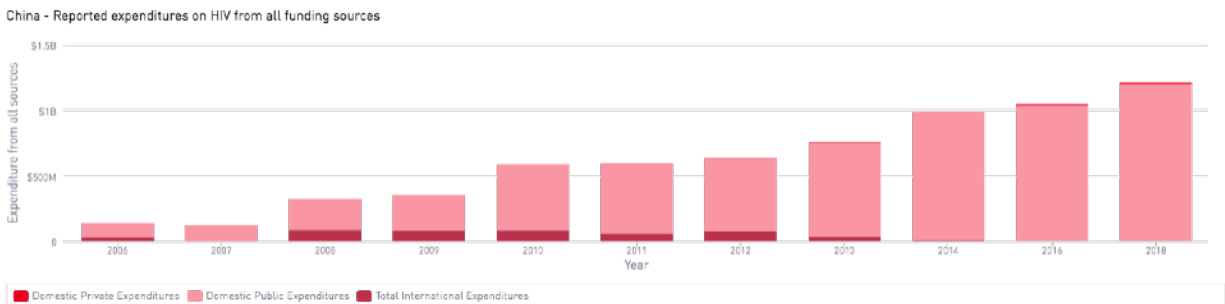
“The prediction..that Global Health Initiatives would soon leave China began to come true before I left the field; in May 2011, the Global Fund temporarily suspended payments to its HIV/AIDS projects in China....in November 2011 they announced that their Chinese projects would be ending in 2013. The Chinese government has pledged to make up any shortfall in funds for NGOs involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS, nevertheless, after the departure of GHIs (Global Health Initiatives) from China, groups like Tong'ai face an uncertain and precarious future.” (Miller 2016, p. 427).

Many of these scholars have worried how the growth of government spending and the retreat of the international donors would impact groups like these *tongzhis* organizations.

It seems that the international organizations mostly left the field of HIV/AIDS work in China due to a combination of international donors deciding that it was no longer useful to spend money on Chinese development when it seemed that China was capable of its own domestic spending (Feeding the Dragon 2011), and a change in Chinese domestic policies making it more difficult for international NGOs to operate (Hsu and Teets 2016). As Tim Charles explained to me, from FHI and USAID's point of view, this was a success story. Any time that they begin a project in a developing country the hope is that eventually the domestic nation will take over the majority of spending and make the need for international aid unnecessary. As UNAID's website on Chinese expenditures on HIV demonstrate, not only did international contributions basically end by 2013, but overall expenditures primarily fueled through domestic spending have continued to increase in China (China: How the decline in PEPFAR funding has



affected key populations 2016). This allowed for FHI and USAID to, as Tim Charles said, “move down the Meikong River.”



### UNAids-China Reported expenditures on HIV 2018

Whereas other scholars have worried about the future of these organizations, my project takes this transition to government funding of MSM CBOs as its starting point. While Miller is right that in 2012 and 2013 the future of these organizations was a bit shaky, by 2019 and 2020, when I did my research, their status seemed relatively stable. In 2012, Rainbow Skies completely closed down. For most of 2012, Colorful Spring was similarly defunct. During this transitional period, other organizations like Bentong Weiyi and Trans China tell stories of desperately searching out funders. However, the Chinese government’s new policy of *goumai fuwu* (购买服务)—consuming social services (Zheng 2016), created a new demand for CBOs to sell designated services to the government, in particular HIV testing (Fan 2014). New policy directives from the national government compelled the Yunnan provincial government to demand that municipal, county and district CDCs find MSM CBOs to partner with and purchase HIV testing data (ibid). Miller worries that the logic of bureaucratization and medicalization has had detrimental impacts on MSM social organizations, distorting their original missions (2016a). But Fan makes the point that at this juncture in their history, the recruiting-for-testing expertise that the MSM CBOs had developed enabled them to survive within the Chinese political system (2014). In 2013-2015 in Kunming, district CDCs organized their own MSM HIV organizations and hired figures like Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie to run their operations; Colorful Spring was resurrected with new leadership under Liu Laoshi; and Tong Xin developed new prominence as a close ally of the Provincial CDC and benefitted from the expertise of Ran Ran and Liang Liang, who are currently employed there.

The power of the HIV test on the construction of the modern MSM CBO cannot, I think, be understated. It speaks to some of the major lessons that the cadres learned during this period of time. The first is the predominant style of management that has come to typify the relationship between government cadres and the CBOs. As I will discuss in Chapter 8, the use of testing data as part of the cadre evaluations system means that production of testing data is the most important aspect of the project, and managing other kinds of activities is less important for the cadres. In my interviews with current leaders of these CBOs, they did not describe many instances in which busy-body Meng Laoshis would attend events to control funds. And with the absence of the international donors, the cadres do not need to worry about the myriad of ways they might be judged and can primarily focus on obtaining the reports from the organizations. As Chapters 7 & 8 will describe in greater detail, this more distanced management style allows for the CBOs to have some room to plan their own events and focus on *tongzhi* activities that do not need to directly deal with HIV/AIDS.

Even as CBOs and government cadres learned that certain kinds of organizing (particularly labor-intensive performance halls or political groups) needed to be avoided, the legacy of play continues. As Fan points out, there is still a strong belief among many government cadres that they cannot effectively reach out to groups like MSMs and they are thus still dependent on these organizations to find people that are otherwise illegible (2017). This has cemented the role of the 'peer educators' as a necessary for the HIV work. Through this expertise, organizers have continued to claim that hosting 'fun events' or situating themselves in 'fun spaces' is necessary for reaching out to MSMs (Wei 2015), and can thus use this as an opportunity to host community building activities. Since their primary evaluation is based on the HIV test, scrutiny over whether or not these are the best ways to do such interventions is also rarely applied. As long as they can continue to report their HIV target goals and the events do not attract too much attention, then these events can mostly operate without too much scrutiny.

PART I: ORDERING PLAY

## Chapter IV: Chaos in the MSM Bathhouse

One of my key points in the previous chapter is that an LGBT community does not naturally exist in the world, but rather, like all social groups, must be assembled. In this way these HIV CBOs, especially in regions of the country that lack *tongzhi* institutions, have been important in assembling *tongzhi* men together. Their '*tongzhi*'ness, then, is made socially significant through participation in events and activities that produce differences between '*tongzhi*' and others. Rather than a queering process, the participation in *tongzhi* activities is a normalizing process, in the sense that it must produce rules, roles and expectations about what it means to be a *tongzhi* in this assemblage of people.

What I have also argued in the previous chapters is that activities of play can be permitted by these organizations as they are useful for attracting MSMs without threatening the state. This section of the dissertation builds off the previous chapters by detailing activities of play and what norms emerge from them. Throughout each section I will describe the ways in which these activities take discourses about sexuality that have emerged from other groupings of people and rearrange them to fit the new normals they are creating. At times these activities might be shaped by state objectives and public health goals, but in many instances HIV and health discussions completely disappear, or are mediated through competing discourses from popular sentiments about sex and morality. Here I will explore hegemonic discourses in China that often criticize these groups of men, such as ideas of *luan* (亂)—chaos, in the bathhouse, *suzhi* (素质)—quality, specifically of non-urbanites and political resistance for HIV workers. In each of these instances I will show how the dominant discourses produce nearly impossible positions for these men, and how through the norms of play they break these discourses apart and find their own ways of going along in the world.

As Varenne has noted, it is important for anthropologists to look at moments of 'messaging around' as they produce 'new normals' of interaction (Varenne & Cotter 2007). These moments are where the *bricoleur* reconfigures some new interpretation of the world which may become widely practiced or may be erased (Levi-Strauss 1966). The 'normals' that I describe in each chapter are often marked in space and time, limited in these men's lives to the activities hosted by these organizations and quickly erased as soon as they move into non-*tongzhi* spaces. It is easy to get lost, as I hope you do, in the fun of these moments. To enjoy the ways that these men bond with one another through humor, games and

sometimes sex. However, please remember the existence of dominant norms (around chaos, *suzhi* and power), exist once these moments end and threaten to disrupt these worlds of play.

I start this section with a chapter on the Piao Piao Bathhouse. From the beginning of HIV/AIDS work in Yunnan, bathhouses have been identified as a sight for MSM cruising and thus a nexus for the spread of HIV (Wu, et. al 2013). Early public health initiatives trained volunteers to pass out condoms and safe-sex pamphlets at the bathhouses, but from an interpersonal perspective these interactions could be quite awkward. As Xiannü noted of the volunteers with Rainbow Skies bathhouse volunteers, “These interventions were really badass (*hen diao*--很屌)<sup>4</sup>! Who has the courage to do this kind of thing? Honestly doing interventions is freaking awesome (*niu bi*--牛逼)<sup>5</sup>” More often than not, volunteers who approach people in a cruising location are likely to be ignored or turned away. It has been an ongoing struggle for HIV/AIDS workers to learn the best ways change behavior in an MSM bathhouse while maintaining the kind of erotic environment that bathhouse patrons desire (Li et. al. 2010).

After the international donors left and Colorful Spring was disbanded, Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie found jobs working with the district CDC providing HIV tests for MSMs. As part of this work they set up an office in one of the district’s more popular MSM bathhouses and committed themselves to the challenging task of instructing men to incorporate condom use in their bathhouse sex practices. That they were successful in their endeavor is more a testament to their previous experience and love for the work, than the power of the CDC or the influence of public health discourses. Both in the literature on HIV/AIDS prevention and in popular imagination, the MSM bathhouse is thought of as places of sexual ‘chaos’, in which men sacrifice health and responsibility for carnal desires. However, the example of Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie show how an attention to the specific social ordering of the bathhouse allows people to fit condom use and HIV testing into men’s normal behavior.

#### *The Discursive Construction of the Bathhouse as Chaotic Space*

Since the Zhou Dynasty (c. 1046-256 BCE), hot springs, saunas and steam rooms have been mentioned by Confucius, Taoist and Buddhist institutions as ways to not only cleanse the body, but also

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<sup>4</sup> 很屌—literally means ‘dick’ but used as awesome, from Jay Chou

<sup>5</sup> 牛逼—cow cunt, means awesome, very cool, rockin’, bithcin’

purify oneself before engaging in sacred rituals (Schafer 1956). For men at least, public bathing was well incorporated into daily life during imperial China, as early documentation shows that men commonly bathed together in rivers, streams and lakes (Ibid). In times before most homes had the plumbing facilities for bathtubs or showers, the use of public bathhouses was quite common, and became a place not only for cleanliness but also relaxation and socialization (Boucher 2017). While in recent years many bathhouses emerged as luxury businesses modeled after Japanese spas, the existence of common, accessible institutions exist in many Chinese small town.

However, despite bathing's connotation with cleanliness, almost as soon as bathhouses became a common public institution in 14th Century China, they became associated with dirty sexual play. In common speech, Chinese people referred to bathhouses as 'promiscuous halls.' One Yuan poet jokingly called them 'countries of naked forms' (Schafer p. 70). During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE), the palace employed a eunuch at one of their bathhouses and gave him the title 'Administrator of the Promiscuous Hall' (ibid). While clearly homosexual promiscuity was made available through the homosocial, intimate spaces of the bathhouse, 'promiscuity' was not confined to same-sex sex between clients, but frequently included the availability of female sex workers to give clients special massages (Chou 2000). The association between bathhouses and sexual play was so well established that during the Cultural Revolution, the Maoist government shut down many of the bathhouses in China to prevent the spread of 'hooliganism'.

The joy of bathhouses, especially for *tongzhi* men, is that they can be ambiguously framed to friends and family members. On the one hand going to a bathhouse can be viewed as normal, clean fun, and yet at the same time if you go to the right bathhouses it can also allow for the fulfillment of sexual desire. As Wei notes, for many homosexual men, chance encounters in the bathhouse are often some of their first experiences with homosexual sex, and then later in life going to certain underground MSM bathhouses was one of the few ways to escape family pressures and release sexual desire (2012, p.76). The possibilities of the homosexual bathhouse are not unique to China, and have been well documented across cultures and time (Berube 2003). Chauncey makes the point that bathhouses are often not only the first place where homosexuals engage in satisfying sex, but also where they establish a homosexual sociality (1994). Regular clients will gradually recognize one another and start to engage in conversations that turn into relationships that exists beyond the confines of the bathhouse.

However, the sliding scale between suitable, proper bathhouses and the kind of 'promiscuous halls' that permit homosexual sex is not beyond discursive distinctions in the minds of the public. Even if they are unaware which bathhouses permit or even encourage such *tawdry* sexual actions, many Chinese people would chastise such behavior. Chinese may criticize the same-sex sex in the bathhouse calling the activity very *luan* (亂)—chaotic, as opposed to behavior that is more *wenming* (文明)—civilized. Take for instance this conversation that I recorded in the bathhouse:

*The man from the pool told us that he can never make friends with homosexuals, because he thinks that relationships between homosexuals are very unstable. They don't have any responsibilities to any other relationships, they have no ties to their spouses or children that would make them more reliable. Furthermore it is was too easy for them to make love with other men and not need to deal with the consequences. They can just fall in love very easily and then when they get bored or see a new handsome guy they will just forget about their old lover. These types of gays are very chaotic, he emphasized. A young couple sitting at Huang Cheng's desk doing an HIV test piped up to say that 80% of gay men are like this. Pao Pao added that he thinks that 99% of the homosexual men are unstable and immoral. Huang Cheng agreed that by and large gay men are sexually promiscuous and not interested in long term relationships, however he wanted to point out that there are real exceptions. He and his boyfriend have been together for 6-7 years, but such a relationship is very rare. Pao Pao largely agreed with the man from the pool's sentiment and later ashamedly told me that he feared he, himself, was one of these chaotic men.*

The concept of 'chaotic' sexuality is characterized by a lack of responsibilities for other people and doing whatever you desire. Such behavior is frequently understood as shortsighted fulfillment of physical pleasure over their longterm well being or the needs of others. This often is related to discourses of HIV/AIDS and *tongqi* (同妻)—women married to *tongzhi* men. People frequently discuss the problem of MSMs who put the health of their wives at risk, because they engage in risky behavior without using condoms. However, even among non-married MSMs, *tongzhi* will frequently denounce other *tongzhi* as not being reliable or trustworthy, too prone to act on libidinal impulses rather than engage in committed relationships. Pao Pao, who accompanied me as a translator for this conversation, frequently repeated discourses of chaotic over-sexualized *tongzhi* men, despite being *tongzhi* himself. He would often worry about the fact that he would never be in a stable relationships because *tongzhi* men were too *chaotic* because they were not restrained by institutions like marriage.

Chaos then gets its meaning from a comparison to values like *wenming* (文明)—civilized. Whereas the chaotic acts of the man in the bathhouse are construed as selfish and out of control, civilized behavior implies a kind of restraint of one's desire for the benefits of the larger social world. The term has taken on many meanings, including both the aspirational position of a superior foreign society,

distinctions between the urban centers of Han Chinese cultures and the 'savages (man)' in the west and more recent campaigns to teach civic behavior (Dynon 2008). During the post-Mao Era, being 'civilized' has become closely linked to Socialist Values (*shehui jiazhi guan*—社会价值观) and has become a part of the governing strategy to modernize the Chinese citizens. Civilized residents are encouraged to wait in line, pick up their trash, speak politely to others and adhere to the rules (Ibid). For example, as part of the Civilized Cities campaign the values of being civilized are posted on nearly every billboard and city bus in cities like Kunming (Maurinelli 2012), reminding citizens *wenming chengshi, ni wo tongxing* (文明城市, 你我同行)-- To have a civilized city we must do it together.

In fact, a few years before I moved to Kunming, there had been another bathhouse that Colorful Spring used to frequent to distribute condoms and provide HIV tests. This bathhouse was located just next to the Yuantong Temple, one of Kunming's most famous temples and a popular tourist destination. It was often joked about by the members of Colorful Spring that this bathhouse was shut down as part of Kunming's efforts to become officially designated as a Civilized City. As part of the campaign, Kunming has plastered more signs trying to inspire civilized behavior from its citizens, planted more flowers along the roadsides and shut down many bars and clubs. 'Certainly,' Xiao Mei joked, 'if the bars and clubs were not civilized, then that bathhouse definitely was not civilized.'

### *The Piao Piao Bathhouse*

The Piao Piao Bathhouse sits at the end of a dusty road, surrounded by parking lots where taxi and bus drivers keep their vehicles. From the outside there is no indication that the small business is anything more than an unassuming, low-end bathhouse. When you enter there is a mahjong table and a lady sitting behind the desk who sells you an entrance fee for 50 RMB (less than \$10) and hands out a key for the locker. Even the operating hours are a bit surprising as they open at 10am and close by 6pm. However, upon walking past the initial threshold the norms of the space suddenly change. Within the confines of the bathhouse same-sex sexual intercourse is not merely a suggestion, a hidden option, but rather an expectation. This is not a situation where men were finding private rooms or dark hidden corners to fool around in. Rather there was an understanding that men could make eye contact to indicate they were interested and if their intentions seemed vaguely mutual they could begin touching one another. The bathhouse had four main rooms, beyond the public facing front desk area. In the locker





room, men would get undressed, stow away their belongings and begin to look for attractive options. Then they would go into the shower room, where they could wash off, soak in the pool or detox in the sauna. If you had found a potential partner by this point you might try to initiate contact, either by chatting with them in the pool or joining them in the shower. If the connection seemed mutual then you likely moved into one of the other two rooms: the dark room or the lounge. The dark room, as the name suggests, had no lighting, which allowed men to grope one another in complete anonymity. The lounge had a series of beds lined up against the walls which in a normal bathhouse would allow people to take naps or get a massage. However, in this particular bathhouse it was the location for most of the direct intercourse between partners. In this room, sex was not an intimate private affair between two men, but rather was part of the entertainment for everyone involved. Multiple pairings may be engaged in erotic activities around the room, and peripheral participants are free to watch and even pleasure themselves.

Most of the attendees in the bathhouse were a bit older (in their 40s or 50s, although some were in their 70s and a few were in their 20s) and slightly more working class and rural than the typical image of the young, urban professional gay. Beyond strictly sexual contact, these men were also quite friendly, frequently chattering and making small talk. This differs from other descriptions of gay bathhouses where there is an emphasis on the silence of the men inside, as they try to initiate sex without much conversation, and keep explicit sexual noises to a minimum (Wei 2012). Many of the men told me that they were married to women and had children. This was sometimes expressed as a complaint, such as

one man who explained that he had recently gotten divorced from his wife after she found out he was a *tongxinglian*. This had destroyed his family, and added a lot of stress to his relationship with his parents. Other men admitted they were married, but treated it as a very casual fact about their life. One man ended our conversation to say that he needed to get home so he could start cooking dinner and pick up the kids before his wife came home from work. Some of the men lived in Kunming, but many of them were visiting Kunming from the countryside. One man told me that he was from a smaller town a few hours outside of Kunming, and every time he needed to come into the city for work he would swing by the bathhouse. It was far enough away from his friends and family that he did not worry about getting caught, and felt like he could just relax and enjoy the experience. However, most of the men that I met insisted that it was the first time they had even entered the bathhouse, even if they clearly knew some of the other people there, or I had even seen them there previously. Nobody wanted to be thought of as a guy who regularly goes to this kind of place.

During my first visit to the Piao Piao Bathhouse I brought along Qiu Qiu, who worked at Colorful Spring, to help me do some translation. I had tried to bring JR, but was told that they were pretty strict about not allowing women into the facilities.<sup>6</sup> After we left the bathhouse Qiu Qiu was completely enamored with what he considered to be the open and free nature of the men inside. ‘In the bathhouse,’ he said, ‘people could just be their true selves. They didn’t need to pretend or worry about what others would think. If they wanted something they just went with it. The beauty of the bathhouse, is that everyone is equal. Once you are naked it does not matter where you came from or what your class background is, you can just have sex and enjoy each other.’ For Qiu Qiu the ‘chaos’ of the bathhouse was an expression of freedom, an escape from hiding behind the veneer of ‘civilization’. In being able to just act upon your desire, you were able to express your true self.

#### *Attempts to Tame the Chaos: Capitalists and Healthcare Workers*

Despite Qiu Qiu’s romanticized vision, the perception that MSM bathhouses are sexually chaotic permeates throughout much of society, and has often become the project of do-gooders to try and control this sex. In the most obvious cases, bathhouses—both homosexual and heterosexual, have been the target of many police raids. Even as the institutions have largely come back since the Maoist Era, current

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<sup>6</sup> It seems that Zheng Tian Tian managed to enter a men’s only bathhouse by pretending that she was a crossdresser (Zheng 2015). I wish that we had tried this with JR.

political campaigns do occasionally target bathhouses as an easy way to indicate that they are taking public morality seriously. In Zheng's ethnography of *tongzhi* men, police raids are a common occurrence for not only bathhouses, but parks for cruising and even gay bars (2015). In her analysis she demonstrates how raids ensure a level of insecurity to the men participating in these sexual dalliances. In Chapter 10, I will return to the political stakes of bathhouse play and describe the broader implications of police raids of risky sexual spaces.

Perhaps more meddlesome than the police, have been the HIV/AIDS public health workers, who have defined much of the scholarship of MSM bathhouses in terms of a public health crises. Many papers (Escoffier 1998, Harrison 1993, Li et. al 2010, Wight & Barnard 1993, Woods et. al. 2013) have posed some form of the question, 'how do you change the social norms of condom use in the MSM bathhouse?' Often times mirroring the strategies of applied anthropologists (Deverell 1993), many have tried to figure out the best way to use peer educators to change behavior. Interestingly enough, the Chinese government still largely tries to set up peer educators to intervene in many MSM bathhouses around China. In the 1980s and 1990s the government more explicitly sent police to shut down bathhouses as a way to stop the spread of HIV, but partially with the help of MSM CBOs, they have largely changed the policy and rather than closing down the bathhouses have sent these workers in to try and tame the space (Wu et. al. 2007). This sets up an interesting tension between different branches of the Chinese government. Public health workers have largely seen the utility in keeping bathhouses open, but trying to make them safer spaces, where as the police (as described by Zheng), still see occasional value in waging moral raids on this kind of 'hooliganism'.

Finally we can see in some high end markets that the gay bathhouse has also been tamed through capitalist markets. Famous bathhouses like Babylon in Bangkok or Spartacus in Singapore have become major markers of a particular kind of international gay elite form of consumption, leisure and sex (Dacanay 2011). I note this as a kind of taming process, as even though these spaces are still the locus for anonymous gay sex, their class privileges and aesthetic try to secure a certain kind of propriety and safety. Their intentions are clearly marked both from the outside and the inside, so there is no danger of uncomfortable heterosexuals accidentally wandering inside or police raids. Their public facing marketing and transparency about what occurs inside, thus implies that they negotiate with the public for some kind of toleration, if not acceptance. This is unlike the Piao Piao Bathhouse, and many other historic cruising

locations, which seek to remain hidden from the outside world. In these high-end versions of the bathhouse they seek to legitimize the practice in the openly understood geography of the urban space.

### *Ethnomethodology: Ordering of Sex in the Bathhouse*

Despite what may appear to be structurally 'chaotic' from the outside world, ethnomethodologists and qualitative researchers have demonstrated that the actual process of engaging in sex in a bathhouse or other public/semi-public spaces is actually dependent on a great deal of social structure. As Humphrey's notes in his famous description of the 'Teahouse':

except for masturbation, sex necessitates collective action; and all collective action requires communication. Mutually understood signals must be conveyed, intentions expressed, and the action sustained by reciprocal encouragement. Under normal circumstances, such communication is ritualized in those patterns of word and movement we call courtship and love-making. Verbal agreements are reached and intentions conveyed....In the search for impersonal, anonymous sex, however, these ordinary patterns of collective action must be avoided.' (1970 p. 59)

In order to transform the typical norms around sex, publics, and intercourse between people of the same gender, a great deal of communication and understanding needs to occur.

Often the most important structures that need to be agreed upon in order to facilitate this kind of sex have certain demarcations of space and methods of initiating sex without direct words. In terms of space the most obvious structural necessities are the production of internal and external barriers that allowed the interior space to facilitate open same-sex sex and remain hidden or private from an external world that would never condone such behavior (Tattleman 1999, also see Wei's use of Lefebvre to describe the creation of *tongzhi* spaces, Wei 2012, Lefebvre 1974). For more established, high-end bathhouses this is often done by advertising the bathhouse as 'gay space', normally as some kind of club. For instance in Chengdu, the famous MC Bathhouse was mostly portrayed to the public as a gay dance club, which prevented heterosexuals from trying to enter. Of course within *tongzhi* circles everyone knew what really happened inside. The Piao Piao Bathhouse did not use this strategy to communicate exclusivity to wayward heterosexuals. It relied more heavily on its location in an unassuming, dingy building on the outskirts of town where you would not expect a bathhouse to be. Its uncleanly appearance helped to dissuade people from entering if they did not already know what to expect. Furthermore the woman at the front desk would make sure that patrons knew that this was a 'special kind of bathhouse' that you might only want to enter if you knew what would happen inside (Both Wei 2012 and Zheng 2015 describe a similar gatekeeper in their experiences in the bathhouse).

Within the bathhouse itself there are understood spaces where you can “seek, negotiate and consume sexual activity”, and other spaces designated as ‘sex free zones’ (Tewksbury 200, p. 91). “In this way, these sex free zones of the bathhouse serve as transitional areas, mediating between the norms and culture of the ‘regular world’ and the sexual oasis of the bathhouse.” Spatially the bathhouse creates an almost gradient of sexual engagement, from the outside world where you are ‘not a homosexual’, to the front desk in which you are warned that this is a ‘special place’, to the locker room where initial eye contact is established, then the shower and pool room where flirtations and more signals can be exchanged, and finally the dark room for anonymous sex and the lounge for sex as performance. As you move through the bathhouse it feels like you are moving further away from the external world in which such behaviors would be considered deviant. The enforcement of norms within these spaces is partially maintained through mutual reminders (i.e. if a man tries to have oral sex in the pool room, he would likely be escorted by his partner to the dark room), but also the structure of space is related to its felt proximity to the outside.

In terms of communication many have noted that bathhouse participants often rely on localized communicative practices, circumventing normal speech. Delph describes the importance of eye contact in the bathhouse as “not merely an empty glance but a holding or penetrating look shot directly in the other’s eyes” (Delph 1978, p. 49). In this direct and focused exchange, individuals determine whether or not they will have sex with one another. Zheng further adds that touching and groping are also often used to indicate the type of sex that will happen, (whether it will be mutual masturbation, oral or fully penetrative) and which positions partners prefer (2015).

While I observed the kind of exchanges that scholars have described (Delph 1978, Humphreys 1970, Tattleman 1999, Tewsbury 2002, Weinberg and Williams 1975), I found the bathhouse itself to actually be more communicative and social than these accounts suggest, more similar to the kinds of interactions described in Chauncey’s *Gay New York* (1994). While it is true that people largely followed Humphrey’s number one rule of anonymous sexual intercourse in not providing identifying information to one another, people still frequently shared personal information (like the state of their divorce or leaving to pick up their kids etc.). I think that this derives from the public nature of sex in the Piao Piao Bathhouse. Communication was more permissible, since sex was a far more social experience, in which almost every sexual interaction was performed to a small public who could participate through distanced observation, voyeuristic masturbation, encouraging touching of the primary sex actors or direct participation in group

sex. In this way the decision to have sex was not only based on the mutual understanding of two individuals, but facilitated through a group effort to match the most erotic pairings. It was not uncommon, for instance, for one person to indicate to a friend who they were attracted to, and for that friend to play schoolyard games of scurrying around the bathhouse, gossiping with others to figure out if that person reciprocated this desire. Or if a person approached someone to initiate sex and was rejected, then to try and find a substitute sexual partner so they could watch the object of their desire having sex with someone else.

After people either had sex, or had watched enough sex, they would often want to move into 'no sex zones'. While in theory they could go back to the pool or shower room, these spaces were often filled with other people trying to initiate future sex. Therefore, if you wanted to fully remove yourself from the erotic environment, the best place to go was Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie's HIV testing office behind the dark room. This gave Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie an important opportunity to influence the sexual practices and habits of the bathhouse.

#### *Beyond Public Health Discourse*

After their early years of working in Colorful Spring, Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie tried for a while to work in fields outside of HIV/AIDS interventions, but they said that nothing compared to the joy of working with other *tongzhi* men. When an opportunity came to start a new MSM group with a district level CDC they jumped at the opportunity. In the early days they did not have an office, and would travel around to different cruising locations to distribute condoms and provide HIV tests. However they often found that they had the best luck in the Piao Piao Bathhouse. After some time they were able to convince the owner of the bathhouse to give them a room in the back where they could set up an office.

Chen Xiaojie is a pudgy, balding, gregarious middle aged man, who enjoys actively facilitating and watching many forms of gay sex. When you go to the bathhouse he bounds through all of the rooms, fully dressed, sharing pornographic videos and engaging in some playful *liao sa*(聊骚)—lascivious flirtations. Huang Cheng, his counterpart, is more refined: clad in bright orange dress shirts with a whiff of henna-dyed hair, this Chinese opera-singing 'mama bear' uses his manicured nails to gingerly process the HIV tests in the back. Boxes of condoms and lubricant are stacked around the room, easily accessible for visitors. For patrons who want to chat with their fellow MSMs, the office becomes a kind of non-sexualized respite among the carnal pleasures of the dark room and the lounge. In the HIV office

you can talk with Chen Xiaojie and Huang Cheng, not only about HIV or sex, but catch up on the latest gossip, share personal stories and ask for advice. Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie told me that once a month they host a salon in the office to discuss topics more formally, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic I was not able to attend any such salon. They often used these moments to give men advice on how to handle romantic relationships or deal with their families. Many of the men who came to the bathhouse had wives and children, and they needed help figuring out how to be responsible husbands and fathers. Every time that I was in the office people were talking informally about topics ranging from why they didn't like to wear condoms, the sexual encounter that turned them away from women, or penis sizes based on nationalities. So not really such 'serious' topics, but it was clear that Chen Xiaojie and Huang Cheng had close relationships to the men in the bathhouse. One man made a point of telling me how much he appreciated the work that they did distributing condoms and HIV tests and thus making the bathhouse safe.

After this man shared his praises of Chen Xiaojie and Huang Cheng, Pao Pao turned to me to say, in English, that he thought this man was a bit confused. This man seemed to think that Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie did HIV work out of a sense of benevolence, and was not aware that they were being paid by the CDC based on the number of HIV tests they performed. I'm not sure that Pao Pao gave the man speaking enough credit. After all, there were plaques from the CDC posted all over the office designating them as official government partner. However, Pao Pao was reminding me that in some concrete way, Chen Xiaojie and Huang Cheng's knowledge and positions on HIV, after 15 years of working with international organizations and public health offices, were clearly informed by the dominant health workers' framing. And yet, in watching how they interacted with their fellow *tongzhi*, it was clear that they did not problematize the bathhouse in the same way that the public health literature does in terms of risky behavior and vectors of disease. For Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie, these men were not just data points, but potential victims of a disease that they knew all too well.

One day I invited Chen Xiaojie to my home for a cup of tea and to do a formal interview with JR. He began to tell us about one of his previous boyfriends who used to come in regularly to the bathhouse. This man was married with children, and lived in the town of Dali, not Kunming, so the two men were limited in the amount of time they could spend together. However, the couple maintained a relationship for many years that Chen Xiaojie described as deeply passionate, both in terms of love and war. It was

after one of their vicious spats and subsequent periods of silence that a “little goblin”<sup>7</sup> came to the bathhouse and asked Chen Xiaojie if he had checked in on this man recently. “Why?” Chen Xiaojie asked. “Because he is sick and dying in the hospital,” the little goblin replied. Chen Xiaojie stormed off, wanting to just curse everyone in sight. Apparently his lover had become infected with HIV, and when his wife found out, she abandoned him. He went to the hospital and yelled at his longtime lover for not telling him that he had gotten sick and was left alone, but by this point there was little he could do. When his boyfriend passed away, Chen Xiaojie was devastated. “When I came home from the funeral I just cried so much I couldn’t stand it anymore.” Stories like this influence Chen Xiaojie and Huang Cheng’s commitment to promoting safe sex. It is not just because of the CDC training, the financial incentives or the public discourse about HIV. They have borne witness to the effects of the disease and feel a sense of responsibility and duty to the men of the bathhouse.

### *Ethnomethodology and the Order of Wearing Condoms*

How then do Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie go about the work of HIV/AIDS in spaces like the MSM bathhouse? During one of our interviews I asked Huang Cheng this question, he chuckled and said:

In the beginning it was quite difficult. When we would try to pass out condoms they would say they didn’t want them, when we tried to do interventions they wouldn’t listen. Whatever you tried to tell them they would just turn their heads to the side in embarrassment. They thought that using condoms meant that they were ‘chaotic—messy’ (亂) people, and would reply back to us, “I’m not some messy kind of guy! I don’t just sleep around! I don’t want that!” But you could tell that inside they could see the situation clearly, and we were beginning to break the deadlock. During this time we worked hard to recruit volunteers to convince people to accept the condoms and come in for testing. At first these old friends would do the intervention, and then later they would come to us. We began working in the bathhouse in 2013, and by the end of 2014 nearly 60-70% of the bathhouse goers were trained to come in and do their tests every three months. Now when regular patrons come into the bathhouse, almost every single one will just come back to our office, do their tests and grab a condom. It’s all very, very safe! (*an an quan de*--安安全全地)

In fact there was a great deal of truth to what Huang Cheng described; the sex in the bathhouse was very very 安安全全地. After many visits to the bathhouse, observing the behavior of the men there, I found that condom use and HIV testing was well integrated into the forms of erotic play. As I sat in the HIV testing office observing people’s behavior it was quite common for men to go straight to the office upon arrival to take their HIV test. As soon as their negative status was assured they would go back into

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<sup>7</sup> It seems that Chen Xiaojie still harbors some resentment to this messenger for being the bearer of bad news.



the bathhouse to find potential partners. The HIV test had become as ritualistic as the shower to assure cleanliness. Once they found an enticing partner, they would run back into the office, grab a condom and go back out to the lounge for ‘fun.’ Sometimes when two men were about to have sex for an adoring public, one of the spectators would run back to the office, grab the condoms and come back out to give it to the stars of the show. If Chen Xiaojie and Huang Cheng were intrigued by the couple, they might leave the office to watch a bit themselves.

As Huang Cheng suggests, condom use and HIV tests have become a norm in the Piao Piao Bathhouse, but where I differ a bit from Huang Cheng’s assessment is that it is not the case that he just worked hard in the early days to teach the men to use condoms, and then everyone just learned what to do. Instead the success of building this norm is that there are people in the bathhouse who continually hold each other accountable to use condoms and take HIV testing. In fact there is quite a bit of ongoing social work happening to make sure everyone stays healthy, while they also have fun.

Between the two men, Chen Xiaojie usually takes recruitment duty, running around the bathhouse to convince men to get tested in the office, while Huang Cheng sits at his desk, administering tests and giving sound advice. Chen Xiaojie will often gregariously buzz around the lounge, asking men if they like to “smoke water pipes” (*shuiyandai* 水烟袋)—a common Yunnan object and obvious phallic symbol, and then ask who they find enticing and encourage them to have fun. Previously when I mentioned the ‘school girl shenanigans’ of running around the bathhouse trying to matchmake, I am largely referring to the games of Chen Xiaojie. However, before they begin, he will remind them to stop by the office to get an HIV test and pick up some condoms. He doesn’t do so in a nagging or lecturing kind of way, but as part of the fun. His impact on the norms and practices of men is profound. His playful sense of humor means that everyone in the bathhouse continues to have a good time, while at the same time his helpful reminders to wear condoms incorporate safety into the fun.

Meanwhile in the office, Huang Cheng is able to reverse the messages around chaos and condom use through more sober conversation. Here the spatial dimensions of the bathhouse are also significant. If the locker room and pool/bathing area are both kinds of pre-sexual spaces, in which contact and flirtations are initiated, and the dark room and lounge are where actual sex occurs, then the HIV office can work as a post-sexual space where people take a break. After a person has gone through the flow of rooms, they become familiar with the HIV testing room at the end of the sequence. It is here

where they can sit and chat with others in a way that foregrounds sexual topics, but does not try to initiate sex.

During these moments, men may offer different ideas about their participation in this chaotic activity of anonymous sex in a bathhouse. For example in the earlier conversation I featured in which the man explained how he never made close homosexual friends because they were too chaotic, Huang Cheng subtly attempts to open the door towards a non-chaotic view of *tongzhi* men. He himself has a long-term partner who occasionally assists him to do the paper work in the office and he mentioned to the man during that conversation that he had been with his boyfriend for 6-7years and they had never cheated on each other. He does not argue or forcefully tell the men in the room that they are wrong, but offers a redefinition of what a *tongzhi* relationship could be. Meanwhile when I observed men complain about how condoms ruined the sensation of sex, he was a bit more stern in his correction, reminding them that they did not want to get HIV. Through his gentle guidance, Huang Cheng was attempting to redefine what chaos meant for the men in the bathhouse. He was letting them know that they could come to the bathhouse and enjoy in the sex, and still eventually enter in a monogamous relationship with a man. In other words coming to the bathhouse did not make the men chaotic people, instead chaos was being defined to specifically index men who came to the bathhouse and did not wear condoms.

According to Huang Cheng, when they first started working in the bathhouse, the use of condoms were physical evidence that you were a chaotic sexual man. If you truly did not engage in such activities then you would not need a condom, thus to accept the condom would be to admit that you are that kind of man. Apparently the fact that you were in the bathhouse already was not full admission enough. The important intervention that Huang Cheng is able to make, is that he shifts the application of chaos within the context of the bathhouse to mean: men who come here and do not get their HIV tests and use condoms. This does not fundamentally challenge the discourse of dividing people's actions into chaotic or civilized, but rather in the consequences of how it is applied. In previous iterations, the discourse around chaos could be applied with the opposite consequences, discouraging men from admitting to the kinds of sex that they had, and thus refusing to accept condoms. At least in the concentrated space of the bathhouse, however, people were taught this other definition of chaotic men, and were able to hold each other accountable to that usage of the term.

Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie are able to establish this norm, because they have convinced everyone in the bathhouse that it is important to hold people accountable around the social facts of HIV/

AIDS. They created a world that HIV/AIDS peer educator enthusiasts can only imagine. We do not know if these lessons changed long-term behavior. It is likely that the man who complained about condom use left the bathhouse and had sex with men without using a condom somewhere else. But at least within this space and time, men knew that condoms were just a part of the rules. How they achieved this status quo is not easily repeatable, and is dependent on the particular personalities of these men who were active participants in both enhancing the erotic fun of the bathhouse and keeping it safe.

This has implications for our broader discussion about how play situates and helps to define the meaning of discourses about sexuality. While externally play in the bathhouse would be used as evidence of the validity of the chaotic *tongzhi* concept among everyday Chinese people, within the bathhouse itself, play does not avoid the idea of chaos, but constrains its application. As Huizinga points out, part of what play does is that it produces limits in terms of place, time and players (1950). Within the domain of the game there are certain rules and conventions that are agreed upon that might not apply to life outside of the game. One can act in strange ways, because it is framed around the conceit that this is how the game is supposed to work. In working the ideas of chaos into the rules and norms of the bathhouse, Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie are adjusting the meaning of chaotic sex to something particular among people who are having sex in this bathhouse. As we move forward in the next few chapters about how discourse is located in spaces of play we can see how space and players are doing a lot of work to determine the agreed upon meaning of these concepts within these particular social groups.

## Chapter V: Dirty Jokes: Parodies of Sex, Parodies of Suzhi

As you might expect, not every *tongzhi* or MSM man found the bathhouse to be the most comfortable place to make friends, start relationships or even have sex. In fact, as I mentioned, even in the bathhouse men complained about the chaotic sexual habits of their fellow *tongzhis*. While many younger *tongzhi* more openly embrace their sexual identity, they will often try to distinguish themselves from the more rural, older generations who are thought to be primarily interested in sex, by emphasized their commitment to serious relationship. It is partially because of this uncomfortable relationship to casual sex that many other HIV/AIDS prevention organizations choose not to locate themselves in bathhouses and bars, but rather to host platonic events in public or in their offices, where sex is not an expected (or appropriate) activity.

In this chapter, I will start by reviewing the generational shift that has occurred over the past 20 years, in which young *tongzhi* are both expected to express their sexual desire more openly, while also moderating that desire through discourses of *suzhi* (素质)---quality. I find that in my own fieldwork, the tensions between expressing sexual desire and performing high quality morals produces uncomfortable tensions for the men, who frequently deal with these conflicting values through humor. I thus study the ways that humor around sex expresses *tongzhis* ambivalent attitudes towards sex and quality discourses and becomes the field for new forms of cultural rhetorics. These humorous sexual rhetorics become one of the main ways of signaling a common *tongzhi* culture amongst men in Kunming, and is used to do the work of HIV/AIDS without being constrained by dominant discourses of either public health or *tongzhi* morality politics.

### Desiring Selves and *Suzhi* Politics

Expressing one's sexuality, much like sexual play in a dance hall, represented in the 1990s and early 2000s aligning oneself with a globalized identity that replicated the cosmopolitan ontologies of the West (Yan 2020). To participate in this new, modern world, young Chinese knew that they should not be ashamed of their desires, but be able to express it openly, or at least to other youth (Wang 2001). In his description of the development and proliferation of dance halls in Shanghai, Farrer notes that "sexual play" was not only a break from the seriousness of goal-oriented work, but also a way to participate in the growth and development of a new and modern China (Farrer 2002). Dance halls were symbols of globalization and trendy new forms of expression, and one's ability to perform 'sex positivity' distinguished youth from the backwards Maoist era (Wang 2002). As Rofel has shown from her work in Beijing, urban

gay men saw their ability to articulate desire as proof of their modernity. She opens her book with a description of one informant who implied that gay and lesbian Chinese people “are at the forefront of a new human era. Far from representing perversion, Chinese gay men and lesbians are leading China toward its proper place in a cosmopolitan globalized world” (2007, p. 1). This meant learning to perform a queer culture that included the consumptions of LGBT films from abroad, hanging out in gay bars, and associating with other queer youth. It is easy to conclude from this shift in representations about the self and desire that generations of *tongzhi* that grew up since the 1990s are more sexual than their older counterparts.

However, Rofel reminds us that less we too quickly understand these gay youth as Altman’s Global Gay paradigm (Altman 1997), many, if not all, were still deeply embedded in Chinese familial and social networks and were not willing to completely forsake their Chinese identity (Rofel 1999). As a way of cultivating a “Chinese citizenship,” as Rofel calls it, these *tongzhi* men try to balance the articulation of their sexual identities with the Chinese concept of *suzhi* (2007). “*Suzhi*” is a popular term used by Chinese anthropologists to describe a form of governmentality used to discipline Chinese individuals starting with the neoliberalization of the early 2000s (Jacka 2009). Literally translated as ‘quality’, *suzhi* represents a Chinese cultural way to moderate globalized values with middle class restraint and demonstration of polite comportment. Often times *suzhi* is reflected through suitable consumption that reflects an accumulation of capital, but that is restrained through one’s taste level (Anagnost 1997, 2004), in contrast to the upwardly mobile factory or peasant laborer, who may have gained financial status, but whose *habitus* remains gauche or pedestrian (Yan 2003). Necessary in discourses of *suzhi* is the role of education and the ability to articulate and express one’s self in terms of high moral values and intellect (Kipnis 2006, Murphy 2004, Woronov 2009). The ability to perform what might be recognized as high levels of *suzhi* becomes synonymous with what it means to be a full Chinese citizen, not in the direct legal sense, but in terms of exemplifying the kind of ideal Chinese person (Jacka 2009).

Rofel reported that for many *tongzhi* activists, the ability to reflect high levels of *suzhi* was a political strategy to convince the public that actually *tongzhi* were upstanding members of Chinese society. As discussed in the previous chapter, many Chinese people think of homosexuals as not being suitably rooted in moral structures, namely marriage and parenthood, and too preoccupied with the satisfaction of personal desire over responsibilities. In places like Chengdu the euphemism for gay men was *piao piao* (飘飘), which means a wanderer or a flower without a stem, a clear metaphor for a man who

was not grounded in Confucian family values (Wei 2007). Being openly gay, but also maintaining high levels of *suzhi*, meant that while you were aware of your desires and did not try to repress them, you also were grounded in the same Chinese moral fabric as the broader public (Rofel 2007). Much like how *suzhi* in a general sense gains its meaning from a contrast between middle-class Chinese and laborers, so too, Rofel argues, do gay *suzhi* make a distinction in types of desire, with rural gays who traffic in money boys<sup>8</sup> (and bathhouses) reflecting a lack of *suzhi*, while more affluent gays who had long term relationships were seen as having high *suzhi*.

In my own research I found traces of *suzhi* discourse to describe different kinds of sexual behavior although I think that the term was used sparingly. Xia Shu, the founding member of AiBai, a *tongzhi* discussion group in Chengdu, set up most of his salons to try and cultivate *tongzhi* men who were able to engage in happy, long-term relationships. He himself had a high paying job, was very articulate and had a relationship that he frequently used as an example that other *tongzhi* might seek to emulate. However, I never heard Xia Shu specifically point to certain sexual behaviors as lacking in *suzhi*. Even after the raid of the MC bathhouse (see Chapter 10), he did not condemn the sexual acts of *tongzhi* men, but rather explained their behavior in terms of societal constraints that prevented *tongzhi* from entering fulfilling relationships. Ah He, Xia Shu's successor, framed Aibai's pedagogy as a dichotomy between "logical" or "rational" as opposed to "emotional" or "chaotic" to describe a new *tongzhi* approach towards solving problems with their family, friends and romantic relationships. Officially the Chinese government seems to have moved towards cultivating citizens who are *wenming* (文明)—civilized, as a signifier for "disciplined" (Marinelli 2012). As I discussed in Chapter 4, I am beginning to investigate the semantic shift from the *suzhi* discourse to the civilized (文明)-chaos (乱) binary that I think is more present in China today. That being said, I have not found enough contemporary research on 'chaos' as a discourse and believe I need further research to fully develop a Chinese conception of 'chaos' as it applies to sexual morals. Rofel and other scholars' work on *suzhi* provides a useful, if not somewhat outdated framing for the idea that *tongzhi* men frequently feel like they need to discipline their sexuality to present themselves as restrained for a broader public. It also helped to explain hierarchies within the broader *tongzhi* world that tries to distinguish between educated, urban and middle class gays with backwards homosexuals

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<sup>8</sup> Money boys is the most common translation for male sex workers, whose clients are primarily gay men. They are also frequently referred to as *yazi* (鸭子)—'ducks', as a parallel to the term *ji* (鸡)—'chickens' which was a common term for female sex workers. See Kong 2009 & 2012

from the countryside. Until I am able to fully develop my thoughts on chaos as a suitable replacement, I will need to stick with *suzhi* for this chapter.

*Suzhi* has “wed Foucault” to an anthropological analysis of China (Rofel 1999b), in the sense that both articulations of desire and *suzhi* reflect the kinds of discourse in which discipline is derived from an inwardly looking subject (Foucault 1988). *Suzhi* not only further exaggerates class based distinctions, but it emphasizes that the failure to have *suzhi* is to some extent a personal failing. It is one’s own inability to control sexual desires that makes that person a money boy or a chaotic, loose homosexual in the bathhouse. This leads to an internal policing of one’s desires, a constant pressure to control the self and be better. I thought a lot about the hold that *suzhi* discourses around sex had on some of my friends, and how they would often feel guilty for his desires. It is perhaps because young *tongzhi* men do not want to be perceived as chaotic that they avoid spaces like bathhouses and prefer to engage in other kinds of activities.

#### Public Health, Counseling and the Problems of Sex

Of the five MSM organizations that I studied in Kunming, only the team working in the Piao Piao Bathhouse located themselves directly in spaces where *tongzhi* sex was happening, or about to happen. Because HIV is an STD, and the projects are outreach to men who have sex with men, it’s impossible to completely ignore sex. However, the other four groups all had their own attitudes to the role that sex would play in shaping the kinds of acceptable behaviors and norms that would exist in their given events. In practice, group attitudes were not so simplistic, but for the sake of clarity I’m going to take the anthropologist’s liberty to create some ‘ideal types’ (Weber 1949) to illustrate how different organizations problematized sex.

#### *Tong Xin—A Public Health Problem*

Tong Xin took the most straightforward approach, and insisted that their focus on sex was only to control the spread of HIV/AIDS. Since they were funded, governed and directly linked to the Provincial CDC, Tong Xin takes the work of public health very seriously, and *tongzhi* events have become a nice outgrowth of the work, but is not really a major focus. As Yang Laoshi, the leader of Tong Xin, explained to me, “Tong Xin focuses on health, and disease control. In our events we merge these health aspects with LGBT community culture, but it’s more to invite members of the community to come together to get the health information. Too much community culture building is not possible.” The events are thus typically more constrained, normally organized around a free meal for their regular participants and a

casual activity like hiking or singing KTV. Having fun and play are goals, especially for Tong Xin's younger organizers, but they must always remember to gather data that can be used for outreach. As one young Tong Xin volunteer explained it to me, 'the goal of these events is to develop relationships so that we can better understand how the virus is being spread to correct men engaged in risky behavior.' When Tong Xin does host "fun" events Yang Laoshi makes all of the organizers preface each activity with information about HIV, how it spreads, how people can sign up for tests and to distribute condoms.

#### *Bentong Weiyi— Relationship Counseling*

Bentong Weiyi views sex as part of emotional and personal growth, and hopes to act as a kind of 'safe space' for youth to come and share their questions and experiences. They mostly cater to young people, sometimes as young as high schoolers, but more often college students, and host enriching activities that prioritize articulating personal feelings. Bentong Weiyi organizers often take the approach that sex and relationships are especially difficult, and they want to help young people solve problems at an emotional level. Frequently they host group therapy sessions, where young people can come to talk about their relationships, depression and families with Bentong Weiyi's resident therapist. They will invite participants beyond exclusively young gay men, including women, bisexuals, lesbians, straight men and transgender youth, as well as targeted outreach with sex workers. It is common in the Bentong Weiyi office for young LGBT people to come and relax when they have some spare time—a continuation of the Drop in Center model (mentioned in Chapter 3). Bentong Weiyi also tries to have film nights that usually address serious, LGBT-related topic, and use the film to generate discussions about individual's emotional and sexual health. In Bentong Weiyi's analysis, sex may cause serious emotional trauma and they can try to provide strong support to help people overcome these difficulties.

#### *Trans China/Kunming Pride—LGBT Fun and Identity*

Kunming Pride and Trans China think about sex as an identity category that can inspire art and expression, but also be the basis for prejudice and oppression. Originally founded by two expat lesbians, the group was meant to be a cross-cultural LGBT event, with no funding or ties to the CDC or the government. Since the two expat founders left Kunming, the drag queen leader of the HIV organization Trans China, Spangle, has taken a more active approach in hosting the events. Regrettably Trans China lost their partnership with their own district level CDC and now relies on assisting other organizations like Bentong Weiyi and Tong Xin for funds. This freed up more time for Spangle to take a greater leadership role in Kunming Pride. When talking to Spangle, he frequently discusses the kinds of discrimination that



trans women face in Kunming and how Kunming Pride events can encourage positive self-expression and acceptance. They regularly host bar nights, often with fun entertainment featuring drag performers or fashion runways, and a large Pride event during the month of June to express their solidarity with LGBT people across the globe.

### *Colorful Spring—Sexual Agnostics?*

It is difficult to articulate in a single sentence how Colorful Spring thinks about sex. Colorful Spring's events range in scope and content. While I was in Kunming they hosted a camping trip, bungee jumping, laser tag and dumpling making. They also had a weekly board game night, some educational events, allowed me to run an English corner, showed films and in the month of June hosted a four-week Pride celebration. In some ways, Colorful Spring shared Kunming Pride's concept of a global sexual identity and thus would occasionally host events that promoted LGBT values. During this past year's Pride, Liu Laoshi, the leader of the group, was excited to host an S&M performance, which he knew would shock the other gays in Kunming. "Nobody has ever hosted anything like this in Kunming!" he cheered during the night of the event. Colorful Spring is always one of the first groups to jump onto viral internet trends, making quick little videos with hashtags that link them to Anti-Homophobia Day or pleasant little reminders to wear condoms.



Screenshots<sup>9</sup> from a Tiktok video that Colorful Spring made celebrating the hashtag #中国LGBT发声月— Chinese LGBT Voices Speaking Out Month, an online campaign that commemorated a series of hashtags and online posts pushing back against internet bans on homosexuality (Ho 2018).

However, even if sexual identity was a topic for select events (Anti-Homophobia Day or the Rainbow Talks), other events like bungee jumping, dumpling making or camping seemed to have very little to do with sex. One day I was talking with Liu Laoshi about two organizations in Chengdu, AiBai and Milk, and how Aibai was trying to cultivate the less chaotic sexual self, while Milk was trying to use the identity of sexual minority to inspire political action. I asked Liu Laoshi what he thought Colorful Spring's philosophy regarding education and sex, and he said, "Everyone who comes to our events is different from each other. It's not my place to change anyone, plus I couldn't." In the answer he signaled that Colorful Spring took a kind of agnostic approach to sex, that allowed everyone to figure out what was best for themselves.

Be that as it may, it struck me as incorrect to act as if sex was not a common feature of Colorful Spring's events. While they were never engaged directly in sexual activities, like the bathhouses, they did not confine themselves from only talking about sex as a public health problem, like Tong Xin. Even if the events were not unified around sexual themes (whether it be public health, psychological counseling or identity expression), the topic of sex in conversation was ubiquitous. It was only later that I realized that sex existed in these events not as directed topic but as the common genre of humor that mediated Colorful Spring's social activities.

### Campy Humor

I posit that "sexual play" extends beyond the bathhouse to continue to exist as a precondition for participating in and enjoying a *tongzhi* events. "Sex" is rarely ever the central 'topic' for hosting an event and it is never performed in such explicit ways, but 'sex' is marked through the common rhetoric of "dirty jokes" that characterizes many of the interaction between the organizers and the participants. Moving "sexual play" from a potential action at the event itself (as in the bathhouse), to something that is joked or gossiped about at *tongzhi* events, speaks to a shared set of desires, experiences and potential world-

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<sup>9</sup> To make this video Colorful Spring employees asked people to send in pictures of themselves that could be put into frames with famous LGBT hashtags. In the real video everybody's face was shown, however I chose in this report to cover up people's faces with animal heads. This is something that Colorful Spring regularly does when they want to take photos of an event but some people do not want to be pictured to protect their privacy.

making, while also allowing for a distanced sense of irony in regards to the articulators “low levels of *suzhi*”. Humor is also the platform of creative symbol-making that produces the signs used to communicate at these events. Becoming proficient in the gay sexual joke-making genre allows for full, ratified participation in these groups.

Let’s look at some examples from the Colorful Spring camping trip that they hosted in the fall of 2019. First, I have a translated clip from the WeChat post they used to recruit people to come to the event. Second, I have an excerpt from my field notes during the camping trip.

*The Fairy and the Enchantress*

In the following poster two Colorful Spring employees assume the voice of ongoing characters who narrate much of Colorful Spring’s WeChat account—Mengxia the Fairy and Mikako the Enchantress.

**仙女版 (萌夏阳子)**

见一朵并蒂的野花，微笑如初见时般的纯净，那纷纷落下的花瓣映亮了这个晴日，守候了这丝缘分。你，有没有准备好这样一片心湖，来迎接这场盛大的花雨？你，有没有准备好这样一叶扁舟，在这心湖里荡起浅浅涟漪？

冥冥中是否真有一条红线将你我的手缠绕在一起，答案是肯定的。爱情就在我们双手可触及的地方，在美丽的林之森，湖之畔。在这里，邂逅你梦中的白马王子，那个可以陪伴你一生的人，来吧，与春雨一起露营，邂逅一场浪漫且充满野性的偶遇吧。

**Fairies Version (MengXia Yangzi)**

One day, I saw a wild flower smiling up at me, as pure as the first time we met. The petals raining down one after another reflected this sunny day, waiting for fate. Are you ready for this grand shower of flowers to welcome you into the lake of the heart? Are you ready to glide across the lake of the heart on a flat boat, causing shallow ripples?

Whether there is really a red thread entwining your hands and mine, the answer is yes. Love is where our hands can reach, in the beautiful forest by the lake. Here, meet the Prince Charming of your dreams, who can accompany you for life. Come with us.

**魔女版 (向美奈子)**

夜，在这泗水之畔，yin火之森，双眼的漆黑让身体的感官无限放大，那炽热的气息让我的汗毛颤栗。夜里鸟儿的啼吟伴随着婉转的吟唱，那炽热的快感像一条条粉红的丝带，将我们越缠越紧。我听见天使们的歌声从我身体里传来，那湿黏的液体开出一朵朵具有弹性的花，那藏在身体里的密语终于冲出喉咙！

野！  
 战！  
 好！  
 爽！

随即我便感觉全身酥软无力。  
 哦，原来是今晚采的菌子没煮熟。

**Enchantress Version (Mikako Toko)**

At night, by the side of the Surabaya, Yin Fire Forest, the darkness of my eyes makes the senses of the body infinitely enlarged, and the hot breath makes my hair tremble. The chirping of birds in the night is accompanied by tactful singing, and the hot pleasure is like a pink ribbon, which binds us tighter and tighter. I heard the singing of angels coming from my body, the sticky liquid bloomed with elastic flowers, and the secret words hidden in the body finally rushed out of my throat!

Wild! Fight! Good! Cool!

Immediately I felt soft and weak all over.  
 Oh...it turns out that the mushroom I picked tonight was not cooked.  
 Come camping with Chun Yu for a romantic and wild encounter.

晋宁大绿溪

### *Campfire Drinking Games without the Alcohol*

For the above-mentioned camping trip, I accompanied a group of about 30 *tongzhi* men into the woods just outside of Kunming. At night we gathered around a large bonfire to play games. It had been decided that drinking was not appropriate, so we needed to come up with ways for a relatively large group of people to have fun without alcohol. Liu Laoshi adapted several typical drinking games into sober play by changing the drinking punishment into actions that would embarrass the losers.

One game that we played for much of the night required everyone to clap in a sequence, twice on your legs and twice with just your hands. On the two hand beats participants would take turns saying the name of something in a given category. So for instance the category might be animals and the person would say *shizi* (狮子) —lion. The two beats of the characters shi+zi should be said on the beats of clapping. The first person would set the category and then people would say their words in sequence. Once a person said a word in that category, nobody could repeat that word. If you made a mistake (i.e. repeated a word or spoke off-beat) then the game would stop and you would need to be punished. If this was a drinking game you would normally be forced to take a shot, but for our sober games, we would wait until four people had made a mistake and then make them pantomime some sexual act together.

Drinking games, or in this case sexual pantomime games, are riddled with paradoxes. You play the game because you want to get drunk, but in the games itself, drinking is the punishment for losing, which you don't want to do. Simple tasks like clapping your hands and speaking in rhythm can be transformed into something fun because there are some stakes involved. Even though doing the punishment is something you kind of want to do anyway, you still, because of the humiliating nature of losing, pretend that the loss is so tragic, that you couldn't possibly want to drink that shot. The fun of course also derives from watching your friends do something that they "don't want to do" and express their despair at having to do it.

Here are a list of five punishments that Liu Laoshi made people do instead of drinking:

1. Person A would lay on the ground and Person B would hover over him in push up position, with the Person A's head lined up with Person B's groin and Person A's head lined up with Person B's groin. Person B would then need to do five pushups, basically miming a 69 position blow job.

2. Person A would lie on the ground and Person B would stand over their groin area and do five squats, all the way down so that they were sitting on Person A's lap.
3. Person A would stand in front of Person B. Person B then needed to take a lighter and feed it up the pants leg of Person A, move the lighter up the pants leg, feed the lighter through the crotch area and then slide it down the other pants leg. The idea was to get Person B to touch Person A's crotch, but the participants were wearing rather baggy pants and so it was easy to slide the lighter through without much contact.
4. Person A would stand in front of Person B. Person B would take an egg and had to rub it in a circle around Person A's crotch for 10 seconds.
5. Person B needed to pick out a pubic hair from Person A.

Throughout the night everyone participated appropriately, that is they showed suitable levels of embarrassment while still having fun doing the game. At times they would protest the action, which let us all know that the situation was suitably awkward. A few, would really have fun with the event, but most did it with a grimace on their faces. The audience laughed and teased the losers, and people looked forward to getting their revenge in the next round of the game.

The melodramatic invitation and the non-drinking drinking games are quite typical forms of games and humor for Colorful Spring, whether it be on their WeChat account, where they regularly post sexual fantasies or in their events where they might turn something relatively non-sexual to a kind of fun flirtation. Sitting in the office, employees will pretty regularly tease each other about their sexual exploits, and reference the giant pink dildo that they keep in one of the cabinets. When Colorful Spring staff meet a new *tongzhi*, frequently their first question to them is whether or not they are a top or a bottom, and normally some kinds of subsequent jokes about their answer.

In the Wechat posts that Colorful Spring uses to recruit men to their events, the blurbs from the Fairy and the Enchantress are a parody of sexual and romantic desire, contrasting the flowery and overly sentimental language popular in online Boy Love stories<sup>10</sup> with a raunchy, hyper erotic wet dream. The exaggerated nature of the language, along with the postscript about eating bad mushrooms, lets the

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<sup>10</sup> Boy Love stories are a popular internet genre, especially in Japan, Taiwan and China, that usually depicts love stories between two young men. The language and plots of these stories is normally overly saccharine and sweet, with sometimes minimal sexual interactions. Interestingly enough most of the writers and readers of the Boy Love genre are straight women, not gay men (Xi 2020, Xu & Yang 2013, Zhang 2016)



reader know that in actuality this imagined world is not intended to be actualized. It articulates a fantasy that many homosexuals may have, while simultaneously acknowledging through hyperbole that the fantasy is preposterous. The Colorful Spring WeChat account regularly features such fantasies. Beyond just the Fairy and Enchantress characters there are many posts that imagine a homosexual world far from the current world they live in. Every few days they will post the *xin xian rou* (新鲜肉)—fresh meat posts, of muscled men working out in the gym with sassy comments about their bodies. The message of these posts is not to motivate people to go to the gym, but to stoke and satisfy the *tongzhi* erotic gaze. Perhaps viewers wouldn't even actually want to be surrounded by such hunks “gliding across the lake of the heart” or entwined in the “pleasure of a tight pink ribbon.” The ridiculousness of such a world is both entertaining and just silly. It does not ask the reader to hope that they will find ‘Prince Charming’ at the camping trip, but to laugh together at the knowledge that we have all hoped for such a fairy tale. Readers are then excited to attend these events, because they can be surrounded by other people who understand these silly fantasies. They can meet other people who can joke about the muscular men or the dream of finding a prince. The expression of the fantasy then, is more about relating to other people, than what the fantasy reveals about the self.



During the camping trip itself, such a sexual hedonism was never truly attempted, beyond the realm of humor. As you might expect, much of the activity during the camping trip was centered around carrying in materials, setting up tents, preparing food and collecting wood to build a fire. When people partnered up with their tent mates, some people joked about needing to pair tops and bottoms, but to the best of my knowledge no sexual actions were actually going to happen. The only touching that was present was a part of the games and used as a kind of ironic punishment.

This demonstrates the kind of contradictory attitudes that the men have around sex and the social. On the one hand there is a mutual desire for sex and touching one another and at the same time being forced to do it publicly with people that you didn't choose is embarrassing, *but* not so embarrassing that you completely refuse to do it. It is interesting that when a much older man in the group would lose and really have fun exaggerating the sexual act the younger people just smiled that indicated a feeling of embarrassment, like the crazy and uncomfortable things that your grandfather does. This is obviously because of his age, but also because he doesn't show adequate amounts of embarrassment. If a person was deemed to actually enjoy touching each other, then it is not really a punishment, and doesn't fit into the spirit of the play. Other younger people would also sometimes pretend to enjoy it, but would do so in such an over the top, farfetched way that everyone could laugh at their parody of bathetic deprivation, signaling that they did not actually want to pluck out someone else's pubic hair.

The paradoxical nature of play, reminds us that in these moments sex both resembles some true desire, and yet at the same time lampoons that desires as too much, too impossible. Whether it's because engaging in such lewd behavior would be too "low" or because finding such a soul mate seems too unlikely. Framing it in a humorous way allows for a kind of meta commentary on the conflicting and uncomfortable feelings that surround sex. If it didn't reveal some truth, or some perception of truth, it would not be funny. However if it was too true, if it was the precondition for actual sex to occur, then it also wouldn't be funny, it would be real. The humor lies in the exaggeration of truth beyond reasonableness.

#### Radical Fairies or Mikako the Enchantress?

In Povinelli's work on Radical Fairies, she describes a group of New Age queer spiritualists who went out to the woods of upstate New York to create a new "world" (2006). The theory of these fairies is that the "real world" they had to live in was plagued with oppressive power structures, particularly with regard to sexual freedom and gender constraints. In building a new society in the woods, even for only a

short period of time, new norms could be created around free expressions of sex, drug use and gender expression. As Povinelli notes, this group quickly created a host of new rituals and symbols for their new society by borrowing/stealing from many indigenous groups, however with competing epistemologies that valorized the 'autological subject' over the 'genealogical societies' that they were taking from. Even as many queer activists and writers have joined the projects of radical faeries in trying to imagine and realize new worlds, Povinelli shows the ultimate paradoxical limits of the autological subject, confined to building new worlds through piecing back together the bits and threads of their current state like a bricoleur (Levi Strauss 1966). Such queer worlds do not reflect the kind of incommensurability as other ontologically distinct cultural groups (Povinelli 2001), but rather are parodies of such radical worlds.

In this way Povinelli helps us to realize that building 'radical worlds' is rarely more than reconfigurations of existing symbols and ideas. The *tongzhi* men of Colorful Spring were notably not trying to be Radical Fairies. The invitation from Mikako the Fairy and the non-drinking drinking games during the camping trip could have tried to imagine a radical departure from their current world, or ways to change Kunming society. In fact if anything they were mocking the idea that you would have such a dramatic departure. They could have even tried to imagine such a world as a possibility, a goal to aspire to or a desired utopia. They did not. In Dave's working on lesbian activists in Delhi (2012) or Engebretsen's on lesbians in Beijing (2013), there is a point in which the activists imagine alternative communities, queer families or new legal definitions of marriage. The camping trip games in keeping the sexual contained in the realm of humor are making a point that the organizers did not want to try and radically change or reconstitute a new world. As Bateson ponders what is the difference between a joke and a threat, between fantasy and play, he reminds us to identify the frames which give the particular signifiers their meaning (1973). Humor comes with a unique set of metasigns which remind us to not take the signified as something serious (Sacks 1974). Rather than offering commentary on the "real world", like Povinelli's faeries, the Colorful Spring campers were ultimately signaling something that had more to do with entertaining and connecting each other, rather than offering commentary on the activity being referenced—'sex'.

This was made even more clear to me when I talked with the organizers of Colorful Spring about sex in interviews in which humor was not framing the interaction. What they revealed is that much of the 'dirty jokes' rhetoric is less a reflection of personal desire and more a performance for the other *tongzhi* participants. For instance Qiu Qiu, the witty, flirtatious host of the Colorful Spring live stream, told me



about his frustration he had with one-night stands and how he missed the non-sexual comforts of his ex-boyfriend. Two purveyors of the Fresh Meat section of the WeChat account once admitted that they actually did not find overly muscled hunks all that attractive, and preferred really skinny men or even slightly pudgier men. Their use of muscular men and “slutty” sexual behavior, asking whether new members were tops or bottoms were not indicative, at least as they later explained, of their “true selves,” but rather just for fun. Whether or not their true self desires muscle men or skinny guys is in some ways beside the point, because what they revealed was that in either case the representation of desire was done as a social interaction more than personal introspection. As Uretsky describes in her ethnography of heterosexual men and the spread of HIV (2016), men in particular social settings are often required to reproduce specific sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon 2003) for the purposes of entertainment and performing masculinity. These articulations of desire are not meant as completely a personal reflection, but a genre of speech used to build relationships. Similarly the engagement between *tongzhi* men in Colorful Spring events and the office requires degrees of proficiency in articulating sexual desire, even if the articulator did not fully identify with the desire being expressed. We need not know whether or not the desire reflects something real to understand its articulation as performance (Goffman 1956), not necessarily as performative (Butler 1989).

If desire is paradoxical play, then expressing desire not as something that is constituted as ‘true’ but as something that is meant to entertain others should be treated as something different from the Foucauldian idea of the ‘self’ which is produced through a reflective examination for truth. In fact here the articulation of desire is not a revelation of truth, but a way of building connections to others. For Bakhtin, the self signifies a particular “center” located at a specific place at a specific time (Holquist 2002). This center is necessarily surrounded by peripheries—“others”, who are constantly engaging and requiring that this “self” do something in response. The dialogue captures this interaction between the centralized self and the others. The self then can never be thought about as truly individualized or isolated, but rather caught in an ongoing dialogue with the rest of the world (Bakhtin 1981). The dialogue then in effect constructs one’s sense of self, expressed in terms of its differences and sameness with the others as understood through the dialogue. The dialogue further must be understood as the self trying to send certain messages to specific others, with ideas about how they might relate to those people and anticipating how those people might respond (Bakhtin 1984). It also must do so, both in terms of

language that is both usable by the "self" and presumably understandable to the other. This means that the self must rely on terms, expressions, genres of speech and discourses that preexist the self, that are borrowed from a broader cultural and social ecosystem (Bakhtin 1986). However, in bringing those discourses into a specific moment and place and using them to respond to particular pragmatics, the discourse becomes— however briefly—owned by the speaker.

When sexual desire is articulated in terms of a genre of speech placed within a dialogue between Colorful Spring employees and members, we understand "the self" not as constituted as an internal truth. Instead the self, in this context the sexual self, is borrowed from other voices and used to socialized with other members of the group in ways that can be recognizable. Humorous metasigns further reminds us of the discomfort the speaker or doer has with the act. It is ambiguous whether or not the expression is actually desired or not, but its truth value is secondary to its pragmatics in constructing relationships to the other.

This theoretical point also has important implications for the literature on *suzhi*. If the Beijing activists in Rofel's work are trying to promote *tongzhi* subjects who understand their desire but control it through the moderation of *suzhi*, what do we do with men who express *other people's desires* (that is a sexual rhetoric that does not necessarily reflect one's own desire) in ways that to the outsider would indicate *low suzhi*? Are the men of Colorful Spring just examples of men with low quality desire? Perhaps Rofel's activists might think so, but I think that Colorful Spring employee's playing around with desire as something ironic, expresses the uncomfortableness that they, and many *tongzhi* men, likely have with dominant *suzhi* discourses. Rather than reproduce it, or be disciplined by it, they mock it through their exaggerated, yet ultimately empty, articulations of 'slutty, chaotic gay sex'.

During an English Corners that I hosted with Colorful Spring, I taught the participants some English words they could use on a date. Then I had each of them pair up and "speed date" using the phrases that they had learned. The game quickly became 'debaucherous' with the men asking each other obscene questions and creating erotic fantasies. At one point the 'prim' participant, Sam, told Qiu Qiu, "Your humor is too low." When we heard this everyone erupted into laughter, far exceeding any of the sexual jokes that had been uttered prior. What made Sam's joke so funny was the knowing sense of irony he invoked parodying the idea of low and high *suzhi*. It was not that he was actually instructing Qiu Qiu on his humor, but pretending to be the kind of date who would judge Qiu Qiu for saying such lewd comments. For weeks when I met with members of Colorful Spring, they would say to each other, "Your

humor is too low” with an affected pretentious voice. In these instances the *suzhi* discourse is not being used to discipline each other, but rather builds networks through a common parody of the discourse through humor and games.

It seems clear that on the one hand the men do not actually want to engage in such immodest sexual behavior, or else they might go the bathhouse more regularly. At the same time they don't all seem to share the same degree of repulsion by the very idea. In fact, it's kind of fun to exaggerate one's promiscuity for an appreciative audience. In framing attitudes around propriety and sex as something ironic, the men can maintain an ambiguous stance that hopes to suspend judgement. They can maintain a kind of ambiguous status in which it is unclear how promiscuous they actually are, and how much *suzhi* they really have. If you took the jokes too seriously, and actually accused them of being chaotic men, they can easily respond that it is just a joke, you should not take things too literal. For those worried that *suzhi* and sexual desires creates the kind of governmentality described by Foucault, we need an accounting of how this kind of humorous response to such discourses function. These jokes do not resolve the problems presented by discourses of *suzhi* and desire, but they also do not reproduce such discourses without a sense of awareness. When faced with unresolvable conflicting values and desires, at times it's best to just laugh.

#### Dirty Jokes: Technologies without a Self

Dirty jokes are also used to fulfill Colorful Spring's other mandate to attract *tongzhi* men for HIV testing. Colorful Spring takes a novel approach to such work by largely avoiding the topic of HIV during their events. During one interview Liu Laoshi said, "We try to avoid HIV related conversations, because our organization already does an HIV intervention project, the usual relevant publicity is enough. For instance sending out the Blued messages getting the MSM people to come to get testing, this kind of thing. If you talk about HIV too much then it might make people dislike the organization." His hope is that in getting to know and trust the people at Colorful Spring, people will come to them when they need tests or have questions, but if you bombard them with information about HIV then they will surely not come to future events. The closest you will come to seeing HIV referenced at a Colorful Spring event is a staged photo of a Colorful Spring employee passing out condoms that they can put in their project reports. This contrasts with other organizations like Tong Xin, which takes their obligations to educate the public about HIV slightly more seriously, requiring that whomever hosts an event read a scripted blurb about the importance of HIV testing at either the beginning or the end.

However, Colorful Spring employees often utilize the “dirty-joke” genre of speech that I have described from their events, to try to recruit people in to take HIV tests. As part of their duties, the employees need to send at least 70 messages a day on the dating app Blued to try to recruit people to come in and get tested for HIV. While many people just resend the same spam message over and over, *top* performers like Li Yi have many strategies for getting men to come into the office and get tested. In particular, he often uses the same kinds of over-sexualized or romantic language that is common in the Colorful Spring office, and uses it to structure his conversations with men on Blued.

One day, JR and I went to watch the master at work. Throughout dinner we saw all of Li Yi's different HIV-testing pick-up lines. For instance, he told us that you should look on their profile to see if they are a top or a bottom. If they are a top then you say (he mocked a kind of higher pitched more effeminate voice): “你好哥哥，想你来给你检测”—“Hello big brother, I want you to come over, so I can give you a test”. For bottoms (which he seemed to prefer to seduce) he said the same thing, but in a deep, rich baritone voice and changed the *gege* (哥哥)—older brother, to *didi*(弟弟)—younger brother. As the night wore on he got more and more flirty with select targets. One guy told him that he already had a boyfriend. Li Yi looked at us and shook his head. ‘This guy doesn’t have a boyfriend,’ he said. ‘I can tell by his voice.’ He then responded to the guy saying, ‘It’s okay, you can bring your boyfriend and both get tested.’ Within minutes the guy responded that in fact he didn’t have a boyfriend to bring along. Then Li Yi said, ‘Don’t worry, I will help you find a boyfriend.’ ‘Ok,’ the guy said. ‘Introduce the boyfriend first.’ ‘No way! If I find you a boyfriend you will forget about me, and never come in to get tested.’ Another guy said to Li Yi, ‘It seems that you are a top, why are you spending so much time with this app, tops must be very popular.’ Wu responded, ‘Even though I am a top I am so ugly nobody loves me. Do you love me? If you love me then you can come get tested.....’

In addition to all of his flirting, Li Yi also told us that he would pull out all the stops to get a guy to come get tested. He would offer to drive his scooter to them to come pick them up and bring them to the office if it was too late. He would stay up until midnight if need be. In some situations he said that he even would cook for them if they came over to get tested. For the most part he was just very straightforward and told them that he just needed their help to reach his quotas. One of his targets was actually a virgin, so he certainly did not need an HIV test. However, he came over, chatted with Li Yi and

was so charmed by him that he conceded to an HIV test just to help him out. It seemed that many of these men had so much fun with Li Yi that they agreed to get an HIV test.

Li Yi combines both the world-building fantasies of the WeChat posts with the hyperbole in the camping games. In his assessments of tops and bottoms he invents characters and stories that he thinks will fulfill his counterpart's hopes and dreams. At the same time he does so in ways that are so exaggerated that it's clear that the fantasies are not going to occur. Occasionally some men are frustrated by his efforts, feeling like he is teasing them and getting their hopes up, but more often his interlocutors seem to understand that his rhetoric is more a parody of sexual flirting than actual flirting. Rather than getting angry or disappointed, they engage in their own counter-parody flirting. 'If you are a top, then you should be very popular?' 'I have a fake boyfriend already.' It's a kind of dialogue that many of these men have likely engaged with in a more serious manner before on the app, so they are able to parody it back easily. Through their chats, Li Yi and these men develop a relationship by sharing in a kind of inside joke mocking the Blued platform. The good will that this produces is the basis for them to agree to meet him and do an HIV test.

If in these conversations the articulation of "true desire" was the dominant frame, then many more men would likely feel aggrieved when Li Yi just wanted to 'use' them to reach his HIV testing quotas. It is only in understanding their mutual ability to use sexual flirtation as playful rhetoric that we can understand how the emptiness of the signified (no sex is actually going to happen) allows for a positive relationship to be developed. It is the familiarity and the shared lexicon that encourages these strangers to come into the office and help Li Yi out with his testing quotas. It is likely that many of these men were not at real risk of HIV (certainly not the virgin), but in a sense the testing in those moments was less about detecting the virus and more about helping a fellow *tongzhi* out with their job.

In these moments the actors, Li Yi and the men he is flirting with on Blued are in theory doing something that is very serious, testing for HIV, but they deflect the topic through parodies of online sexual foreplay. This furthers Liu Laoshi's emphasis that HIV itself is too sensitive and depressing of a topic for people to discuss openly, and even amongst these HIV workers they do a lot to avoid addressing it directly, instead couching an HIV test in forms of online play. The mediation of sexual humor changes the kinds of strategies that Li Yi is able to use to recruit men to get tested for HIV. What we see then is that "sexuality" as a discourse is mediated through a locally created sense of humor and used as a pragmatic rhetoric to accomplish certain bureaucratic priorities. Its success in recruiting men to come in

and get tested, speaks to how well these rhetorics have circulated as understood forms by which Kunming *tongzhi* can relate to one another as a constructed group.

## Chapter VI: Killing Werewolves, Dancing in the Square

During an interview, I asked Liu Laoshi, the leader of Colorful Spring, “What exactly makes bungee jumping or camping a ‘*tongzhi*’ community event?” JR, being the genius that she is, rephrased the question, asking, “Are these events for ‘gay community’ just public square dancing?” Across China, from Beijing to nearly every small village, if you go to the parks you will see mostly little older ladies—*da ma* (大妈) lined up in rows or standing in a circle, dancing together, or what is known as *guangchang wu* (广场舞). The “dancing grannies,” as they are sometimes affectionately referred to, (Huang 2016), will dance every evening for hours, often repeating the same songs over and over. “Public square dancing” refers to an activity where many people gather every evening, some of them friends, some enemies, some strangers, to participate in a shared dance. Whether intentionally or not, JR framed the idea of square dancing as a diminutive activity, compared to some *larger* idea that might be trying to change the political or moral landscape. Liu Laoshi answered, “For now, that is pretty much exactly what these events are. There really isn’t much of a difference.” But, he hoped, that this was just the beginning and that it would lead to something more consequential. In this chapter, however, I will argue that in fact *guangchang wu* is more powerful metaphor for the social assembling of *tongzhi* men than either JR or Liu Laoshi realized at the time. It speaks to the powerful way that the social fact of *tongzhi* came to structure time and space for the men who participated in Colorful Spring events.

The implication of JR’s observation, is that Colorful Spring was just hosting events to pass the time, but were not oriented towards some larger goal or bigger purpose. For leaders like Liu Laoshi, he admitted that right now his events may seem small and ‘just for fun’, but he hoped that the impact of bringing *tongzhi* men together would lead to something in the future. As I mentioned in the introduction, often these HIV CBOs have been dismissed or criticized for their inability to foster “serious LGBT work” because they are closely tied to the state and public health, making it difficult to truly foster a *tongzhi* community (Hildebrandt 2016, Liu 2015, Wei 2015, Zheng 2015). Such criticisms often call upon these HIV CBOs to become more involved in either a *tongzhi* activist politics or help support what frequently is referred to as “queer kinship” (Eng 2010, Engebretsen 2013) The power of such expectations even has figures like Liu Laoshi trying his best to reposition these events and his work towards these objectives. However, as I will discuss in this chapter, what typically counts as serious or consequential work (activism and queer kinship) frequently erases the ways in which a *tongzhi* normal is being fostered through the

quotidian assembling(s) that organizations like Colorful Spring are able to accomplish. In using ethnomethodology and Latour's Actor Network Theory to analyze the common occurrence of Colorful Spring's weekly board game night, I describe how *tongzhi*-ness becomes normalized in this space.

### Queering Queer Politics

In Eve Sedgwick's attempt to define 'queer' she famously notes that "queer can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (1994, p. 7). This comes after Sedgwick muses on the overwhelming force of Christmas, which requires American society to signify everything in terms of "the same thing", that is everything comes to be about Christmas. Queer, in this discussion is a helpful response to the hegemony of Christmas (or sexual identity), in that queer allows the thinker to analytically push back against the totalizing effect of the "norm", recognizing that the same thing can mean different things to different people, or mean nothing at all. The challenge, that Sedgwick sets out for the analyst, is to try and not condense everything down to being about Christmas, but rather to read into the text, multiple interpretations, particular anti-normative versions. Queer then, as a theoretical terms, is akin to 'subaltern' in that it was supposed to describe a relationship between 'normal' and 'non-normal', and thus must be used in an active sense. A person, in its original usage, cannot be 'queer' throughout time, queer is not an ontology. Rather a piece of literature can be 'queered' in the sense that it can be reinterpreted to mean something beyond the dominant understandings. Queer derives much of its transgressive potential, in its ability to take common understandings of what something *should* be and reinterpret what it means for particular people at particular moments. Sedgwick demonstrates this through her *queer readings* of dominant texts like Jane Austen's 'Sense and Sensibility', in which she take a hegemonic text and embeds it with new sexual and gendered interpretations.

Queer Theory (with capital letters), has since Sedgwick's intervention become itself a dominant set of theoretical discourses within the academy, leading to scholars like Margot Weiss to wonder whether or not 'queer' continues to challenge scholars to truly think about 'queer' as an active form of transgressions and reinterpretations (2016). Instead, Weis notes that 'queer' has become an identity, a static replacement for the terms 'gays and lesbians' to theoretically respond to Queer Theory's insights that sexual identity itself was problematic, but inso doing transformed 'queer' into the same problematized



way of thinking about 'sexual identity' that it was meant to critique. Part of what the social fact of 'queer' has come to imply is not only specific kinds of ontologies, but also a particular kind of politics, which iterates criticism against 'normals'. Whereas Sedgwick's earlier examples of 'queering' Jane Austen, relied on a re-signification of a dominant text, contemporary 'queer people', seek to rally around their identities to wage confrontational political battles for normalizing rights and representations.

Part of my own difficulty thinking through a term like 'queer' is that it requires the scholar to determine what exactly is 'normal', and often relies on an abstracted idea of scale. So for instance, to return to Sedgwick's initial metaphor, Christmas is normal in America because, as she notes, religion (here Christianity), the state and media outlets all interpret everything in terms of its relationship to Christmas. While due to its omnipresence in dominating institution, Christmas might be difficult to fully ignore in the United States, it is still the case that many people within the U.S. do not pay much attention to Christmas, and may have created their own normals in which Christmas means very little. Discussing this group of people, on the scale of the nation, may feel transgressive, but discussing how they are queering Christmas from within that group, may seem a bit odd, as for them not-celebrating Christmas is normal. How then, do we 'queer' a child in such a community,, who sees Christmas at her school, and then wants to celebrate Christmas at home, but nobody else in her family agrees to go along with the celebration? The family, in terms of American Culture, is queering December 25th in not recognizing Christmas, however the daughter is queering the family normals in her desire to celebrate it. 'Queer' then, as an analytic tool struggles in that it could always be shifting or moving around. This is in part why I continue to return to the idea of these kinds of concepts as social facts, in that it recognizes that they may ask something of particular groups of people, but need not imply how people will respond or reify which responses are normal.

If Weiss is correct in arguing that 'queer identity' has come to imply its own set of normals, that is that 'queer' has become a social fact, then it is important (in terms of 'queer' as an analytic) to think about ways in which people are *queering* these 'queer identity' norms. For the present-day queer scholars (another identity category) the scale of normal is frequently placed at the level of the state and thus queerness is almost always involved in pushing back *against* the state in the form of resistance. This is certainly the premise of works by Hongwei Bao (2020), Elisabeth Engebretsen (2015), and Petrus Liu (2015), all of whom have defined "queer activism" in terms of film makers and writers who defy state

control to imagine a “radical world.” For example, in the introduction to Bao’s book on China’s post-socialism queer metamorphosis he writes:

Queer literature, film, art and performance have mushroomed in this process. These cultural forms and practices not only shape queer *identities* and communities; they also serve a culturally specific forms of social and *political activism* in China. In a country where public demands for political rights are constrained, cultural activism—that is awareness raising and community building through *cultural production and consumption*—becomes one of the most culturally sensitive and context-specific forms of queer struggle for *representation* and existence.... [Q]ueer communities’ engagement with cultural production functions as a crucial form of social political activism in China today. (2020, p.4)<sup>11</sup>

The above quote comes after a long description of Bao’s hometown in northwest China in which he bemoans the fact that there are no “gay bars.” The “queer identity” is then understood to Bao to the extent that queer subjects are participating in queer forms of “cultural production and consumption”. Beyond just the presence of a gay bar, though, Bao often defines “queer community” in terms of an anti-state, anti-normative form of resistance that exists among a class of mostly urban activists. But even as Bao criticizes “pink-washing” and “pink economies” as neoliberal imports to China, his focus on culture-making as the key to *tongzhi* politics and community-building speaks to the ways that urbanity and class still animate the concerns of many queer activists. Such scholarship simultaneously problematizes the urban-rural divide, while making little effort to see how people in spaces that are not articulated as ‘queer’ assemble together. In practice “Queer Politics” (as narrowly defined) becomes a way of privileging culture-makers who offer scathing and radical critiques of the state or the normal, while erasing more modest forms of *norm-making* in peripheral spaces.

It is within this anti-normative framework that queer activist scholars in China have told the tragic tale of HIV CBOs being captured by the Chinese state. The “window of opportunity for gay organizations” in China that the scholars saw when international donors supported these groups (Wei 2015, p. 197), was closed after the international funders began to withdraw in 2010 and the “draconian Foreign NGO law passed in 2016 effectively depriving grassroots community groups from gaining international funding support” (Bao 2020, p. 10). In Hildebrandt’s work, he points out that while NGOs in China have never tried to “challenge the Party’s monopoly of political power”—a fact that demands us to “set aside the problematic assumptions about the goals and international orientation of NGOs” (2016 p. 125), the retreat of international donors and increased funding from the state has meant that NGOs in China (in particular HIV CBOs) have transformed into “social entrepreneurs” rather than to “activists” (p.

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<sup>11</sup> Italics added.

124). It is clear in Hildebrandt's assumptions that activists are anti-state, pro-community and non-profit-oriented, whereas social entrepreneurs, especially in the Chinese context, are focused on monetizing social endeavors for profit and avoid conflict with the state. This is clearly expressed in this anecdote:

A teahouse in Yunnan province was founded as a safe *community* space for the dissemination of HIV/AIDS education to high-risk populations, most notably gay men. Due to diminished financial support from international donors (and the prodding of government partners to make the space more sustainable), the teahouse started to sell beer, contrary to its original mission and the wishes of its international donors. (p. 124)<sup>12</sup>

From this example we are to understand that the noble work of 'community' was corrupted by the grubby need to make money.

These scholars are not alone in their criticism of HIV CBOs. Many of the *tongzhi* activists and organizers in major Chinese cities have also expressed their own critiques of HIV CBOs for prioritizing profits over community. Cody, the activist leader of Milk in Chengdu told me that HIV CBOs were more or less impotent. When I tried to defend their work, especially in less urban centers like Yunnan, he provocatively asked if these organizations were so effective, why had they made such little progress? Xia Shu, whose organization, AiBai, was centered around discussion groups called "salons," organized to develop a *tongzhi* consciousness, expressed a similar hesitation about these CBOs. Even as he argued that *tongzhi* politics should avoid direct criticisms of the government, partnering with the state had risks he was not willing to take. He worried that incentives to make money would push AiBai away from its central mission to help *tongzhi* men. His analysis was some combination of Wei and Hildebrandt's points that involvement in the HIV economy would limit independent advocacy and deviate away from the mission.

Implicit in many of these forms of criticism is the underlying assumption of naturally existing gay communities, as opposed to a group of people who must make the social fact of sexual identity relevant. As we saw in the example of Rainbow Skies, there was not a widespread understanding among men that they were unified around a shared *tongzhi* identity. Other kinds of divisions like class and education, chaos and *suzhi*, were more important differences than either common sexual desires or the shared threat of HIV. The invocation of terms like 'community' erase the history of places like America, which needed to build a common imagination amongst LGBT people, such that they would seek each other out and work together on common political 'interests' (Chauncey 2004, d'Emilio 1988). In spaces like Kunming it must first be established how *tongzhi* groups assemble before they can be reified into a community.

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<sup>12</sup> Italics added.

If 'normal' is understood at the scale of the local, then the assembling of these groups are their own interpretations of what *tongzhi* should mean, within these contexts. If the HIV CBOs do not achieve the kinds of political activism or queer community building that critical scholars may frame as their mission, then perhaps they are not allowing these CBOs to do their own forms of queer interpreting. It is my understanding of anthropology that our goal is not to criticize our informants for not reproducing the particular kind of queer politics we may wish for, or to only focus on the writers and filmmakers that reflect such politics, but to understand the situation from different positions. As Latour wrote:

For scientific, political, and even moral reasons, it is crucial that enquirers do not in advance, and *in place* of the actors, define what sorts of building blocks the social world is made of. This lesson is negative, to be sure, but it's a powerful way to reverse the political urge that itches so many critical sociologists. It might be time to put Marx's famous quote back on its feet: 'Social scientists have *transformed* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to interpret it.' But to interpret, we need to abandon the strange idea that all languages are translatable in the already established idiom of the social.' (2005, p.42)

It is with this framing in mind, that I take a step back and do not impose "something more" on the work of Liu Laoshi and Chunyu, but rather to describe what is being assembled. In so doing, I find that perhaps these CBOs are doing something more 'queer' in the Sedgwick's original sense, in that they take dominant discourses (in this case about government rhetorics, but also LGBT activism) and re-signify their meaning in terms of localized understandings.

#### *Actor Network Theory and Localized Normals*

One of the challenges that Latour sets out in his call to trace the social is to resist the urge to reify superimposed categories, like queer or LGBT or *tongzhi*, onto groups of people who may not have grouped themselves around such identities. When Bao notes that it must be difficult for *tongzhi* living in his gay bar-free hometown, he projects *his* idea that there must be a demographic who would like to meet up at a bar, despite a lack of empirical evidence such a demographic exists. It should not be assumed that simply because such groups of people exist in a certain way in Beijing, based on their history, that people in Bao's hometown or in Kunming would group together in the same ways, and have the same ideas about what they should all be doing once they are together. In this chapter, I will use Latour's Actor Network Theory, as well as Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (1967), not to study *tongzhi* men, but rather the traces left over as a particular grouping of men come together to play the game of *langren sha* on a Friday night.

In tracing out this particular social, framed around the idea of coming together 'just for fun', I will treat the concept of "*tongzhi*" as a social fact in that it is a concept which differentiates and orients the group. However, what it means to be assembled together as "tongzhi men" is dependent on how the particular actors in this group hold each other accountable to specific norms of what "*tongzhi*" means. This reflects what Garfinkel would call "instructing." It turns out that these men do not only need to instruct one another about "being *tongzhi*," but also need to instruct each other to do many things which come to be related to being *tongzhi* in this specific context, but may not define *tongzhi* as an abstracted social demographic. Being a part of this particular group ends up meaning learning how to play the game of *langren sha*, learning how to read dirty magazines and learning how to sign other people's names, some of which are marked specifically as '*tongzhi*', while others may produce alternative forms of difference.

It may appear that this chapter focuses too closely on some very specific 'anecdotes' that lack generalizability to how HIV CBOs or *tongzhi* individuals relate to one another, the state or the 'Chinese social'. Summarizing Bourdieu's critique of ethnomethodology, Varenne writes that some will say that ethnomethodology

only accounts for such arguably minor matters as the opening of telephone conversations, and cannot deal with say class reproduction through schooling. This does not follow. Anthropologists such as McDermott (1979, 1993) analyzing classrooms, or Lave (1984, 1988) observing everyday cognition in structured fields demonstrated that close attention to the apparent details of the constitution of moments through speech and movement can help in the more careful restating of classical problems for those concerned with organization of large populations and the movement of people through organizations." (2007, p. 181)

In much the same way, by focusing on how some key actors order a weekly *tongzhi-langren sha* night, I can avoid generalization and focus on specific moments in which these men needed to define "*tongzhi*" in terms of what it meant at a particular place and time. While these moments may have been temporal and spatial, lasting for a few hours every Friday night, they come to represent what normal means within that particular assemblage of people. In being more specific in this analysis we might rethink what exactly the more serious frames like "political activism" and "community-building" might mean.

#### *Langren Sha: No Work, No Group*

Latour writes that "the social aggregates are not the object of an ostensive definition...but only of a performative definition. They are made by the various ways and manners in which they are said to exist...I want to use (performative) to underline the difference between groups endowed with some inertia and groupings that need to constantly be kept up by some group-making effort.' (2005, p. 34) This is to

say that for a group to exist in the world, there is a lot of social work that needs to be done to constantly bring that group into existence. The fact that there are “queer people” in Bao’s hometown is not by fiat, but comes into existence through particular people regularly doing things that assembles them into a particular kind of activity, perhaps searching for sexual partners on Blued, confessing their loneliness to a researcher or writing about their crush on the internet. In order to find out where and how the social exists we need to answer the question: “What do these people do to keep assembling people together?” There are many things that Colorful Spring and other MSM HIV CBOs do to assemble a group of people together: they conduct HIV tests, they go to bathhouses, they go on camping trips, and they host *langren sha* nights.

Similar to the Western game “Mafia,” *langren sha* or Kill the Werewolf is a kind of role-playing, social party game, where players anonymously draw cards that assign roles and then take turns trying to figure out who are the werewolves before they “kill” everyone. During my own time in China, I spent a great deal of time playing *langren sha* beyond just the board game nights hosted by Colorful Spring. When I was in Chengdu, I found a *tongzhi* hostel that made most of its money by offering a space to play games to college students. On any given day you could walk into their “play space” and find a small group of young men playing *langren sha*. One man that I interviewed in Chengdu was a semi-professional *langren sha* player. He told me, in great detail, about his stint playing in the national championship in Beijing. During one Tong Xin hiking trip to the Western Mountains outside of Kunming, all of the young men decided that rather than continuing the hike they would rather sit at the foot of the hills and play *langren sha*. This reflects the fact that *langren sha* is a popular game not only for *tongzhi* men in southwest China, but is popular among young Chinese people across the country and wider diaspora (Liu 2020).<sup>13</sup>

As Liu describes it, most players are young professionals who normally work more than full-time and generally lack leisure time. Still, the allure of *langren sha* means that many players will join groups after work, often starting games at 9 p.m. on a Wednesday and staying up until 2 a.m. (2020, p. 8). Liu quotes players as saying that playing *langren sha* is a kind of “revenge’ against their boss” as they choose to stay up late playing games instead of resting to be more productive workers the next day. What is more, Liu makes the point that for young professionals who move into cities far away from kinship

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<sup>13</sup> Based on my limited research, Liu is one of the only anthropologists I have found writing about *langren sha* among Chinese youth, which seems like a missed opportunity, as the game is quite popular based on my own observations.

networks or classmates, *langren sha* is an opportunity to make new friends. Since the rules and strategies of *langren sha* are pretty consistent and speaking is a necessary part of game play, it gives young people an easy way to start conversations with strangers.

Every Friday evening a group of between twelve to twenty guys will come into the Colorful Spring main office for the “*Tongzhi* Board Game Night.” Although it is called a ‘board game night’ every week they play the same game. In the game everyone sits in a circle and draws a card which assigns a role. Roles are typically one of three types—villager, werewolf and god cards. The job of the villagers are to figure out who is a werewolf before it’s too late and the werewolves kill them all. Werewolves try to protect their identity and slowly pick off all of the villagers. God cards have special powers which allow them to figure out various identities or perform extra-human powers, such as killing off or saving other players single handedly. Play time is divided up into nights and days, and during the night everyone closes their eyes and a narrator will list off instructions which allow werewolves and god cards to rise and perform specified actions, all within a very rigid sequence. When day comes the narrator will announce who was killed during the night, and then everyone will take turns, one by one giving their analysis of what they know, suspect or just wildly conjecture. Based on what people say, they will try and decide who is a werewolf and then collectively vote off one person to kill. Whoever gets the most votes die. The game continues until either all the villagers or all the werewolves are dead.

The same players tended to come every week, with a few new players showing up, some of whom were the boyfriends of the regulars. These regular attendees did not only come for *langren sha*, but attended many of Colorful Spring’s events. The Colorful Spring employees were required to play, whether or not they enjoyed the game, and could only leave at 9:45pm to catch the last subway train. Some of these guys hung out with each other outside of the events, going to each other’s birthday parties or having a drink together after work, but for many of the participants their main interactions with one another was through the game. Players varied in terms of skill and enthusiasm. Some players played in other settings outside of the board game nights and were able to make compelling arguments about who they thought were the werewolves, while others only came because they wanted to meet other people (or were forced to attend because of their job) and frequently messed up the flow of the game. Sometimes people would preface a speech by saying that they knew that a given player was particularly good and so they warned others not to trust them too easily. New players more often than not did not talk much during

the game for fear that they might make a mistake and say something incriminating that would cause everyone to vote to kill them.

Every Friday evening I would attend the *langren sha* nights in the Colorful Spring office and do my best to take notes. Occasionally they would make me play with them, and this was helpful to understand the strategy behind the game, but as one post-game night WeChat post mentioned, “We also had our lovely Andrew, our foreigner friend who frequently comes to our Colorful Spring events. But this was his first time playing this kind of language intensive game, so of course there were some surprises! These changes made the entire game uncertain, and made the whole thing more fun!”

By the time I joined, the work of assembling the *langren sha* group had some ‘inertia’ (to use Latour’s phrase), however, despite being relatively simple in terms of material and hosting requirements, each week work was required to re-assemble the group. Liu Laoshi, in a practice similar to that of the Chinese government, required each Colorful Spring employee to invite two people to the weekly *langren sha* night and imposed salary deductions for failure to meet the quotas. In theory, employees should invite new people, perhaps people who came into the office for testing, but more often it was a competition to take credit for the people they knew would come. Thus the work was not in extending the group of players, but making sure that the regulars would RSVP at the right time every week, so the employees could get credit. Some people were good friends with regular attendees and could easily claim them for their quotas. Other people were less well connected and excelled at achieving other quotas (like sending out Blued messages to invite people to get tested for HIV). It was sometimes the case that the well connected people would trade their *langren sha* invitation quotas for other people’s Blued HIV invitation quotas. Xiao Mei, who was a regular narrator for *langren sha*, was an expert at cajoling peripheral participants into coming every Friday night. One afternoon in the office I overheard him yelling a flurry of curse words into his WeChat voice messenger. It wasn’t until later that I figured out that he was joking around with one of his friends, making sure that he would definitely be at the *langren sha* game night.

#### *Instructing Each Other on what Tongzhi Means*

There is no essential connection between playing *langren sha* and *tongzhi* identity. And yet despite the fact that *langren sha* and *tongzhi* do not have anything that necessarily ties them together, it becomes an organizing concept for people participating in the Colorful Spring “*Tongzhi* Board Games Night”. This is distinctive from the bathhouse example in Chapter 4, in which case there is a somewhat



tautological relationship between the identity and the action—if you are a man who goes to the Piao Piao Bathhouse and participates, you are almost by definition a ‘man who has sex with men’. Of course, unlike the bathhouse, some people who played *langren sha* were not *tongzhi* (mostly straight female friends of *tongzhi*, but also a few lesbians and trans women). Their participation proved that nothing about the activity needed to be about being *tongzhi*, even though the majority of people who came on a given evening were in fact *tongzhi*.

The *langren sha* board game nights also differ from other kinds of *tongzhi* events, where “being *tongzhi*” is the main topic of conversation. In Chengdu there is an organization called AiBai, which has weekly salons in a tea house to discuss “*tongzhi*” topics. They will ask questions like “should you come out of the closet?” “how can you have a steady relationship?” “how can you prepare to have homosexual sex?” In these discussions they are discursively and actively defining what *tongzhi* means, making specific questions relevant to the group, and requiring certain kinds of answers in defining what it means to be *tongzhi*. Colorful Spring’s *langren sha* night is different, in that even as they too are instructing one another on what they should be doing and what are suitable ways to act around other *tongzhi* men, they rarely do so in discursively explicit ways.

The general ways in which people were recruited or invited to the event implied that they were *tongzhi*, and therefore you could assume that all the other players were also *tongzhi*. This made greetings like, “Are you a top or bottom?” suitable and not offensive in these spaces. In fact the “sexual” humor that I mentioned in the previous chapter was a common style of speech, and some men exaggerated their *niang niang* (娘娘)—sissy affect, during the game. The atmosphere was overall very joyous, and people felt at ease discussing their relationships or sexual adventures. As I also indicated in the previous chapter, in these younger *tongzhi* spaces direct sexual touching or propositions were not considered normal, as opposed to the bathhouse. This sometimes did require some instructions as some older men would occasionally be too touchy. These younger spaces permitted non-sexual, intimacies, which normally consisted of cuddling against one another or resting one’s hand in between each other’s legs to indicate that you were either boyfriends or more likely *jie mei* (姐妹)—sisters.

While for the more part topics of conversation were about the game of *langren sha* and not about being *tongzhi*, there were specific moments in which people would instruct one another that they should do something in a ‘*tongzhi*’ way. For example:

A young man wearing a yellow tank top came by himself. I suspect that someone recruited him after doing an HIV test. He clearly did not really know anybody else in the group and barely talked to anybody else when he entered the room or when he started to play the game. After playing a few rounds of *langren sha*, he got bored and went over to the couch and picked up Colorful Spring's Annual Report. These reports are scattered all over the office but I only saw new employees reading them to pass an exam. I cannot be sure what he found interesting about the report, but perhaps he was reading some of the stories that employees or contributors had written about their first loves or how Colorful Spring helped them get through depression. Liu Laoshi came over and instructed him, in a very public way, that he did not need to bother with such books, as they were boring. Instead he should look through a book of photography of naked men, covered in paint, in the jungle. Many laughed at this suggestion, knowing the erotic content of the book. The boy in the yellow tank top took the dirty magazine and flipped through it until Liu Laoshi went back to playing *langren sha*, then he went back to reading the stories in the Annual Report.

In this moment Liu Laoshi was trying to instruct this young man on how to be a suitable *tongzhi* on a Friday night. A suitable *tongzhi* was having fun and engaging in "naughty" sexual frivolity or playing *langren sha*, he was not paging through boring Annual Reports. At the same point this boy was responding to Liu Laoshi by politely ignoring his suggestion. In this moment he made a difference within the '*tongzhi* culture' of the night, in which some men read dirty magazines and make loud public jokes, while others sit quietly and read romantic stories. This moment was brief, and was largely unnoticed by everyone else in the room. It did not disrupt anyone and the games largely continued as expected. This moment may have been erased for both men and the onlookers, but perhaps it was a moment in which an important difference was being established about what it is that *tongzhi* should do, i.e. what is a '*tongzhi* normal'. The man in the yellow tank top may have gone home and thought, "Wow, I am not like those crazy *tongzhi* who like to read dirty books and make dirty jokes." Liu Laoshi might have thought, "Some men are such prudes and we really need to make them feel more confident in their *sexual identity*." It is in these small moments when a behavior is being noticed and instructed upon, that subsequent commentary can be made interpreting what this signifies about how *tongzhi* do or do not act.

### Holding Each Other Accountable

Once certain norms for a gathering of people are generally understood, the participant may do their best to hold each other accountable to these norms. In the context of the *langren sha* board game night, the first norm of the evening is that everyone is assumed to be *tongzhi*. The second norm is that most people should be playing *langren sha*. After the games really got started, the topic of *tongzhi* went from the social fact that brought everyone together, to something that was nearly invisible (aside from the stray interactions where Liu Laoshi told people to look at certain kinds of magazines). As an assumed characteristic of the room, attention moved to the task at hand of playing the game. Despite playing the

game every week, the game was constantly at risk of falling apart. For example, this type of scene was relatively common during a Colorful Spring game of *langren sha*:

*During the first night the witch chose to save the person that was killed by the wolves. During the daytime the narrator announced that this person had been killed, forgetting that the witch has saved them. The witch, who was new to the game, was confused and made a confused face when the narrator announced this. Assuming that they must have missed something the witch said nothing. Then when it was their turn to speak they began to tell the group that they were the witch and they thought...then they turned to the narrator to try and get some clarification about how it was possible for the person to be dead if they saved them. The narrator then realized their mistake and told everyone that they forget the witch had saved them. Then there was a discussion about whether they should just bring that person back to life or start over. It was determined that now too much was known and they would need to start over. People groaned and the narrator was quickly replaced.*

This example indicates that there is quite a bit of social work keeping people accountable to the second norm. There is always the possibility for the narrator to forget something that happened during the night and for the players to then be confused and remind them of the mistake. Too often the players of Colorful Spring *langren sha* were not able to successfully conclude a game and they were forced to re-deal the roles and try again. Therefore the kinds of instructions that were more frequently being given, where the breaches more often occurred and the kind of normal trying to be maintained, was to keep the game itself going, rather than discussing what it meant to be *tongzhi*.

Such devolutions of the game did not only occur due to the narrator's mistakes. Sometimes a player would make a noise that gave away some key piece of information. Even as players were instructed to ignore such evidence, it was nearly impossible to do so. Newer players frequently chose not to speak. When it was their turn they would just say, "*guo le* (过了)" meaning "enough," or that they had nothing really to bring up. At times Liu Laoshi would reiterate that everyone needed to speak or else the game could not be played because no evidence was being produced. To make things more complicated, some of the more experienced players would get bored with the traditional roles of the game and constantly be trying to add in new roles, which normally confused new players, who would then need to spend a great deal of time explaining to each other what these new roles did.

What this work to host a weekly *langren sha* night shows is both the continued power that *tongzhi* as a social fact has in keeping these men to constantly recreate the group every week, while at the same time within the game normalizing *tongzhi* such that it is not creating differences of signification. While there are a few moments in which '*tongzhi*' was being instructed (e.g., read this erotic magazine not an organizational report), most of the social work during these evenings was about trying to make the game

work. If we compare this to AiBai salon, most of the social work is put into keeping a discussion about 'tongzhi identity' topics going for two hours every week. As some people who used to be active members of the AiBai salon, but then quit, told me, actually there aren't so many things to talk about when it comes to sexuality. Once you have figured out certain basic questions for yourself, debating whether or not to come out to your parents just feels repetitive. In this interesting way, the game of *langren sha* bypasses this problem by just ignoring the specific topic of *tongzhi* identity making directly. Instead *tongzhi* is a differentiating characteristic to the extent that it frames one's participation in the event from the outside, but within the the game itself, the significance of *tongzhi* is made invisible.

Part of what might make these *langren sha* nights frustrating to Bao looking for gay bars, or Cody wanting to mobilize around a *tongzhi* activism, is that playing games means that *tongzhi* does not continue to be articulated. As the game goes on, the specific sexual identity becomes less important to other potential identities like, "being narrator" or "being the confused witch". . *Tongzhi* as a social fact clearly has a lot of power to organize and attract people to associate with one another. Even for employees or participants that do not particularly enjoy playing the game of *langren sha*, they still come to these events or continue to work at Colorful Spring to be around other *tongzhi* individuals. At the same time the particular activities of the event, in some ways erased *tongzhi*-ness and reoriented people around figuring out how to repair the game when the narrator makes a mistake about the witch. As Colorful Spring focuses on "play" instead of "*tongzhi*," as a marked topic 'sexual identity' becomes at least temporarily invisible. Within the game of *langren sha*, *tongzhi* is such an understood and assumed background for the event, that it is not being made present through much instruction or breaching. If we trace through the sequence of how a Colorful Spring *langren sha* night is assembled, it might look something like this:

1. Some young men living in Kunming encounter the *tongzhi* social fact, such that they feel they should associate with other people who are *tongzhi*.
2. Colorful Spring recruits people, both as employees and event participants, using a humorous rhetoric around making *tongzhi* friends. Based on the earlier proposed social facts, people come to these events or work in these spaces because making *tongzhi* friends is something they want to do, or feel they should do.

3. Participating in Colorful Spring events may require learning certain markers of being *tongzhi*, certain ways to address one another and humorous attitudes about sex. This is a way of continuing to mark yourself and other people in this group as '*tongzhi*'.
4. After these initial markers, "normal" activities in these events, such as playing *langren sha* or doing HIV work become the more important markers of difference and action, and the topic of *tongzhi* fades into the background.

#### *Where is the State?*

For some critical activists the erasing of '*tongzhi*' through the play is exactly the kind of apolitical impotency that they will point to when they discuss these HIV CBOs. Instead of doing activities that might elevate '*tongzhi* consciousness' in such a way as to make more 'consequential' change, they focus on something frivolous that will not offend the state. In this way, the CBOs do not only aid the state in terms of collecting data that the state needs to govern, but they aid also in maintaining a *tongzhi* group that is not activated around a radical queer politics. The relationship to the state certainly exists as an important constraint on the particular activities that these organizations do, just as capitalist logics play a role in gay bar nights and academic publishing norms play a role in the creation of scholastic literature on the topic. However, what these *langren sha* nights also demonstrate is the way that these groups also "mess around" with state norms.

As has been mentioned, the Chinese CDC, whether knowingly or not, was an important actor in assembling these *tongzhi langren sha* nights. The CDC paid for the office space, put Liu Laoshi in charge and compensated the salaries of the employees who invited people to come to the event. However, while participating in such an event, it was easy to forget that the Chinese state played such an important role. If part of how we become aware of the normality of the underlying structure of the everyday is to see some breach, some moment of instruction, the CDC stayed largely silent when it came to *langren sha* nights. They neither explicitly supported this specific kind of activity, nor insisted that Colorful Spring do something more pertinent to HIV/AIDS. Obviously in the official reports these game nights needed to be justified as building trust with the community to help with HIV research, but in the event itself even HIV had disappeared. There was no talk of testing, no talk of public health interventions.

In this way, the state was similar to the social fact of *tongzhi* in that they both played an important organizing role in the setting the context of the activity and ordering who participated. But within the

event itself they were not particularly consequential. Rather than producing an epistemic or ontological field of power, which shaped the behavior and mental regimes of these organizers, the state and *tongzhi* social facts were either ignored or even at times re-interpreted within the field of the *langren sha* game.

For example, to the extent that the CDC did appear appear during the *Tongzhi* Board Game Nights, it was the unassuming and ongoing circulation of the 'sign-in sheets'. For any event that Colorful Spring hosted, they needed to have participants sign-in because, as we will detail in the next section, as part of their reports to the CDC they needed to prove that a target number of people had attended their HIV events. Since they seldom did events that explicitly focused on HIV, they needed to collect these signatures from events like the weekly board game night. For the most part however they instructed the participants to the event to write down whatever name and phone number that they wanted, and many just scribbled some nonsense onto the form. Towards the end of the month or a project cycle they might need more signatures to make up any shortcomings that they had, and so they would request that people sign in extra names.

The regular *langren sha* players were well aware that part of playing the game with Colorful Spring is that you needed to sign-in multiple times. In fact, I was somewhat surprised at how comfortable people were with signing unknown documents with unfamiliar names. One of my informants told me that for Chinese people these kinds of bureaucratic games were in fact quite normal. Everyone knew that the government always required excessive amounts of paperwork and you might need to play around with signatures in order to make the paperwork look the way it needed to. They were more than willing to offer this kind of assistance when they were in the office.

Thus in this moment the state does order the activity in terms of requiring a specific kind of action and response—signing in, however the meaning of those sign-in sheets is not exactly what the state likely hoped. These sign-in sheets were not evidence that they had done an HIV education, or even that real people had attended. The fact that they frequently signed silly names shows the limits of state power and the interpretation by the organizers that such sign-in sheets would not be carefully reviewed. Rather than being disciplined from the point of a mental state, the power the state has comes from the ways that it too must instruct the CBOs to act. Clearly there are certain instructions on producing sign-in sheets, but there are not instructions on the particular names on those sheets, nor are there instructions on what types of events Colorful Spring should be hosting. From a discursive point of view, there are likely rules about who should be signing in, and the fact that they should focus on HIV, but from an interactionalist

level, there seems to be little power to actualize these discursive instructions. In this way, Sedgwick might say that these these CBOs are *queering* the sign-in sheets, in that they appear to signify a certain normalized focus on HIV/AIDS work and disciplined subjects, but in fact their meaning has been reinterpreted by the actors to facilitate a *langren sha* night.

Thus we see that a 'normal' Friday night for these men was to gather together, under the frame of making 'tongzhi friends' and playing *langren sha* for several hours. They may be required to break the frame of "play" to do some "serious" work of scribbling signatures onto government paperwork. The fact that they do this instead of sipping gin and tonics and bopping their heads to a Lady Gaga song, or sitting in a circle and discussing a Cui Zi'en film, is not a failure on the part of the organization, but speaks to the particular mediators that assembled them together and the norms that are agreed upon during these events. We see that in fact the state has a great deal of power in ordering these spaces, but it is not so powerful as to prevent people from "messing around" with the forms and wasting time.

#### *Liu Laoshi's Idea of "Something More"*

In our interview with Liu Laoshi, after conceding that *langren sha* was more or less similar to *guangchang wu*, he went on to explain:

Yes, yes, because when we are talking about Anti-homophobia Day or Pride these are very big and signature events. But it couldn't happen every day. In daily life people are very depressed, so they want to find some place to have fun and enjoy themselves. And once they have *rentong ziji*(认可自己)--confidence in themselves, then they will do more. I constantly tell my employees, the reason why we do these events is because I think the influence of person to person is very important. If we have a bunch of gay guys walking on the street being sissy and happy, this could change a lot of people and show that you can be yourself in the way that you want.

In Liu Laoshi's own framing of these "play events" he notes that doing activities that are constantly marked at *tongzhi* is a bit unnecessary and excessive. Instead he suggests that simply by gathering these groups of men together on a regular basis they might have a bigger influence on their lives. Often the criticism of these groups is that in becoming apolitical they do not do the serious work of changing *tongzhi*'s behavior, but in Liu Laoshi's justification of the group, "being sissy and happy" is a way of making *tongzhi* performance normal.

In Varenne's work on making new normals he calls for anthropologists and ethnographers to pay special attention to these moments of "messing around" as spaces for social change. He writes:

[W]e do need much more work, starting at the most local of levels where discourse analysis is most effective. Then, we might be able to see when something that is marked as having occurred in an earlier sequence is used to produce difference in further sequences—and also, and possibly more common, to erase the possibility of difference by reconstituting the extraordinary past as ordinary for all future purposes. (2007, p. 192)

This is what I have tried to do in this chapter. In looking at the specific ways in which a *langren sha* night is assembled and the norms that are established in these spaces we see particular actions, moments of *queering* in which commonly understood ideas are being reinterpreted and then made invisible. Part of what understanding *queer* as a verb reminds us is that any particular *queer* action is done within a sequence of activities, and over time becomes somewhat normalized. It is in marking these moments ethnomethodologically that we can track how and when something is being *queered*, that is when its meaning is being reinterpreted, and then when it becomes erased by fading into the normal.

My main argument in this chapter was that '*tongzhi*' as a marked social fact is queering for many of the men, in that it compels them to take time out of their Friday night to do something different, to come join a particular assemblage of people who all felt similarly compelled to interpret '*tongzhi*' in that way. However, through focusing on *langren sha* the distinction of *tongzhi* fades back into the normal. It is part of a sequence of events, which is at one point made important, but then subsequently made normal. Studying queerness then requires this kind of fluidity in thinking, as we move back and forth between moments when symbols are being reconstituted, and then when their new meanings are understood and normalized.

The metaphor of these *langren sha* events as being similar to *guangchang wu* may prove to be more powerful than was initially framed. *Guangchang wu* in many ways is thought of as apolitical and kind of silly, especially by young people who want to make fun of their mothers and grandmothers. However, as scholarship on the practice has demonstrated, in fact *guangchang wu* is actually a powerful way of claiming control of space during specific moments in time and ordering bodies within that space to do very particular kinds of activities (Martin & Chen 2020). In much the same way *langren sha* too, although to a less degree, is a powerful immortal fact that is animating and being animated by these assemblages of men, structuring their lives and space. Just as *guangchang wu* is in part what it means to be a *da ma*, so too does *langren sha* come to be part of what it means to be a Kunming *tongzhi*.



Part II: HIV/AIDS POLITICS

## Chapter VII: Table Games

*“Marxism is not a state policy such as the planned economy or collectivized labor, but a living philosophy. As a methodology rather than an ideology, Marxism inspires queer authors who occupy a variety of political positions that may be at odds with the ‘actual existing Marxism’ of the People’s Republic of China.” (Liu 2015, p. 9)*

In setting out his conceptualization of a Chinese queer theory, Petrus Liu stakes out a Marxism that is independent of the Chinese state. In the following two chapters, I ask a different question: what kinds of *tongzhi* or queer politics emerge in conjunction with the Chinese state? What is Queer Marxism if it is studied in terms of the “actual existing Marxism of the People’s Republic of China”? As I have already described, MSM HIV CBOs have used the money and support they receive to do HIV testing in order to host regular game nights and forms of play. We have seen that within these spaces the state will occasionally make certain demands or offer constraints about what can be done during these activities. As I have suggested, to avoid conflict with political officers, they do not host major political events or try to host public facing activities at all. They also may need to use those events or the humors that develop in these networks to recruit people to get HIV tests. They will often ask the participants to sign in and submit data that they can use for state funding, and they may try to get people to wear condoms. However, what we also saw in these vignettes is that frequently, even as the state provides the underlying resources for the activity, the state itself seemed to disappear and the kinds of play and fooling around were largely, if not resistant to the state’s intentions, at least not mobilized around them. Having sex in a bathhouse or spending all night playing board games was hardly the kind of HIV education or interventions that were outlined in official CDC health guidelines or training manuals. So what are the full requirements that these organizations must meet in order to get state funding, and how do they work with the state in order to have times and places to have *tongzhi* fun?

In the next two chapters, I will explain the logic and structures of MSM HIV CBO relationships to their government partners. I begin Chapter 7 with a detailed description of the kinds of data and reports they need to make in order to get funding. In Chapter 8, I will describe in more detail how collecting this data forms cooperative relationships with local CDC officials and go into more detail about how these CBOs fit into the Chinese bureaucratic political system. However, as I suggested in Chapter 6, games like *langren sha* are used as opportunities to collect signatures which are then used as evidence of HIV educational activities that never happened. This tactic becomes one of the important strategies these

organizations have for interacting with the state. At least some of their data are rumored to be 'hydrated' as they euphemistically say, to show the data as more beautiful than it actually is. Extra negative HIV tests are created, friends are tested multiple times within a given testing cycle and events are misrepresented. This, I argue is important to the tactics that these organizations use in order to do *tongzhi* politics. It allows them to make sure that they are not only providing services to the government, but developing close relationships with local officials to ensure they are evaluated well by their superiors. This increases feelings of reciprocity and helps them to negotiate their position within the local bureaucracies and state financing ecosystems of Kunming. Thus, in these two chapters I also argue that understanding how these organizations strategize the best ways of dealing with and fitting into the Chinese state should be the basis for understanding a *tongzhi* politics.

#### From Pride Parties to Paper Pushers

It was the last weekend of June and the final Pride Event had come to a close. After a busy month of nearly non-stop programming, organizations across Kunming had successfully hosted pool parties, sports meets, Rainbow talks and S&M performances. For this final event organizers had rented out a small bar and invited back beloved speakers and dancers, prepared a slideshow of photos depicting many events and planned to play a few final games to celebrate LGBT identity. Soon after leaders had made their final speeches, participants began to break up into groups and play drinking games; it was Saturday night and it was still early! However, all of the employees quickly went to work packing up the rainbow flags, projectors and sound systems so each could go home and get a good night's rest. They could not sleep in the next morning because tomorrow was the monthly Table Day.

At the end of every month, all of the CBO employees from different MSM organizations were expected to come in to the central office to help put together the final reports for CDC. They needed to count up their final HIV testing totals and organize all of the test kits into photographic evidence. Summaries of all the month's activities needed to be written and binders filled with survey data. On Table Day employees are expected to work from 9am until well after midnight to make sure that all the data are suitable for their government partners. What struck me about the June Table day was how abrupt the turn around was from the previous night of LGBT Pride to the taxing day of government paperwork. It seemed that after the stroke of midnight the organizers had transformed from fun loving, LGBT rights party goers to stoic paper pushers. Suddenly, the month of Pride disappeared and we were back to official business.

The anthropological literature on bureaucracies and statistical representations of bodies and humans often maintains that the creation of statistical data is a faltering and de-humanizing process. However, I argue in this chapter that the flattening that occurs with the onset of Table Day, beautifully illustrated by the midnight Cinderella transformation which just occurred, is an affordance for these organizations. Using hydrated statistics and tired buzz words allows them to produce interventions and activities that never happened in order to fund their assemblages of *tongzhi* men. As part of the work of collecting HIV testing data and writing reports these organization become adept at 'hydrating' (水分) as JR put it, or making the data "look beautiful" in order to transform events of fun in public health interventions. This is, I argue, part of the dynamic in running an organization that is so dedicated to hosting events of play for *tongzhi* members of the community. In order to get the money, you must go beyond simply doing the HIV work and avoiding political conflict, you also must transform some of the events and interactions of the month into the kinds of statistics and reports that are acceptable to government bureaus.

#### Government Purchasing of Services from Social Organizations

As introduced in Chapter 3, around 2012 most of the major international donors who had established and were supporting the MSM groups to do HIV work in Kunming, and elsewhere began to retreat. Initially this was a response to increased domestic spending by the Chinese government and new interest in the international community towards funding in parts of Southeast Asia (Matsuzawa 2019, Hsu & Teets 2016, Feeding the Dragon 2011, Health Policy Project 2016). Shortly after many of these international NGOs left, the Chinese government put into place two major policy shifts that incentivized greater cooperation between government offices and the CBO sector. The first began in 2012 when the 12th Five-Year Plan for National Economic Social Development set a clear goal for national and local government to increase purchasing services from Social Organizations (购买服务) (Teets and Jagusztyn 2014, Wang & Snape 2018). The second reform came in 2015 when China passed the new Overseas NGO Management Law, which put major restrictions on international donations to NGOs and CBOs in China, and required that all funding revenues be reported to the Bureau of Civil Affairs (Hsu & Teets 2016). This meant that by 2016, not only were there more opportunities for CBOs to get money from the

Chinese government, but alternative funding sources were nearly impossible (Hildebrandt 2016, Hsu 2017).

Based on my research, there are now two primary sources of funds that most Kunming MSM CBOs typically receive from the CDC. The first is through a contracted relationship between an organization and a district level CDC to provide specified services: normally in the form of HIV testing quotas. Kunming's municipal CDC has a budget and a target goal for the number of HIV tests they must administer as a city every year, and in order to reach that goal they divide their funding and quotas amongst the different districts, counties and cities. These district CDCs are then responsible for ensuring that they meet these testing goals and use all the funding in appropriate ways, usually through hiring these specialized CBOs.

The second source of funds is through the successful bidding and procurement of projects offered by the provincial or national CDCs. For the most part these projects also have a testing component, but may also require organizations to collect survey data that the CDCs can use as part of their research. The projects typically also have other goals, such as public health education or caring projects to be enacted. Caring projects provide funds to encourage these recipient organizations to set up support groups for men diagnosed as HIV positive. Caring groups should typically meet every month to offer psychological counseling and support, as well as to regularly check in with HIV positive individuals to ensure that they are taking their medication and see if they need any help. Projects may encourage organizations to start new initiatives that the CDC hopes will improve health outcomes. For example, one organization told me about an ongoing discussion group for gay men to talk about their sexual behavior and how to promote longer lasting relationships (i.e. fewer sexual partners). In this project the recipient organization were given pedagogy as well as surveys that they were to give participants throughout to see if this counseling changed attitudes and sexual behavior. Another example is the drug user surveys at the pool party mentioned in the introductory chapter. The CDC has become increasingly worried about the impact that synthetic drugs have on risky sexual behavior and have been funding initiatives for organizations which will try to intervene and gather information and educate participants about drug use.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In particular the Yunnan government is interested in collecting data about the relationship between nitrate inhalant drugs (often referred to as poppers or rush) and the spread of HIV/Aids. Unlike heroine and other needle-based drugs there would be no direct relationship between inhalants and the spread of the virus, but some scientists hypothesize that usage of nitrate inhalants might lower inhibitions which could increase risky sexual behavior (Li, et all 2014).

As part of the application for these projects an organization will write a project book to specify how it can help complete the goals and targets the granting province or national project wants to achieve. It will then set quotas to be delivered which will be used to evaluate its success at the end of the project. At completion of the project period it will need to provide documentation that it met the proposed quotas. This may include tables with testing information, photographs of passing out condoms, screenshots of online interventions and reports describing sponsored events. Projects typically extend over a six month to two year period and may require only quarterly or midterm reports. Projects include many reimbursements and subsidies for the organization, such as a payment for volunteers, renting event space and even sometimes funding to pay participants to join events and get tested. This is typically documented through sign in sheets and receipts.

In contrast to the provincial and national projects, district CDC quotas normally require monthly data reports, which are more confined to specific kinds of documentation about the number of tests administered during the month. This is normally recorded through a standard spreadsheet which has data for each test taker including name, phone number, birthdate, date of the test and the result. Importantly, to date, there has been no need to specify ID card numbers; something increasingly being asked of Chinese people when the state really wants to be able to confirm an identity.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the CBO needs to provide a pen drive with photographic evidence of the used test kits to prove they were actually administered. Each test taker should be tested for three different STDs: HIV, gonorrhea and syphilis. HIV tests follow standard procedure and use three different kits to verify the results: a 3rd and 4th generation Alere HIV Combo kit which looks like little strips of paper, and two test boxes, one of which is used to test for HIV and the other, *Treponema pallidum*, which can indicate both HIV and syphilis. Gonorrhea tests require a urine sample sent to the CDC to be lab tested. Below is a copy of the kind of picture that Colorful Spring will take of the test kits, with made up information photoshopped onto the form and test kits. It shows each test kit identified, using permanent marker, with the name, test numbers and date of the test on the actual test kit.

*Table Day —Hydrating the Data to make it ‘Beautiful’*

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<sup>15</sup> For example, as part of China’s COVID-19 contract tracing measures, most Chinese citizens must scan their ID cards or a QR code attached to their ID cards in nearly every transportation hub (trains, busses, subways and airlines). To take a COVID-19 test in China you also must provide your ID number. In theory if the Chinese government wanted to contact trace HIV, they could impose rules that required HIV tests to be linked to a person’s ID card.

As one young employee described to me, 'Table Day is like a cram session the night before an exam, when all your classmates stay up late in the library to study.' One day near the end of the month all the employees in their respective CBOs will usually meet to organize and finalize their project books and HIV testing data. What ends up being a bit surprising about Table Day is that not only are the employees packaging things up together to submit, but much of the time and energy of the day is spent putting together the testing strips and taking the actual photographic evidence to submit to the district CDCs. The most commonly stated reason for waiting until month-end to take the photos and write down the numbers of each test was because every month they would need to do some sorting in terms of which batch of tests should go to which district CDC. District quotas are partially set by total populations, however when it comes to MSM behavior and recruitment, districts which have large college campuses usually over performs their quotas, so there is a need to move some of the tests done in the college districts to tests done in other districts to balance out the figures. Since they might not know how many tests need to move between districts, it was better to wait until Table Day to assign numbers to the tests and take the photographs.

Thus the morning of Table Day involves organizing the master tables and making sure that each test is placed at the optimal spot for the given district's demands. Once the master table for a district is set, the master table spread sheet is printed and given to employees to make sure that the physical tables and evidence match the 'reported number' and district to which it is now assigned. Then, in the afternoon, a group of men will sit out in the living room around a box filled with used, negative HIV kits and write down the appropriate information and take photographs of the test kits so that there is suitable documented evidence based on the bureaucratic necessities of how many tests need to be used for which project or district.

In addition to these monthly quotas, organizations will also need to be collecting information for their projects. They may wait to finish all this information at the end of the project, especially for things like writing project reports, but they may need to collect some information along the way, such as for HIV caring projects or events, when they might need to collect signatures from participants and document what interventions they have done. These events will have additional tables to be filled out on Table Day. For instance, the person in charge of HIV positive people has a table for the HIV caring group where he will go in and fill out information for all new HIV positive people that have been diagnosed that month. This table will specify information for each individual, of which the ID number is very important, as well as

the method for testing (saliva, blood drop, blood withdrawals, self test, other), whether or not they were informed of their HIV status during the first round, were they informed during the second round, and were they successfully transferred to the CDC. For the interventions and events for which a project might need documentation, the CBO may need to have sign-in sheets with hand written signatures as well as separate sign-in sheets for volunteers to confirm that they received their stipend that the project provided. This kind of task does not need to wait until the end of the project, as there may be many events and interventions throughout the year, and so may be finished throughout the month.

Once all of this information has been organized for a district, summary tables with all of the test information and the results will be prepared and put it in a binder along with the physical copies of the test forms. The photographs of the test kits are put on a USB drive, which will also be put in the binder. In the following week, different employees will go out to the different CDC offices and deliver the binders with that month's data. Sometimes a CDC officer will want to check the work of the organization and may flip through the tables, reading some names or open the USB drive and look through some of the pictures of the test kits, but for the most part officers just take the binder and the employee is on his merry way.

One thing that I learned quickly upon arriving to my field site was that different organizations would accuse each other of different levels and degrees of "hydrating" the data. These accusation frequently had limited concrete evidence and were often not applied to specific organizations, but more framed around the idea that this was a problem more generally. What is implied is that some months it is impossible to reach a given quota, so data needs to be moved around to make all of the tables look the way that they are supposed to. When applied to a rival organization, the claim was intended to scandalize me as an outside researcher, however when I asked for specifics or noted questionable instances that I observed within their own organization there were usually good reasons why the quotas would have been difficult to achieve and why the strategy for "hydrating" the data was not a major form of corruption.

I am not the first researcher to notice that frequently NGOs or data collecting organizations (not only in China but globally) may find themselves, frequently when under an immense amount of pressure, compelled to play around with the representation of the data in order to fit the pre-set requirements. This is not a new observation in the literature on CBOs in China, or data collecting institutions in China more generally. Western critics have often accused China of using manipulated data in their official reports and have long wondered how close GDP figures match reality (Wallace 2014). Whether it be



teachers (Kipnis 2008), village government officials (Zhao 2007) or public health workers (Kohrman 2007), the response to data auditing in China has been to ensure that regardless of the actual situation the reports of the data are made 'beautiful'. While some scholars have used this fact to criticize countries like China, I will argue in this chapter that testing quotas primarily operate as a way to motivate organizations to actively find HIV positive cases. Therefore allowing for a certain amount of creative data manipulation, particularly under extenuating circumstances, gave organizations both the governing pressure to find HIV positive cases, while at the same time allowing for a certain degree of flexibility in months where reaching such quotas would be impossible. Ultimately this reflects less a manipulation of truth and more a negotiation of rule.

Take for instance the months of February and March 2020, when most of the city of Kunming was shut down due to Covid-19 restrictions, and so clearly the organizations were not able to collect as many HIV tests as they normally would be able to do. However, the rigidity of the district testing quota system meant that if the organizations wanted to receive their normal funds from the district CDC they needed to submit the right amount of HIV tests. As JR and one of the organizational leaders explained to us:

Boss: Yes (the numbers during the COVID lockdowns) are so terrible. So what you talked about before (*hydrating the data*), it's not so serious, it's nothing.

JR: We ask, because we don't want to misunderstand. Because we don't want to put any tag on you that isn't fair. We don't want to make any assumptions by ourselves.

Boss: Most of them are from people that have already tested with us. It's old data.

JR: So you just recycle them? Will anyone check on these people

Boss: No, because the CDC is aware of this. As long as you did it properly and achieve their quotas then you are fine.

JR: It's very bizarre. Every reasonable person will know that it's 2020. It's not some normal year. How can you achieve this normal year quotas? They should adjust them a little bit.

Boss: Because it's Yunnan. I can tell you right now, that the province made a promise to the national government that by 2020 they would accomplish 90% of the three HIV target goals. So then they could never adjust it.

JR: So it's already a political task. Nobody could adjust it.

Boss: Yes it is. In that case even though you need to fake, you need to fake it perfectly.

JR: \*jokes\* even if you need to make gay men give birth to children you still must meet the quotas (让gay生孩子, 也要给我生出来)

In the above mentioned quote the leader of the organization mentions one of the primary tactics of data hydration, i.e. collecting excess data during months of plenty and waiting to report it to the

government during times when there is a lack of testing. Much like moving data in between districts, this spoke to the reality that some months there may be an upswell in tests, while other months people may be less likely to get tested. For instance they explained to me that the months of November and December exceeded the number of quotas they needed to accomplish, so they could save the surplus testing information and use it for months that were a bit below the goal. Another tactic that leaders of organizations accused other CBOs of doing was to call in a few friends to come get tested multiple times under different names. In theory a person can be counted only once every three months, but it was rumored that organizations made sure they had a base group of testers who would come in every month. The most extreme accusation was that CBOs may be forced to create names and phone numbers of nonexistent HIV negative test takers. Since they did not need to put people's ID numbers if they tested negative, there was really no way to verify any of the information, which allowed for room for completely imaged cases. Even if the CDC tried to call up some of the names based on the phone numbers, organizations could very easily say, 'you know *tongzhis* are very worried about their privacy, especially about something as sensitive as HIV testing. They may have given us a fake phone number or just not admitted it to you on the phone.'

As mentioned in the dialogue between JR and the leader of the organization, even under the extenuating circumstances of COVID 19, organizations felt a lot of pressure to produce data. This, as the leader references, was closely tied to Yunnan's reputation as having higher than normal HIV rates and the particular pressures of the 2020 UNAIDS 90-90-90 goals for treating HIV/AIDS. These goals stated that by 2020 every country would find 90% of the positive patients, 90% of new positive patients are taking medicine and viral loads are controlled for 90% of the people who take treatments (UNAIDS 2014). Part of China's governing legitimacy has been to show tremendous progress on various development indicators (Liu 2009), including public health results, and thus it was important that by 2020, China could declare that they had done their part to accomplish these goals.

The pressure to perform to these use data as a way to establishing international legitimacy has a long history in China, but can even be recognized in the history of HIV/AIDS that I presented in Chapter 3. It was in part the international organizations, lead by the Global Fund and the Gates Foundation, that demanded that HIV testing data was used as the primary way to evaluate organizations in China. While there is a certain empirical logic to such evaluations, it similarly produces inflexibility to actual realities (i.e. the 2020 corona virus pandemic or in Chapter 3 Rainbow Skies peculiar limitations based on bureaucratic

classifications). What CBOs have learned is to figure out which parts of the tables and data are less critical and can thus be hydrated a bit to reflect the realities of the situation, and which parts will be seriously scrutinized. We can see in the 90-90-90 Goals that the real emphasis of these measures was to find HIV positive patients, it was not necessarily to calculate the HIV infection rate. Thus if there was any room for hydrating it would be amongst HIV negative test results.

### Regimes of Truth and Sociologies of Rule

Over the past few decades, anthropologists have increasingly studied and critiqued the creation of statistics, quantifiable data and audit cultures as a form of neoliberal governmentality (Strathern 2000). Following the lead of Foucault, theorists like Nicholas Rose have argued that statistical and scientific representations of human populations produce the 'regimes of truth' by which governmentality can function (1996). Humans are transformed into numerical representations which can then easily be compared to other numerical figures. This produces the kind of inward forms of discipline, fundamental to neoliberal theories, in which you do not only abide by institutions of power, but that you also impose such governing logics onto yourself. Rose writes:

The ethos of analytics of governmentality is very different from sociologies of governance. First, analyses of governmentalities are empirical but not realistic. They are not studies of the actual organization and operations of systems of rule, of the relations that obtain amongst political and other actors and organizations at local levels and their connection into actor networks and the like. In these networks, rule is, no doubt, exercised and experienced in manners that are complex, contingent, locally variable and organized by no distinct logic, although exactly how complex they are would be a matter for a certain type of empirical investigation. But studies of governmentality are not sociologies of rule. They are studies of particular "stratum" of knowing and acting. Of the emergence of particular "regimes of truth" concerning the conduct of conduct, ways of speaking truth, persons authorized to speak truths, ways of enacting truths and the costs of doing so. (1999, p.19)

The implication here is that in neoliberal societies statistical data produces certain regimes of truth which can ensure individual accountability, and can impose a market logic on the productivity of a given individual such that they can be evaluated. In spaces in which profits cannot fully capture the productivity of a given job, other metrics have been created such as test scores in education, customer satisfaction scores in the service industry and a host of figures to try and quantify personal health.

In the realm of international HIV organizations, testing and survey data has been scrutinized and critiqued using Rose's concepts of governmentality and neoliberal regimes of truth. Take for instance Hyde's chapter on the 'Aesthetics of Data' in which she writes, "Statistics allow governments to expand their moral and material authority over their citizens. Nation-states have a fetish for numbers.

Nevertheless, it is not just statistics that should concern anthropologists but also the actual processes, the subject-making of statisticians, and the micro-processes of statistical inquiry that allow us to understand the links between state regulation and statistics.” (2007, p.38) She then goes on to describe how scientific surveys on HIV knowledge link key populations to the stigmatized disease and then erase much of their knowledge about the spread of the virus by confining what counts as legible knowledge based on a confined set of questions that can be measured and compared.

Miller makes similar types of arguments in his analysis of MSM organizations in China when he discusses the ways in which international organizations began to tie funding to HIV tests (2016a). Based on his account of history, HIV tests were a way to make organizations accountable and ensure that they were doing an ‘effective job’ with the money being spent. Furthermore, it was widely thought that having ‘good data’ on the number of HIV cases within the population was an important foundation for making policy to control the spread of the disease. However, tying funding to HIV tests increased the amount of competition between organizations to out-test one another and moved priorities away from other kinds of outreach to mainly focusing on what could be counted and statistically represented. The organizations’

increasingly narrow focus on HIV testing took away from the group’s broader social and political goals of developing local gay culture and promoting the rights and visibility of gays and lesbians in Chinese society....By tying HIV/AIDS projects and funding directly to HIV testing, GHIs (Global Health Initiatives) and the CCDC (Chinese Center for Disease Control) compelled (the organizations) to become progressively more “medicalized” or risk being outcompeted by rival organizations for the funding they needed to survive. (2016a, p 425)

In reflecting back on the history of Rainbow Skies in Chapter 3, it might be argued that the failure of the organization to successfully make its work legible through HIV testing to the Global Fund was a major cause for the Provincial Health and Education Bureau to withdraw its support. In this instance the fetish for HIV testing data completely erased the work that Rainbow Skies did to help HIV positive patients.

However, how would this understanding of HIV testing data as regimes of truth fit into a society in which the data can and is, to some extent, *expected* to be manipulated? If everyone in the system knows that on the one hand data audits are an important form of evaluation, but at the same time the validity of this knowledge is less important than the representation of the knowledge, then is this truly the kind of disciplined governmentality that Rose fears?

Kipnis has an interesting response to Rose’s reliance on neoliberalism and governmentality to understand the prominence of statistical data and audit cultures (2008). First, Kipnis compares Rose’s work, which has primarily been confined to the US, to his own fieldwork amongst teachers in a Chinese

village. What he finds is that while these teachers had similar pressures to satisfy quotas as their American counterparts, rather than ascribe this dire state to neoliberal market logics they attributed it to socialist planned economy logics. “Under socialist economic regimes, the quality or marketability of goods counted for little: all that mattered was ritualistically announcing that the production quota had been met and convincing one’s superiors into believing that this was the case.” (p. 277) Kipnis makes the point that self discipline and accountability can be attributed to such “neoliberal thinkers” as Mao Zedong or even Confucius. The point here is that we cannot attribute the production and emphasis on collecting quantifiable metrics like HIV testing data purely on neoliberal mentalities, but need to perhaps return to what Rose called “sociologies of rule”. Here the collection and representation of data is not necessarily about the particular regimes of truth, but rather is one of the fields by which management and counter management are negotiated.

In Fan’s work on HIV organizations she makes a similar interesting point in quoting one of her informant’s theories on what the CDC cared about in terms of the testing figures (2017). In this informant’s perceptions the quotas for HIV test numbers were not important in terms of gathering information for the government, but rather were a way to hold the organizations accountable. This was not, as in the Miller example, completely founded on the idea that if we give you so much money you should be so productive and could reasonably collect this much information. Rather, according to this organizer, the CDC already had its own ideas of the infection rate and thus how many HIV positive people these organizations should be able to find if they test that number of people. For the CDC the most important goal was to find HIV positive people, not to calculate the infection rate which they presumed to already know. If, for instance the CDC wanted an organization to find three new HIV positive people every month, and these organizations could do that by only testing three people, then they could make up the rest of the quotas and that would not be important to the CDC. What is more, HIV positive results are nearly impossible to fake, so if monthly quotas are being met, but never finding any HIV positive people, then this is a problem for the CDC regardless of what percentage of the tests are valid. “If, as (Fan’s informant) articulated, the intention of targets is to hold organizations accountable, then what matters is simply generating the numbers that meet those targets, not what they stand for.” (p. 225)

Fan’s point resonated with what I observed about how testing data was used. Whenever I asked organizers why every organization didn’t just completely make up all of the testing data, they returned to the point that they still needed to find HIV positive people. An HIV positive test was something that could

not be faked, as an HIV positive report only counted if you brought the person into the hospital, confirmed the diagnosis with more extensive blood work, collected their ID number and began the referral process to get them medication. Thus the negative tests were less about a representation of truth than a way of indicating to the CDC that you were working hard to find HIV positive cases. This is also important because it meant that these organizations were still largely accomplishing the important goal, i.e. actively looking for and finding HIV positive cases who could be referred to treatment. While it seems that the negative cases are important in the strict world of data and representation, if they are more accurately understood as the government mechanism to ensure that CBOs are trying as hard as possible to find HIV numbers, then perhaps meeting the exact number of negative tests is (within reason) negotiable based on time of year and location.

However, this point is more important theoretically than just explaining why the CDC may be tolerant of a certain amount of data hydration. This insight makes an important distinction from the idea of governmentality and regimes of truth to sociologies of rule. In this theory of the interactions between HIV MSM organizations and their CDC partners, everyone understands that the actual data does not really signify exact truth. The production of HIV testing data is a way of setting the agenda of activity, while allowing for a certain amount of squishiness that can help organizations negotiate with local partners for funding or opportunities to play. Obviously for the data to mean anything it needs to resemble something that people perceive as basically true, but its real power is in terms of how it is used to manage organizations or to build relationships with government partners. The CBOs are not so much disciplined by what this data is supposed to signify about themselves or *tongzhi* men. In fact as we know many of the 'real tests' that were done were with virgins and friends that they knew were HIV negative. The tests are just a way of making its government partners happy and securing funds. Organizers are disciplined by the data in that it represents a relationship to the state and accomplishment of particular political goals, not in terms of its truth value.

#### Testing as Erasure of Play

If then, the production of data is understood as not reflecting a mental discipline but rather as a political process of negotiating status and resources, then I ask how does the Table Day relate back to activities like Pride Parties and *langren sha* board game nights? In Miller's analysis of the relationship of HIV testing to 'gay cultural events', he argues that HIV tests shift priorities away from ephemeral activities which cannot be counted and toward quantifiable tests. Part of what this explanation implies is that under

the governmentality logic of evaluations and audits, the work that is done for gay culture making is erased by the HIV test and the only thing that is rewarded are the number of tests given. Following a market logic then, organizations would move their energy away from things that cannot be monetized and towards the metrics used for evaluation.

However, according to the bureaucratic managerial logics that I have been describing, in which the truth value of the tests is not as important as the creation of the reports and the subsequent relationship between the organization and the political partners in the CDC, then it does not necessarily mean that the organizers will spend more time on testing and less on playing around. Certainly the organizations I studied do need to spend a great deal of time recruiting people to take tests and filling out forms that will be used in the report. But they also spend a considerable amount of time hosting *tongzhi* events where people can gather to have fun. Based on this understanding of the rules of the game, the power of the HIV tests to erase the activities of fun then are less of an incentive to de-prioritize *tongzhi* events and more of an affordance to shield these events from being scrutinized by the government. After all, if there is no way to be financially compensated for hosting *tongzhi* events, but there is a risk that these events will be criticized by the government, then the HIV tests work to provide the funding for these events, while also obfuscating that these events are actually happening. As Fan similarly argues, the fact that the *goumai fuwu* (government purchasing services) exists and that testing serves as a valued service that *tongzhi* organizations can provide, gives them an opportunity that would not exist otherwise (2014).

As I have already discussed in the *langren sha* events in Chapter 6, the state only exists in these spaces through the form of the sign-in sheets. These signature sheets may seem innocuous but are actually the vehicle which ensures money into the organizations. At the time of contact nothing about the sign-in sheet seems to be related to the Chinese government, it looks like a common document that any organization might use to track participation. However, as reports are being produced for the CDC, these sign-in sheets are repurposed and on the top of the forms new dates are written and event titles about 'HIV Education' are scribbled in to match the other documentation. In this brief moment the participants of *langren sha* have been transported into another space and time where they sat for two hours to learn about condom use. The HIV economy thus does, in fact, erase gay culture building, but it does so in such a way as to allow these organizations to continue to do it.

Here is another example from one of the project reports submitted at the beginning of 2020 about the events done in 2019. The organization's HIV programming in theory ended with a New Year's Eve

celebration with all of the different stake holders that had participated throughout the year. Here is an excerpt from that project report:

#### Brief summary of the New Year's Eve dinner Event

Participants: Kunming MSM Group

Place: restaurant

The number of participant: 25

The aim of activity: The staff will summarize the results of last year and look forward to the future, listen to everyone's suggestions for the studio based on last year, and to promote gay people's communications, to advertise the knowledge about HIV to gay people, to enhance gay people's self-protection awareness on knowing HIV and HIV prevention, and to encourage gay people test from their own initiative.

The group hosted the 'New Year's Eve dinner' event to gather gay people to have dinner. Many friends were interested in the event and played an active part in it. Everyone was happy to talk to each other at the table.

After chatting and laughing together, we asked everyone for suggestions about our work and office, then we made a plan for how to spread information about HIV and STDs and discussed the importance of safe sexual behavior.

This event not only was a party for everyone to make more friends after one year of hard work, but also collected the opinions from everyone about how to help people understand and trust the group's work. And more importantly, we advertised the knowledge about STD and HIV and had a discussion on the necessity and importance of safe sexual behavior. We answered the questions about HIV prevention and HIV therapy and mobilized some participants to get an HIV test.

Finally, with the joint efforts of each of the staff and volunteers, the New Year's Eve dinner successfully held and made everyone happy to talk. This event got many precious opinions from everyone, and drew gay people closer together. What's more, we made a breakthrough on the advertisement of STD and HIV's knowledge. The participants has also added to the knowledge of these diseases and broke down prejudices on HIV and HIV patients. More importantly, more people will take valid self-protection measures when they have sex.

This event occurred while I was doing research in Chendgu, so I was not able to attend this specific event and so cannot say for sure what did or did not occur. Conveniently for me the person who wrote this project summary also did not attend the event. This report was written in late February or early March, when the project report was due and everyone was scrambling to get all the documents in order. At the time that the event ostensibly took place, the writer of the report was not an employee and had never been to any of that organization's events. In order to write up the report of the event he was told to look at some of the previous event summaries used for other projects and then model his version off of those copies. He was given the date, name of the restaurant and the basic idea of the event, but then needed to fill in the rest of the blanks on his own.

In reading through prior accounts, he explained to me that the important objective was to emphasize their HIV work. He thus adds in almost every sentence some reference to HIV education.



During the event, people should be spreading information about HIV, encouraging safe sex, encouraging people to come in regularly for testing, and answering questions people have about HIV. Even the other aspects of the event mentioned things like, “The studio staff summarizes the results of last year and look forward to the future, listen to everyone’s suggestions for the events based on last year, and to promote gay people’s communications. ” This is also a pretext for building confidence from the gay men so that they will trust the organization and come in to get tested. Again, I do not have data for this specific event, but notably the WeChat advertisement written to recruit people for the event does not mention HIV at all, instead emphasizing coming together and preparing for the difficult questions that your parents may ask you when you go home for New Year’s. After having attended many events similar to this one, I can guess that HIV was briefly mentioned, but that many other conversations occurred that had little to do with HIV/AIDs.

The fact that there were two New Year’s Parties, one in which *tongzhi* men came together to have dinner and may have talked about how they were going to defer marriage when their parents asked them if they had a girlfriend, and the other on the pages of a government report in which everyone talked about HIV disease control can happen because of the institutional logics that do not require an assimilated truth but allow for a certain degree of performance and exaggeration. In the following chapter, I will build on this tactic for dealing with the state by analyzing how the structures of the cadre system encourage cooperation between low level government officers and these kinds of organizations.

## Chapter VIII: Colluding with Fragmented Authoritarians

When I first learned about the Table Day hijinks, I immediately wondered if this was some form of 'resistance' to the Chinese state. I began to think about the laborers in Scott's *Weapons of the Weak*, breaking their tools or dragging their feet to reduce productivity (1985). I thought about Ong's factory women becoming possessed and writhing around on the floor (1987). Was transforming *tongzhi* New Years Parties into HIV education reports, the *langren sha* signatures and the made up HIV tests some clever way to trick the Chinese state, to signal the organizers' discontent, even if they could not directly protest or directly criticize the government? However, as I began to talk more with organizers I rarely heard such scheming in terms of truly trying to deceive the government partners. Instead, people continued to assure me that their associates at the district CDCs understood what was happening; that there was a kind of tacit agreement that a certain degree of data hydrating is not only acceptable but perhaps even necessary.

In this chapter I will continue to discuss the kinds of political institutions in which organizations are positioned and why hydrating data is a mutually beneficial activity not only for the CBOs but also for the CDC partners. The relationships of reciprocity that come out of providing beneficial services to local cadres help these organizations not be noticed; that is to say it helps establish them as legitimate HIV organizations, even when they spend a great deal of time hosting Pride events instead of HIV interventions. In understanding this in the context of many different types of local organizations and CBOs messing around with the intention of national or provincial political mandates, we can build a model for *tongzhi* politics that looks like reporting data and avoiding conflict with the government, while at the same time redirecting funds and energy surreptitiously to fund *tongzhi* gatherings. This fits better, I argue, in a Kunming style of politics than more noted forms of *tongzhi* activism.

### Fragmented Authoritarianism and the Cadre Evaluation System

The study of *tongzhi* politics in terms of *everyday practice* requires disaggregating the state by focusing on different bureaucracies without assuming their coherence in terms of a larger concept that we call the Chinese political state (Gupta 1995). This can be difficult when it comes to studies of China, which frequently appears to be a hierarchical political system in which power is centralized within one party rule. However, since the 1970s and 1980s, a group of scholars (Barnett 1962, Lampton 1987,

Lieberthall & Oskenberg 1988, Lampton & Lieberthall 1992) have developed a framework for studying the Chinese political system as 'fragmented authoritarianism'. This framework challenges the idea that power in China is actualized through its vertical construction but rather asserts that "power can be easily manipulated, even effectively 'vetoed', at the policy implementation stage and that policy rationality is constantly being undermined by the self-interested, short-term and parochial calculations of institutional actors whose support is essential for the policy to even remotely succeed." (Mertha and Brodsgaard 2017, p. 3) What these studies have demonstrated is that as bureaucratic institutions in China move further down the the hierarchical structure and towards the local level, cadres and bureaucrats must adjust and adapt the policies to fit either their own personal interests or the pragmatic limits of what they can convince people to do. Often they need to partner with members outside of the formal political structure in order to implement a given policy and, in doing so, alter the policy from the original intention. This process rarely looks like resistance in terms of articulated expressions of discontent, but often effectively looks like 'selective policy implementation' at the local level (O'brien & Li 1999).

Studying Chinese politics from the perspective of local bureaucracies, reveals that it takes a great deal of social and political work to govern a particular village or city, and thus local bureaucrats or cadres must frequently '*collude*' with local partners in order to govern. This requires a certain kind of flexibility in which relationships with important figures allow the governing officials to accomplish certain tasks, but also requires a certain amount of non-enforcement or distortion of other tasks. This is captured in a popular Chinese saying, "From above there are imposed policies, and from below there are evading strategies" (上有政策, 下有对策) (Zhou 2010). Often local cadres partner with business leaders or wealthy landowners to adapt policies to maximize benefits for themselves and their new friends (Oi 1999, Edin 2003). This can result in the selective implementation of policies to protect local industries and ensure elite support for these governing officials (O'brien & Li 1999, Qian 2017, Sun 2015). It is thus not always the case that local cadres are simply working on behalf of local interests and standing up as a bulwark against national governments. This problem of disobedient local governments has plagued the Chinese state since days of imperial rule (Zhou 2016) and has caused many scholars to draw the limits to national, central power (Lampton 2014). Often the Chinese national government tries to push back against what it has labeled as local 'corruption' between business leaders and government cadres by moving cadres around China, thus limiting their abilities to establish local ties (Zhou 2016, Fitzgerald 2021).

Another strategy to hold local cadres accountable to national political goals has been through the national Cadre Evaluation System (Edin 2003a, Whiting 2004). An exemplar of 'audit culture', the Cadre Evaluation System builds off of the soviet style *nomenklatura*, which structures hierarchical evaluations of lower level bureaucrats by senior departments and divisions based on achieving specified quantitative metrics (Burns 1989). The hope is that if promotion or continued job security is tied to, for instance, GDP figures or tax revenues, then cadres will work hard to make sure to achieve these goals (Landry, Lü & Duan 2018). However, as described in the previous chapter, the reliance on quantitative metrics can obscure quite a bit in terms of actual practice and often incentivizes ways to 'game the system' (Whiting 2004). For instance cadres may put all of their efforts into the kinds of activities that will be evaluated, ignoring other objectives or goals of the state which are less visible thus creating a distortion of priorities (ibid). In other instances there is a kind of 'formalism', in which cadres do enough to officially check the box and pass the evaluation, even if the spirit of the directive is not achieved (Zhao 2007). In more recent years President Xi Jinping has put a greater priority on cadre education to mobilize officers around the spirit of national policies (He 2020) and tried to punish public officials in high profile ways in order to instill concepts of discipline (Mei and Pearson 2014). In response to ongoing pressure towards greater local compliance, local cadres do not necessarily adhere more closely to the national policies, but rather develop other strategies to avoid the blame and make distortions of the policy directives appear beyond their immediate control (Ang 2020, Li, Ni and Wang 2021).

In this regard, cooperation not only with business institutions, but also with CBOs has proven to be a productive way to achieve political goals while also avoiding blame. As mentioned in Chapter 7, in 2012 there was a push from the national government to purchase more government services from community based organizations (CBOs) (Wang & Snape 2018). Over the past 8 years, close relationships have developed between a generation of government cadres and CBO leaders who have learned that they can work closely together to implement policies, especially amongst key populations that are often difficult to reach (Noakes & Teets 2017, Teets & Jagustyzn 2016, Kan & Ku 2020). The local cadres also learned that they could outsource a great deal of this work to these CBO partners to help them achieve the quotas and metrics on which they will be evaluated, while also avoiding responsibility for the ways in which those quotas were achieved. For instance in the previous chapter, if there is a lot of pressure for CDC workers at the district level to test a certain target number of people for HIV, but extenuating circumstances would make achieving those targets impossible, it is better for CBOs

that operate outside of the direct scrutiny of local bureaucracies to fill in the extra testing data, rather than the cadres themselves (Li, Ni and Wang 2021).

While wealthy businessmen continue to be an important partner for local cadres, the leaders of these CBOs have also risen in prominence as important features of local statecraft (Howell 2015). In recent works, scholars have gone from calling these figures activists or community leaders, to the monicker “social entrepreneurs”, to signal how they use particular social ties to develop profitable relationships with the government (Hsu 2017, Hildebrandt 2016). Within my own research, leaders of CBOs would often say that without their contributions government officials would not be able to publish their papers or achieve their quotas. Furthermore because officials were dependent on CBO services in order to do their job, the CBO leaders implied that the government bureaucrats would overlook quite a bit of ‘messaging around’ as long as reports showed the appropriate data.

#### Collusion with Cadres

One reading of these relationships between local cadres and CBOs or businessmen is as a form of corruption, in which the original intentions of a program are distorted for personal gain (Hsu 2001). This might be what McDermott calls an illocutionary analysis of the situation, in which utterances, actions and interactions are explained as fully intentional (McDermott & Tyler 1983). In this configuration we could fully ascribe blame is an organization was producing fake data as trying to deceive the CDC. However, McDermott offers another form of analysis which he calls ‘collusional’. Despite the connotations that collusion is a kind of criminal deception, McDermott defines collusion as a kind of mundane form of interaction in which we as humans are able to coordinate with one another through “defining what can (or must) be left vague or made precise” such that we can fit into the contours of the world and prolong the current state of affairs (p.280). Importantly then, collusion is working together with others to agree upon and often ignore certain truth values, which, if made explicit, would “render the behavior that it seems to service, useless” (p. 281).

McDermott draws out three ways to appreciate or analyze language. In the first he describes propositional analysis, which looks at words as somewhat literal and context free. One can imagine reading through a transcript of a conversation and analyzing exactly what is being articulated. The second is an illocutionary analysis, which places words into structures and contexts, but thinks about how the speaker is using those words to express or manipulate their will within that context. In collusional

analysis, the third way, language and speech are selected and used as a kind of collaborative effort in order to keep the current situation in motion. He provides the example of a student reading circle in which the teacher and students artfully instruct each other on ordering readers and ignoring one student in particular so as not to fully disrupt the activity. In this way we might think of how the local cadres alter or selectively enforce policy not only in terms of their individual interests or the literal implications of what they say and do, but rather in how their behaviors maintain the current situation of the Chinese state and the local context. Ignoring certain directives as well as ignoring certain calls from the citizens becomes an important way of agreeing upon the situation and keeping it in motion. Ignoring a new policy that would change the taxation rate or education policy might be important in preventing uncomfortable and disruptive push backs from key figures. Not criticizing the central government's new policy, while choosing not to implement it, is a useful way to avoid unnecessary conflict that will not help the situation.

Consider, for example, this fantastic vignette from Xin Liu's description of the Bureau of Statistics in Guangzhou, China (Liu 2009). During an interview with one of the officials, Liu was told about the importance of accuracy and avoiding ideological commitments when collecting official government data. During this conversation the officer got on a phone call with another official who had a problem with a discrepancy in economic data collected by one of the newer cadres. The officer said on the call:

I know that both of you are correct, and nobody is wrong. But we can't have two different growth rates, can we? Nobody is saying that his figure is wrong. I know that he went to the factories many times in order to get a better estimate. Of course, he knows the truth. Do you doubt it? You are far more experienced and should know what I want or mean to say. Growth rates are not only about truth. They are also about face, and we've got to be consistent....The bottom line is that we cannot take to our Director two different figures for industrial growth. How can that be? If one is correct, then the other must be wrong. (2009, p. 11)

In this moment the officer was confronted with an uncomfortable situation in which multiple figures had been produced about the same situation. He thus needed to coordinate with the different statisticians to pick one set of numbers, the decisions being as much "about face" as it was about accuracy. Moving forward for the officers would mean making a decision about which numbers they could agree upon and then ignoring the other set of numbers and erasing them from the record. The decision about which numbers to present may be based on some ideas about the quality of the figures, but also would be based on achieving a balance between the different statisticians who had produced them and what would be the most harmonious way to run the office. From a purely scientific stand point, this may present certain problems about the truth value of the situation, but from a human standpoint it is both

understandable and not particularly corrupt. It is a kind of normalizing process that allows people to keep moving on with their day and avoid conflict over trivial issues that could lead to unnecessary quarrels.

Using this concept we might reinterpret the work done to fulfill the quota demands and the reaction of the CDC to accept them without too much interrogation as a form of collusion in which everyone knows that it is better and easier to just check the box and move on, rather than making explicit the exact number of negative tests done during a given month. Truly auditing the work that CBOs did or ensuring that each event was about HIV would just cause more problems for the CDC officers and would likely not help them reach their goals for their Cadre Evaluation System. Take as a counterexample Meng Laoshi in Chapter 3, who was very concerned with making sure that the money in Rainbow Skies was spent appropriately. Withholding funds and attending events to check on the money did not help the organization run more smoothly, but instead bred other forms of mistrust between her and Ran Ran and led to other kinds of work arounds with Ran Ran going straight to the international donors for budget approval. Simply asking for receipts and signatures may have proven just as effective without worrying if each yuan was spent on the exact and correct expense.

#### Finding 'Red Flags'

Let's look at a specific note I made in which the employees of Colorful Spring were figuring out how best to collude with their partners at the CDC. Since I was unable to do an ethnography in which I sat in the CDC office, I cannot speak to these officers specifically. However in observing the day to day practices of how the employees prepared reports for the officer and discussed their officer counterparts, I have at least some idea of how the Colorful Spring employees understood the situation. In this specific example from one of the Table Days, the employees took notice of the kinds of names that could be used for HIV negative tests sorted into a single district. In this discussion the different employees deliberated about what kinds of information will be good *enough* for the CDC partners to accept the report and keep working.

On this particular Table Day, Da Shu (Old Uncle) complained that he kept seeing the same name pop up over and over in the forms. 'What do you mean?' La Duo replied, 'We have checked them. Anyway you worry too much, as long as the phone numbers and test ID numbers are all different it doesn't matter.' 'Let me look at the forms,' Liu Laoshi intervened. He found that there was a *Hong qi* (红

旗)—literally translates as ‘Red Flag’, and a Hong Qi Qi (红旗旗)—‘Double Red Flag’.<sup>16</sup> ‘This makes no sense WTF! If it was a more common name then maybe we could have some repeats or similar names. There is no way that there would be a Hong Qi and a Hong Qi Qi in the same district!’ They ended up changing Hong Qi Qi to just Qi Qi. It was during this time that Da Shu, one of the older employees, started the following conversation:

Da Shu: You guys know what, last time I went to District A’s CDC the *laoshi*<sup>17</sup> that works there said, ‘This Dai Jiang guy on your list, I have seen him so many times! It’s like I have already known about him before.’

*This reminded Liu Laoshi to check District A’s list for more sloppily created names, and they found some more names that looked too much like each other.*

La Duo: I honestly thought it’s ok as long as they all have different phone numbers and test IDs.

Liu Laoshi: Then if anything went wrong you are the one to answer their questioning and inspections!

Da Shu: This “Yangzhong”! It’s the second time I saw his name! I will change it into “Yang Zhongning”, No.1495.

Da Long: Is it really necessary that we treat these little details so seriously?

Xiao Mei: Aiya, you have no idea how annoying this District B CDC can be! Last time when I got there with my summer shorts on the governor asked me, ‘Wow, aren’t you cold wearing things like that?’....Ugh! Bitch!

What we see in this conversation is a deliberation about what it means for an imaginary HIV test to pass as a real HIV test for the district CDC cadre who is evaluating whether or not Colorful Spring has met its quotas. For each test, as described in Chapter 7, there are many pieces of evidence that can be understood by the reviewer as true or not. Recall that for a negative HIV test they will need to provide a name, phone number, date the test was taken, test result, test numbers, sometimes birthday and photographic evidence of the test itself. In this conversation they are specifically thinking about names, and what counts as a plausible list of Chinese names for a list of reported names to go in a single report. My understanding is that Hong Qi is a name someone could have, but it’s a relatively silly name that is not very common. Based on Liu Laoshi’s reactions it is not impossible that there would be a Hong Qi who

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<sup>16</sup> In China, ‘Red Flags’ are associated as a patriotic sign of revolution, so older generations might name or affectionately call their sons ‘红旗’ or ‘红旗旗’ to be cute. However it is a funny coincidence that in English ‘red flag’ is a metaphorical sign that something is wrong or shouldn’t be trusted, since in this real life example the name 红旗 is potential evidence that Colorful Spring is making up names.

<sup>17</sup> *laoshi* is literally translated as ‘teacher’, but in Yunnan many people use the term as a general title for anyone to whom you want to give respect.



might come into the office, but it is unlikely that two Hong Qi's that would come into the same district office in the same month. Perhaps this month this was the case, however with claims and suspicions about how HIV testing is reported it would be better to just make the names look more plausible than risk true names being questioned.

However this level of credibility already speaks to a certain anticipation of how deeply the evaluator is expected to look at the data. For La Duo and Da Long, there is a certain understanding that the CDC does not actually go through the tables and truly evaluate each particular name. They believe the CDC cadres just flip through the paperwork, look at the summarized numbers and as long as it looks *plausible enough* it will be accepted without questions. To some extent even Liu Laoshi and Da Shu are also expecting the data to just look *plausible enough*, but the extent to which *enough* has been achieved is not clear. Obviously, as mentioned before, everyone knows that the phone numbers are just a random assortment of numbers and that if someone called these numbers the wrong person would certainly answer the phone. However, this is not a concern because everyone is convinced that the CDC would never do that, and if a cadre were to do so, they could make up a plausible excuse for why the number was wrong, 'you know *tongzhi* are very shy' Xiao Mei reminded me.

However, when it comes to names, Da Shu suggests that the *laoshi* at the CDC was providing some sort of instruction for what was believable or not and the degree to which they were willing to ignore the data being presented. It is of course very possible that the *laoshi* was not really all that concerned with seeing Dai Jiang so many times, and truly felt a sort of familiarity. However this is not how Da Shu or Liu Laoshi interpreted it. They saw this as its own kind of 'red flag', in which the *laoshi* was telling them not to be so sloppy with names they chose, or to not test the same person too many times. If they are correct and that is what the *laoshi* was doing, it is important to consider that the *laoshi* did not start an investigation into Colorful Spring. There was no call to Dai Jiang, or a meeting with Liu Laoshi to tell him directly that he needed to do a better job or they would sign up with a different organization. Rather the message was a subtle cue to Da Shu and Liu Laoshi to just be more careful or else the bureau might be forced to do something more disruptive. If such an interpretation is correct the bureau is also saying that they would prefer not to do such an investigation as that may impact their own quotas, so it would just be better if Colorful Spring was more careful.

At the end of the day, however, it does not matter whether or not that is how the CDC intended that statement to be, because it is how Colorful Spring understood that statement. After Da Shu told that

story to the room, this compelled Liu Laoshi to do an audit of names and make sure that they were good enough to avoid further scrutiny. We also see instructions within Colorful Spring between Liu Laoshi and his employees La Duo and Da Long in which the two employees had previously assumed that Hong Qi and Hong Qi Qi would be good enough not only for the CDC but also for Liu Laoshi and could be ignored. But Liu Laoshi is making the issue of names more precise is instructing his employees to choose better names. Within this five minute interaction Qi Qi had erased Hong Qi Qi and Yang Zhonging had erased Yangzhong, their negative tests were photographed, they were encased in the report and nobody ever thought about them again. They could finally be ignored. Colorful Spring's quotas were made and they could keep hosting *tongzhi* events.

#### Spangle's Commitment to Speaking Truth

Some still might be uncomfortable with this kind of collaboration and still insist that any level of faking data is a form of corruption. Truly one anonymous employee of Colorful Spring who quit told me that he saw this as a kind of deceptive scam, taking money that the government had generously allotted for HIV testing. However, from Liu Laoshi's point of view it is useful to consider what would happen if the data were not made beautiful. Before Colorful Spring had its contract with the District B CDC, TransChina was the district's main HIV testing provider.

Trans China is run by a flamboyant drag queen named Spangle, who is known for speaking truth, sometimes much to his detriment. When Spangle was unable to reach his HIV quotas he explained to me that he went to the district and told them that the quotas were set too high. During our interview Spangle complained that the quotas were just randomly chosen by a government committee and did not reflect what was reasonable for him or his organization to do. However, Spangle's complaints did very little to change the quotas that District B needed to complete. After all, District B received their quotas from the Kunming CDC, which received quotas from the Yunnan CDC, which had quotas from the Chinese national CDC. There was no mechanism in the system by which low level CBOs could file a complaint and reform the number of quotas allotted to a given district. As Liu Laoshi said, "it's Yunnan... the province made a promise to the national government that by 2020 they would accomplish 90% of the three HIV target goals. So then they could never adjust it." If Trans China did not hydrate the numbers, then the District B would need to do it, and this could cause other problems for the cadres. Therefore it is

no surprise that when Liu Laoshi came along and claimed that Colorful Spring would have no problem fulfilling these quotas, the District B office was more than pleased to transfer the business.

This is not an ideal system for collecting accurate data or rewarding honest CBO workers. Spangle was understandably upset with Colorful Spring for poaching his contract with the District B CDC. He 'exposed' Colorful Spring's 'faking scandal' to me early in the research by going through Colorful Spring's numbers and explaining how any seasoned HIV worker (which Spangle clearly was) could see that they were not possible. But the ease by which an outsider could look at the data reports and find the inconsistencies only showed how important it was for the officers and CBOs to find a kind of *harmonious* working situation in which they could get the reports done. From Liu Laoshi's point of view, there was no point in trying to reform the system: that was impossible. The best he could do was work within it, make himself indispensable to the cadres, and then use the resulting resources to do *tongzhi* events.

#### District CDC *Guanxi*

Another aspect of the conversations between Colorful Spring employees on Table Day provides illumination on the different relationships or *guanxi* (关系) that they have with different district officers. Anthropologists of China have long discussed the role of *guanxi* in theorizing how politics and business are done in China (Yang 2002). As Osburg writes in his work on Chinese businessmen, with *guanxi* everything is possible, without it nothing can get done (2013). Osburg further notes that amongst Chinese people the term *guanxi* can at times have a negative connotation, often implying a somewhat unsavory relationship in which favors are distributed unfairly. What is often preferred is the concept of *renqing* (人情)—social relationships. With *renqing* there is an emphasis on the positive emotions that people may have for one another, and the important aspect of *guanxi* in which favors are done less out of simple reciprocity, but also out of genuine affection and friendship (Kipnis 1997).

In this way, Liu Laoshi often used his relationship with the District D CDC as an example of good *guanxi*, or good *renqing*. In Liu Laoshi's origin stories of Colorful Spring, he talks about being alone in the wild, with no steady job. He would work as a kind of HIV testing freelancer for different government bureaus and through this work met one of the young officers in the District D office. She was working on a report that would be useful to her promotion and Liu Laoshi helped her collect data and even write sections of the report. Soon afterwards she helped him become the leader of Colorful Spring and she

has since become one of the primary officers in the District D district. The point, Liu Laoshi made, is that you needed to develop good working relationships with government officers and find ones who were similarly ambitious.

The relationship with the District D district was frequently compared to the relationship they had with the District B. Xiao Mei mentions in the above conversation, “Aiya, you have no idea how annoying this District B CDC can be! Last time when I got there with my summer shorts on the governor asked me, ‘Wow, aren’t you cold wearing things like that?’....Ugh! Bitch.” His expression of how nosy the District B officers are reflects that they have less good *guanxi* with the District B, and therefore the cadres are less willing to ignore what they are wearing, let alone the contents of their reports. It was often commented that the District B officers were much older than in other districts, which made them a bit more obnoxious when it came to overseeing every piece of data. Some scholars have noted that the cadre promotional scheme sets certain age limits for officers, and thus cadres past a certain age may be less motivated by the evaluation system (Landry, Lü and Duan 2018). It was thus speculated by the organizers that these older cadres had less incentives to collude and would just obnoxiously pick out random details to make Colorful Spring’s work more difficult. In this way, the reports needed to look more convincing in order for the District B cadres to collude.

It is actually the District A that triggered Liu Laoshi to take seriously the need to change the names of repeated test takers in the report. This is because the District A is the central and therefore most important district in Kunming. Colorful Spring frequently needs to use the District A to apply for provincial or national projects, and therefore needs to maintain particularly good relationships with the District A *laoshis*. If a District A cadre is trying to give them instructions that might impact future projects or reports, then they had best be paying attention to what was being made relevant.

Part of what becomes apparent in this discussion on the different relationships between Colorful Spring and the district officers is that *guanxi* is not a system of pure reciprocity. In this particular case there is no explicit quid pro quo about how to best hydrate numbers and what is given in exchange. Rather it is more a general feeling that everyone is benefitting one another, and the warmer the relationship the more people are willing to ignore certain behaviors to maintain the relationship and work. Some district officers are less willing to just trust the CBOs, and so spend more of their time trying to find errors in the reports; this requires a bit more effort on Colorful Spring’s part to make sure that those tables are particularly beautiful. Other districts however have developed really good working relationships over

the years and extend a tremendous amount of trust to Colorful Spring by barely checking the names or information at all.

### Is This Tongzhi Politics?

It is worth looking back here at claims by scholars like Zheng Tian Tian (2015), that the work these HIV CBOs are doing is not “*tongzhi* politics”, in order to initiate a conversation about what political participation and influence might look like in China generally. In Zheng’s chapter on HIV organizations she describes her work with an organization called Aixin in Dalian. This organization, similar to the ones that I studied, had a close working relationship with its local CDCs. It took money for its work on HIV/AIDS and used it to host activities where members would go out in public together, discuss issues related to their sexual identity and try to decrease prejudice and misunderstanding. However when it came to any potential confrontations with the state, the group practiced “non-confrontational strategies” or as one writer on AIDs NGOs put it “the power of existence” rather than the power of resistance (Wang 2010). “Few of these strategies,” Zheng writes “yielded any productive results” (2015 p. 129).

She describes two particular kinds of potential disagreements with the CDC. First are issues in which the depiction or representation of *tongzhi* men are either homophobic or exaggerate the relationship between HIV/AIDS and *tongzhi* men. One example she gives is a local newspaper which prominently advertised psychological treatment for homosexuality and suggested that homosexuality is not healthy nor legal in China (two statements that are untrue). Another example was when there were reports that doctors would discriminate against treating *tongzhi* men who were HIV positive. In both instances the organization wrote mild responses to petition the newspaper to stop running the advertisement and for the leaders of the CDC to instruct doctors to care for MSMs. According to Zheng, neither letter had much of an impact on the situation. The second disagreements involve instances where the police raided popular cruising sites for *tongzhi* men. One example included one of the bathhouses that Ai Xin worked in to promote safe sex practices. Rather than defend these MSMs, members of the HIV/AIDS groups chose to criticize the men for cruising and chose to reproduce the same rhetoric as the CDC about how these kinds of behaviors were increasing the rate of HIV transmissions. In terms of the bathhouse that they had connections with, the leader of Ai Xin apparently just said, “We’d better just stay at home and do nothing.” (p. 134)

Zheng, understandably, is frustrated that the organizations did not advocate on behalf of the MSMs and chose instead to repeat the same hegemonic discourses of the CDC that perpetuate prejudicial representations of *tongzhi* men. She concludes that:

“In this so-called activism, Chinese *tongzhi* work in collaboration with, rather than against the state. Deploying and appropriating state-endorsed AIDS causes, they draw on the dominant moral order as a legitimate resource for engaging in *tongzhi* activism while still seeking legitimacy in the mainstream culture.” (p. 137)

And then later writes:

Their collaboration with the state mitigates their *tongzhi* activism, leaves the social norm unchallenged, and allows further stigmatization of their *tongzhi* identity. Consequentially, AIDS politics and *tongzhi* politics stand in tension, associated yet dissociated at the same time. Furthermore, AIDS politics, although serving as an important tool and opportunity for the *tongzhi* men to advance *tongzhi* politics, albeit in limited scope, paradoxically reinforces the association between *tongzhi* and AIDS and perpetuates the stigma that AIDS is a *tongzhi* problem. (p.140)

While I can sympathize with Zheng's criticism of these organizations, and suspect that, in similar circumstances, the organizations that I have researched would do something rather similar, I consider her invocation of a '*tongzhi* politics' as a rather provocative claim. It seems to me that her understanding of what *tongzhi* politics *should* be, as opposed to these HIV organizations, is similar to the global LGBT movement's idea of politics. In this formulation, LGBT groups *should* be petitioning governments or public discourse to, at the very least, promote positive representatives of members of this group. While I do not personally disagree with this political approach, it is difficult for me to think of a similar political movement in China which has lobbied against popular opinions or official representations in order to change public perceptions of its group. As Zheng also admits, the Chinese censors often times muddle the messages so much that media battles about representation are frequently difficult to wage in the Chinese context. So how is an organization supposed to effectively stand against official government discourses if it does not have a platform?

Beyond lacking a mechanism to actualize her vision of *tongzhi* politics, Zheng's critiques also seem to assume the preexistence of *tongzhi* organizational interests that do not fit well into a Chinese political structure. In particular, I think that she assumes a certain degree of a *tongzhi* civil society as necessarily animating the leaders of a *tongzhi* politics, which is more similar to a Western conception of sexual group identity making, rather than a Chinese understanding of groups and individuals. Fei Xiaotong famously categorized Western social structures as "organizational modes of association" and the Chinese structures as "differential modes of association" (1944). Fei argued that Western individuals commonly saw themselves as members of organizations or collectives, in which they had certain

responsibilities to follow certain rules, but also would have certain shared interests as being a part of this group. In the Chinese system however, responsibilities and shared interests are determined not from belonging to a specific group, but through differentiated degrees of intimacy between different people. Thus kinship networks are (at least traditionally) the most important relationship and imply a high degree of loyalty and responsibility towards one another, whereas strangers or outsiders will be looked upon with suspicion.

The logic of LGBT political-identity-making stands in stark contrast to this “differential modes of association”, as it asks for people, based only on their shared sexual preference, to unite together around a common political project. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, with the use of Latour’s Actor Network Theory and the assembling of men through the *langren sha* night, it is important to not treat *tongzhi* as an already established collective, but a kind of association that is being constantly made and the meaning of these associations is still being deliberated. Similar to the example of Wang Laoshi, when he tried to tell all of the MSMs to join Rainbow Skies and not discriminate towards other homosexuals due to the shared threat of AIDS, Zheng seems to be telling these HIV healthcare workers that to be involved in a *tongzhi* politics they need to ally themselves with the men in the cruising locations being raided. However, we cannot assume that any given individual would or should necessarily unite around this shared political identity. What is more, as I suggest, there seems to be little evidence to me that in China, politics is done through this sort of shared identity/representation organizational structure, wherein people associate themselves with a particular identity group, which can then advocate on their behalf for political representation.

Rather it seems that Mayfair Yang’s prediction that *guanxi* is the main form of political association, as opposed to the West’s idea of civil society, is mostly correct (1994). In a *guanxi* theory of politics, relationships are leveraged in order to distribute resources or political protections to yourself and to people you may also feel responsible towards. *Guanxi* has become a greater political tool during the socialist concentration of resources in China’s recent history as the means to get around bureaucratic hurdles in order to obtain necessary resources for family or close friends. While some predicted that as individualization and market logics took hold, the power of *guanxi* would diminish (Guthrie 1998), many subsequent studies still document how *guanxi* continues to operate as a dominant logic for how business politics are done in China (Yang 2002, Osburg 2013, Uretsky 2016, Zhang & Zhan 2021).

Under a *guanxi* theory of Chinese politics, the leader of an MSM HIV CBO would be less worried about *tongzhi* as an abstracted social term, and more concerned with maintaining good relationships with those in power in order to help the *tongzhi* that he knows. Thus it becomes more important to think about the future survival of the organization and obtaining financial resources to keep paying employees' salaries and to have the money to host events. This approach to politics is problematic if the idea of an identitarian activism is to petition the state and try to exert influence over policies or representation that may impact an abstract group. However, if the logic of politics is to work the levers of power in order to get money and resources to people you know, most of whom are also *tongzhi*, then this kind of political machinations may in fact be more efficacious than Zheng may have admitted. This is not to argue for a cultural essentialist view that all Chinese people do *guanxi* politics and would not do *tongzhi* politics as Zheng described, but rather to at least use the Chinese concept of *guanxi* to potentially expand our idea of what politics means.

Rather than projecting the idea of policy influence as the main criteria for how effective these CBOs are, it would be more helpful to understand them in terms of the fragmented authoritarian politics that has historically been made available to Chinese citizens. Instead of mounting national or even local forms of criticism about the official stance of the Chinese party, for which they have limited hope of success, it may be better to try and change implementation of resources through relationships with local cadres.

#### Politics of Representation vs. Politics of Resources

What is also apparent in Zheng's criticism is that nearly every example she cites, the conflicts that she wanted the organizations to engage in more forcefully were instances of representation. Obviously, how *tongzhi* men are represented to the public has implications for how they are treated (i.e. the doctors who would not examine the men with HIV). But the point I want to make here is that Zheng, and many who have criticized these organizations, want them to take a stronger public stance that does not use the medical discourse of the state and presents a positive image of homosexuality to the public. For reasons that I will describe in the next section, this is important work to help homosexual identity be accepted in China if the 'normal' is set at the level of nation, but it seems antithetical to how politics is done in China when often times your influence only extends to interactions between smaller networks of people.



As Yang writes in her theory of *guanxi* as politics, in order to cultivate good *guanxi*, especially with political entities, you often must reproduce the dominant discourses. De Certeau makes the point that non-powerful tacticians may take hegemonic discourses and appropriate them to fit their own understandings and pragmatic needs, often deviating from the original intention (1980). This is particularly true when Chinese citizens are trying to convince government officials to fund their projects or, at the very least, not overly scrutinize their activities. The reproduction then of the “dominant moral order”, when read in a *guanxi* making frame, is not necessarily an endorsement of that order, but a recognition that being able to articulate it within a given context may be necessary. As I have argued throughout the previous chapter and this one, the usage of data and discourses is frequently more about negotiating relationships between the state and organizations as opposed to representations of truth. The HIV quotas are set not to actually calculate the rate of HIV positive people out of the given population, but to hold CBOs accountable for finding a given number of HIV positive people. Similarly the CBOs know that hydrating a certain amount of data is more about helping the government partner than it is distorting the empirical representation of the work. In fact the reproduction of the medical discourse has been, as I argue, useful in erasing activities that would otherwise be scrutinized as not suitable for these organizations. Under the tactics of promoting good *guanxi* and formalism, the reproduction of discourse should not be interpreted as discipline, but rather a necessary way of procuring resources.

JR once made the analogy that HIV in Yunnan was like pandas in Chengdu. I cannot find an example verifying that JR's panda analogy actually exists like this, but I think that as a kind of fable it helps to illustrate a particular kind of logic. The story goes that Chengdu is home to one of the largest panda breeding facilities in the world, and the local government has prioritized panda conservation and panda tourism as a broader economic development scheme. As a result, businessmen across Chengdu will develop wacky proposals to show how their businesses support panda conservation or promote the image of Chengdu as a panda tourism center, in order to gain government money or support for their projects. Throughout Chengdu businesses fasten giant pandas onto roofs or paint them on windows to demonstrate their commitment to the endangered species. In a similar way, the amount of money available for the project of HIV testing in Yunnan means that many people are trying to retro-fit whatever they are doing to get government funds to do HIV testing. It is reflected in the Meng Laoshi's quote in Chapter 3 where she spoke about how in the early 2000s even the police department came up with ways to do HIV work to get international money. Businessmen and corporate leaders are constantly trying to

figure out what the government priorities are, and to adjust proposals *enough* that the right low level cadre will agree to give funding to the organization.

I observed this kind of logic during a planning meeting for the Pride events. Colorful Spring was hoping that it would be able to coax private donors to support some of the events or at least provide donations. During the brainstorming meeting the employees could not anticipate what sort of events people might be willing to donate money towards, so they created an extensive booklet that included nearly every possible idea for an event that could be done for Pride. When I commented that this plan was rather ambitious they explained to me that they never intended to accomplish all of the events in the book, but rather planned to distribute it to potential donors and see which events drew support. Whichever events had enough funding would be done; the others ignored. During this explanation I came to realize Colorful Spring had produced the same kind of program plan proposal they use to secure government funding. These proposals were a way of testing out language that they could use to gain resources and then sufficiently provide cover for whatever event they ended up doing. In the panda example or this Pride Project guide, we see the same kind of tactic of mastering certain rhetoric of speech (Bakhtin 1986) in a formalistic attempt to procure funds. How those funds will be used is less important as convincing the powers at be to give them to you.

I continue to think that it matters that organizations like the ones I studied, or even the ones mentioned in Zheng's chapter, continue to host events for *tongzhi* men to gather and socialize. The fact that they represent the events in a way that strongly differs from the kinds of conversations and activities that actually occur reflects the political constraints on these organizations, but also shows how *tongzhi* politics is actualized. As scholars we need to expand our idea of political action to recognize alternative ways of contesting resources or policies, particularly in political systems that differ from Western structures. The point cannot be to erase these activities as not "*tongzhi* politics" or to compare them to an idealized version, but rather to understand them in their own terms.

#### Ethics of Chinese Politics

That being said, not everyone agrees on what *tongzhi* politics and community building should look like in Kunming, and within these social groups there are certainly internal conflicts and deliberations about the ethics of HIV work and '*tongzhi* community building'. It is common for employees or the leaders of competing organizations to spread gossip about other leaders, attacking how those organizations

spend their money. Importantly though, these critiques rarely have to do with how these organizations should or should not stand up to the government. Everyone recognizes that for these organizations to continue to get funds the game is to do just enough to maintain good relationships with the state, and then to use the money to do “other things”. The point of deliberation is almost always a question of whether the “other things” are the best way to spend the acquired resources.

This is perhaps best represented by the complaints of many of Colorful Spring’s former employees, especially the delightful gossip, Xiannü. I introduced Xiannü in my chapter on Rainbow Skies, but to follow his story a bit further, he began working with MSM organizations as an early volunteer with Rainbow Skies. After they were dis-assembled he moved through all the different Kunming MSM organizations as either employee, volunteer or active participant. During a recent stint he was one of the senior employees at Colorful Spring, and worked closely with Liu Laoshi in the Table Games. According to him, he was very committed to Liu Laoshi’s idea of Colorful Spring as being a bold chapter of global LGBT activity in the heart of Kunming, and eagerly assisted in organizing Colorful Spring’s first Pride Events. However, through the process of working with the organization he quickly became disillusioned with how the organization worked, and in particular how Liu Laoshi spent the funding. He knew from helping to draft project plans and reports and producing signatures exactly how much money the CDC was sending to Colorful Spring in order to sponsor these events, and yet Liu Laoshi was tight with money, refusing to pay for entertainers or food for guests. During one disastrous Pride Event, Xiannü described the work that he and other employees did to cook for all of the guests, while not getting any compensation or even praise from the leader of the organization. The people who had worked hard to put on the show, similarly felt under appreciated and Xiannü ended up paying them out of his own pocket. In the months following the inaugural Pride, Xiannü and many of the other employees all quit Colorful Spring en masse, because of their disillusionment with how the organization was being run.

I feature Xiannü’s complaints not to directly criticize how Liu Laoshi runs Colorful Spring, but rather to demonstrate the grounds by which organizers might criticize one another about the ethics and strategy of doing this kind of political work. The point is not that access to HIV funding prevents Colorful Spring from advocating on behalf of an LGBT community, but rather that this particular individual did not spend the money correctly. The relationship to the CDC itself is never questioned, and in fact Xiannü admitted that Liu Laoshi did a very good job of maintaining good *guanxi* with the government and securing important funds for their organization. I think that if Liu Laoshi were to hear Xiannü’s criticisms,

he would defend himself on similar grounds by arguing that actually he did the best he could in spending the money to help “build the community”. He would point to the fact that Colorful Spring is now the largest LGBT group currently existing in Kunming. Despite the pressures from the government, they were able to have a Pride event in Kunming, and continued to develop new ways to promote *tongzhi* social groups.

During one of our lunches, I asked Xiannü what he thought a ‘good’ LGBT organization would look like, in this climate of government oversight and HIV testing quotas. He offered up Tong Xin. I was a bit shocked. Tong Xin vocally denies that they are an LGBT organization at all, insisting that they are first and foremost an HIV healthcare organization. They may do some MSM outreach, but it is only to further public health goals. This is the same organization that Ran Ran complained never acknowledged that Pride existed during the entire month of June. As opposed to Colorful Spring’s lively office filled with young *tongzhi* men laughing and joking, Tong Xin’s office was bare and quiet, dominated by HIV testing equipment and focus on government paperwork. Why would Xiannü think that this very sober, close ally of the Provincial CDC, would be the best example of LGBT organizing in Kunming? “It’s not like they are perfect,” Xiannü admitted, “they are a very ‘by the book’ kind of place...but that means you know where all the money is being spent. Even if some of the events are less interesting than others, at least the atmosphere is joyous, the employees are competent and you can have a free meal out of attending. Most importantly,” he reemphasized, “the money and funding for the events is all very clear (*qingqing chuchu*--清清楚楚).” I interviewed many of the *tongzhi* men who regularly attended Tong Xin events as well, and nearly every single one mentioned that they really appreciated that the events were free and they always gave out free food. Tong Xin, they knew, was actually taking the government money and giving something material back to *tongzhi* people.

Politically then, the expectations that I collected from participants to these events, was not to try and change the political systems or reach out to a broader public, but to see which organizations could use their relationships to the government to provide the best services and events for *tongzhi* individuals. People compared these events based on price, the fun of a given activity and, of course, who had the best *xin xian rou* (新鲜肉)—fresh meat. Thus when scholars criticize HIV organizations for not advocating on behalf of the community within the Chinese political context, we need to be more clear about who is getting included in this community, what people actually expect to get from political institutions, and what

ethical conversations people are having to evaluate whether or not these organizations are doing a good job.

This is why ongoing research must be done from within these organizations and with special attention paid to practice, everyday conversations and deliberation. Focus on discourse and public facing rhetoric will always be deceiving as part of succeeding in Chinese politics is matching an organization's rhetoric with the government agency that they are trying to convince to fund the project. This does not mean that in daily office conversation or during *tongzhi* events focus is necessarily on the issues featured in the proposal. In the reports issued by the organizations they will always be crafting the message to fit public health goals and furthering positive impressions of HIV control. But in these public facing messages we are not privy to how the politics work within these organizations, nor the deliberations about how to spend the money: host a Pride event, organize a board game night, or take everyone out to dinner? These are the kinds of strategies and activities that are accomplishing the important work of assembling men into *tongzhi* social networks.

#### Post script—Spaces to Watch

A recently published article by Kan and Ku does a fantastic study of the partnership between CBOs and local government officials in Kunming by looking at how Party members have become more intimately involved in the actual projects that the CBOs do in order to ensure that funds are being spent well and that the organizations are furthering Party ideas (2021). In my research, I rarely ever saw representatives of the state, either in the office or at events. The distance that the CDC gave to Colorful Spring was important in allowing for this kind of work and politics to exist. However, as reports come out that President Xi is becoming increasingly interested in new forms of education to promote a particular kind of civil adherence we shall see what this looks like in the future (Tian & Tsai 2020).

This will be particularly interesting as Yunnan puts into practice new laws on HIV liability. In December 2020, the Yunnan provincial government passed a new law requiring medical professionals who test someone positive for HIV to tell that person's family or known sexual partners that the person in question is HIV positive (Fan 2020). The law is supposed to put more liability not only on the HIV positive individual, but also the test givers in order to track the spread of the virus and warn potential victims of HIV who may be unknowingly engaging in risky behavior. This contradicts conventional best practices (WHO & UNAIDS 2009), as most medical professionals will not share medically confidential information

without gaining the permission of the patient for fear of dissuading people from regularly getting tested. For *tongzhi* men this is particularly risky, as they may worry about being outed by their doctors. The leaders of Colorful Spring reacted to this new regulation by making a big statement in their WeChat groups that they would remain committed to not revealing the HIV identities of test takers, in theory ignoring the law. This will clearly test if they can effectively make the law mute. Based on my current understanding of how these policies work on the ground, I suspect that this law was more about signaling a certain set of priorities and commitment to the Yunnan public. I predict that many HIV testing CBOs and hospital workers will, in practice, ignore the directive. But here is another area where ongoing research is necessary to understand how lower level workers figure out ways to ignore directives in order to muddle through (Zhao 2007). Will shifts by party officials to promote political attitudes towards sex mean that these organizations will have less cooperative governmental partners? This will certainly be a topic for future research on the relationship between CBOs and political institutions.

PART III: DEEP PLAY

## Chapter IX: 'Cock' Fights

After spending over a year in Kunming, attending Colorful Spring events, making small talk in the office, visiting the bathhouse, I found it easy to be emerged in this *tongzhi* world. It became normal for me to joke about 'tops' and 'bottoms', I became adept at telling men in the bathhouse that I was not interested, and even HIV became less of a perceived threat and instead part of the working quotas. I found myself casually asking people about how many tests they had done in a day and gossiping about the flirtatious strategies they had employed to get their 'clients' into the office. It was easy for me to forget that for much of Kunming and for many *tongzhi* men living in the city, they were not embedded in this kind of *tongzhi* normal. Even for many of my close friends, it was easy for me to forget that when they went home to their families they would never have openly expressed such humor, gossip or personal desires.

When I began my research I was very concerned about the group's interactions with the state. I was worried about whether or not the state might learn about me and my research and force me to stop. I was worried that if the CDC found out about hydrating HIV testing data or the promiscuity in the bathhouse, they would punish the men involved. Despite my repeated concerns, the leaders of the organizations would keep telling me not to worry too much, that everyone knew what they needed to know and that there was no risk—the 'collusion' was working. This speaks to the efficacy of these men's ability to assemble us all together and create the safe guards, in terms of their relationships with cadres, their use of space and collusion amongst each other, to protect us from groups and individuals who would be scandalized by what they would have discovered.

I write this because, at a few key moments in my research, there were breaches in our little world. Members from outside of the norms of *tongzhi* men discovered what was happening and vocalized various kinds of criticisms. In this section, I discuss these breaches into this world, by comparing instances in which *tongzhi social norms* were repaired with an instance in which it was not. In comparing norm protecting and norm dissolving, I analyze both the resiliency of these groups and fragility of this kind of politics. It speaks to a kind of double bind, in which remaining quiet to the outside world and building productive relationships with the CDC officials can protect your assemblages from harm, while at the same time avoiding the kind of public-facing work of changing a public's perception of *tongzhi* men prevents broader acceptance and keeps the groups in a marginal position.

Part of what continues to remain unclear to me, is whether or not this strategy of creating underground worlds protected by their silence and collusion with the state was a realistic interpretation of



the political opportunities, an example of 'muddling through', or was a bit overconfident in its success. At times getting so lost in the world of *tongzhi* play and HIV politics, it was easy to ignore the precarious situation it was all built upon, how little support these men truly had outside of these networks. In this chapter I want to explore this tension by reexamining Geertz' concept of 'Deep Play' (2005), to set up a theoretical framework for understanding how forms of risky play and world-building can be challenged through the invasion of outside actors.

Let us begin thinking about this concept with a field note that my research partner and good friend, JR, wrote about a dinner that we had with an Auntie, who was in theory a good friend, one might say an 'ally' to our *tongzhi* network. This Auntie was a part of the Bentong Weiyi Rainbow Parents group, for mothers and fathers who had LGBT children, and had, over the course of volunteering with these organizations, befriended our mutual acquaintances who were transgender sex workers. One expected, and for me it largely was, a pleasant affair in which the normal kinds of *tongzhi* play were readily accessible. However, JR had the experience of a kind of breach in the *tongzhi* world that had become an expectation. Through her interactions with the Auntie and a simple cut of her hand, she became all too aware that the 'normal' that we had created for ourselves was less stable than we perceived. After this moment, JR became a bit more distant and cautious about some of our prior activities. I could not understand what was wrong, so I asked her to write a small reflection of the evening. The following excerpt is the evening from her own point of view.

'The dinner we had with the gay guys and a mother' by J.R.

It was raining when we first arrived at the time Jianping had given us, but he was running a bit late. We didn't wait around and instead decided to have a cup of sesame milk tea and buy some ingredients, mainly vegetables, for the dinner. Later on the way back from the market, we happened to run into the "little-mustache good-dancer" guy who we had met before at Spangle's party. We greeted him cheerfully. Upon arriving we met up with Jianping at the front gate of the *xiaoqu* (neighborhood) where the Auntie lived. Lincang had been chatting with the Auntie for quite a while already and told us that she (Lincang) would be the chef today.

That *xiaoqu* was quiet and green, it was a rainy day in Kunming, a bit cloudy and chill, drips of water sliding down from the leaves finally dropped onto wide-stretched umbrellas and our shoulders. When we went into the apartment, Lincang and the Auntie were busy preparing the dinner. For the first

half hour, it seemed that only Andrew, Jianping, the Auntie, Lincang and I were in the apartment. While the Auntie and Lincang were working on the feast in the kitchen, I was waiting besides the kitchen door in case there was anything I could do to help. When Spangle finally entered the apartment, the dining room (which was a little hallway between the kitchen and living room) suddenly became too crowded. I wandered around in the living room and squeezed myself on the couch with Andrew and Jianping. No TV there as I have recalled. Looking around at the furnishings, I realized at least half of the little lotuses planted in the room were rootless or only had very short roots stuck in the clear water, in some cases a very little incense ashtray. I couldn't help myself from asking Lincang and Jianping if Spangle, the leader of the Trans China CBO, had given them an HIV test after they came back from months of traveling around southern Yunnan. Jianping said yes and Lincang also nodded.

Because of Spangle's allergic constitution, most of the dishes were made into two versions. Therefore after 1 hour and 20 minutes we finally could eat the dinner! 10 minutes before the feast was finally put on the tea table, a young man came in the crowded, noisy living room, hidden from us in the bedroom around the corner. He moved a little stone block which I believed was probably a road block from some park, and used it as his chair as he sat by the tea table on which dinner was served. People called him Qi Ye— a very quiet, skinny guy at first glance, quite tidy in appearance and a relaxed figure. He did not have either a happy or hard expression on his face. "A fine man," I thought. He only showed his smile when Jianping or his mom were joking with each other, but barely talked or responded verbally to the conversation at all.

His mom, on the other hand, was much more active and fun and tried very hard to be generous and friendly. Even with Spangle's tedious requests about the ingredients of dishes, drinks and fruits, she satisfied him with hurried paces and a serious attitude. Soon she noticed we— meaning Andrew, Jianping, Qi Ye, and I —were bored sitting around the living room table. She paused her busy work in the kitchen and pulled out a family album from the bookshelf against the living room wall and one by one showed us— mainly me, because Spangle began showing Andrew his sex videos on his phone and Jianping was lost in his own world— old pictures of her father, a WW2 soldier and CPC member, and her son in his childhood.

I should say all the photographs were introduced in a very proud way, full of tenderness. But even so, at one point she said to me: "Well, he (meaning her son) used to be so cute and sweet. And now he turned into a not quite ugly but definitely not so good looking fellow."

Finally Lincang announced that dinner was ready. Everyone on the couch wriggled to the tea table which was inches away. The dishes included sticky tofu, pork, some vegetables, salad and beef which were all mainly made by Lincang, and the one-million-years eggs which Andrew and I bought, mainly for me. Spangle also bought some over-ripened peaches and he claimed he couldn't drink red wine or eat spicy food because of his oral ulcer so people cooked some pure 'white-flavored' food exclusively for him to eat, and diluted some red wine with Sprite for him to drink. Still, this did not stop Spangle from taking all the beef with him in a plastic bag when we left. During and after the dinner we had been chatting in pairs when I realized that I had mysteriously cut my left hand—my middle finger. I found the clean cut when I was having a *cha-cha* with Andrew. I felt panicked right away because all through dinner I had been with high-risk HIV-positive people, or as the Colorful Spring employees officially called them, "target people."

As I mentioned, I had "misbehaved" earlier that day and asked Lincang about her latest HIV test. Now the answer I got was a firm "yes"—she had been tested. I was realizing how deeply I feared the virus and its outcomes; the real reason I had *needed* to check in with her. And now the fear had been provoked with blood and crested to panic, just one and a half hours since I attended this weird supper. As soon as I felt the sharp pain on my finger and realized it was blood, a thousand ridiculous but unstoppable worries flooded my brain and numbed the back of my head.

I stood up but didn't know where to go, I moaned in silence, not knowing who to turn to. I walked quickly past the Auntie and her son, who were sitting between me and the nearest sink. I ran as much water as as possible, let it wash over my exposed wound while breathing deeply and talking to myself to calm down and return to as normal as possible. But the Auntie caught up with me much faster than I had realized: she followed behind me and brought out a little bottle of disinfectant (iodine). But at that moment I was so afraid, for a second I hesitated to reach my hand out for the fluid. Enough of my rational thoughts were still present to remain myself, to be polite and decent. I reached out my hand and she dripped some of the dark fluid on my cut finger while the water kept running. I smiled a bit at her, which I believe now must have been pale and forced, and secretly smelled the "iodine" on my hand to make sure it was truly a disinfectant product and not some mixture that would infect me with HIV or some other malicious concoction. I remembered the strong smell of the same type of iodine back at my home in Chengdu, so I sniffed a bit while she poured it on my finger, but here I smelled nothing.

So I panicked again: “Should I leave this dark-colored unknown substance on my open wound, or for the sake of my own body’s security wash it off immediately?” I chose a middle way: I washed it for maybe 3 seconds under the running water as the old lady revealed, “I am sorry, I should have brought some medical alcohol but I think we ran out of that. As for the iodine I don’t know if it could work or not either, cause it may also have expired.” I could only nod as response, thinking to myself, “Well, it would be better if you gave me the alcohol disinfectant because at least it’s transparent, so I would know if you added anything frightening to it.” But of course I said nothing and kept my exterior cool, as she had been so hospitable and attentive.

When we returned to the dinner table she asked Andrew and me our sexualities. Andrew said, “Cool, I am gay”. And I feigned my answer: “Well, I am not sure about myself.” And that, I felt, led to the next stage of this fantastic psychological eruption of buried anxiety.

After dinner we planned to go to Jinniu Park, which was famous as an original gay hooking spot in Kunming. The weather was chill and the air was a bit damp. After all it rained nearly the entire day. The atmosphere was dimmer but the sky was not yet dark. We stood at the gate to the *xiaoqu*, lit partially by a light adorning the automatic gate, waiting for the casual Spangle, indolent Jianping and transparent Lincang. That’s when Auntie lifted her face and said to me, “Being like this is not good for your long-term interests, take a look at this bunch (she pointed with her jaw towards Jianping, Spangle and Lincang who were still in the distance): eat well, play hard but happiness for them is short and vulnerable. So for you, it’s better to get married as soon as possible.” I was stunned and could only pull some meaningless sounds out of my stiff mouth. Luckily, to her that seemed to be good enough. She continued her lecture and tried to subtly clarify her point, adding, “if you still have the ( “chance to not be gay” I thought that’s what she wanted to say but didn’t) ... (then) don’t choose to live like them in this way. No matter what, people are supposed to get married. And people’d better not keep a life like theirs and you, as a female, you’d better ... huh? What do you say?” I met her eyes and saw the smile on her face emerge slowly when Spangle and the others approached. I finally regained my bearings and decided not to say anything against this woman, as some part of me still suspected she had poisoned me with the dark-colored scentless fluid that contained the HIV virus.

I thought it would be wise to please her and said, “Eh, right, I may think about that”. I felt lucky that I didn’t tell her directly about my homosexuality a few hours ago, so she may still have had a small

amount of “good” intentions toward me and considered making sure I became straight a worthy cause, which was her true aim in this one-way conversation.

Through all this talk, me and the Auntie were somewhat separated from others. Soon after we arrived at the park, I experienced the third bizarre moment of the night.

We were standing under a big fruit tree, centered around a guy (a man who was there with some friends for cruising) who had climbed up and picked apricots (or plum? I don’t remember) from the tip of the branches. The fruits were sour but the people were enjoying themselves; we were joking around and the air was light. But when I found myself standing shoulder to shoulder with the Auntie, she pointed to the group (of gays, of course) and commented again, “Look, look at them. Weirdos, but so normal. We have weirdos who are so happy and normal and normal people who are so weird.” She tried to explain a bit further: “demons want to be like mankind and men always act like demons.”

In August, I took a free HIV test in Chengdu and I was negative.

“Weirdos who are normal and normal people who are so weird” (Back to Andrew)

JR, as you may recall, is a lesbian who lived in Chengdu and came to help me translate and conduct interviews. Throughout our research together she was relatively unflappable, able to fully participate in *tongzhi* ‘dirty jokes’, and was more upset that Huang Cheng wouldn’t let her into the bathhouse than scandalized that such a place existed. During our research we interviewed many people who expressed a wide assortment of ideas in terms of ethics, but in any case, JR was almost always able to empathize with the speaker and their positions. JR has also struggled with her own family who, even though they had come to accept her sexuality, still pressure her to have a child and occasionally to get married. It was thus a bit shocking to me that his Auntie’s words impacted JR to such an extreme degree. For weeks after the interaction, JR was on edge and whenever I would bring up the evening she showed little mercy to the Auntie. I suggested that it was relatively normal for an older, Chinese woman to suggest that young people should get married, she was likely speaking from a place of caring more than anything else. Yes caring, JR later admitted, but it was caring in a way that was condescending, not out of empathy or understanding.

Later in our conversations JR clarified that what made the Auntie’s comments so jarring was that for much of the dinner she assumed that the Auntie was accepting of *tongzhi* people. If she could be

friends with people like Jianping or Spangle, then she must be open-minded and supportive. However, in referring to the gay men as 'weirdos' and 'demons', she revealed that in fact she did not fully accept us as humans. In the moments after the interaction, JR had told me that when we went to the park and some of the men were climbing the tree to pick some fruit, it was at first fun, just playing around and being silly. However, when the Auntie came up to her and made that final comment, she suddenly saw the men from the Auntie's perspective and they were transformed from friends into monkeys in the zoo. JR got the impression that the Auntie was caring about her, and the rest of us, in the same way that a person might care for a sick or disabled person, not from a position of equality but as a kind of charity. The care that the Auntie took, for instance, to attend to Spangle's complaints was less about being a good host, and more about attending to a pitiful character.

After writing down these reflections, JR has said that she would like to go back and interview this Auntie to get her full perspective. It is possible that JR (as she has later admitted) was being too sensitive and that actually the Auntie did not mean anything judgmental about what she had said. However, I included this story, to present a highly subjective feeling from a member of these *tongzhi* assemblages, who could not feel secure in the normal-ness that was being established. This moment shows how quickly we could go from a lighthearted dinner, in which the Auntie is sharing photo albums of her family, to this sudden sharp insecurity that actually she is treating you like a mental patient.

JR is also, in this passage, drawing a comparison between the judgement of the non-MSM world and the threat of HIV. During our time together, JR never expressed any anxiety about working in an HIV center and the potential threat of contracting the virus. In fact, JR made close friendships with some of our informants who were HIV positive. The fact that JR had such a strong reaction to the disease that night had completely escaped me, and was only apparent to me months later when I reread this passage. Much like the realization that the world we had created around being *tongzhi* was more fragile than we had initially considered, so too was our relationship to HIV. When the virus was a kind of data manipulation game used to acquire funding and build relationships with CDC officers, it was easy to forget that, for those who actually had the virus, the results could be life-altering. What is more, JR admitted to me later, that in this moment she realized that actually she was more afraid of the virus and harbored more stigma towards her sex worker friends than she thought. Just as the Auntie could cook everyone dinner and make us feel welcome in her home while at the same time judging our frivolous and foolish

lifestyle, JR could make friends with Jianping and Wei Wei and still harbor this potentially exaggerated and irrational fear that they might accidentally give her HIV.

The hidden fears that many of the *tongzhi* men had about HIV were profound and shaped their interactions in important ways that deserve more attention and thought than I can currently provide in the context of this dissertation. I interviewed men who were nearly 40 years old and had never had sexual intercourse because they feared they would get HIV. There were examples of men who came into the office to get tested on a weekly basis because a month ago they had oral sex without a condom and feared that their test results were a false positive. Rumors about the HIV status of an employee or leader of these organizations could cause potential participants to never attend any future events. For some *tongzhi* men, this underlying worry that attending an event with HIV positive members could suddenly lead to one's own death spoke to the perceived stakes and risks of participating in these social worlds.

### Deep Play

In Geertz's famous article on the "*Balinese Cockfight*" he popularizes the term 'deep play' (2005), borrowed from the writings of legal scholar Bentham (1840), who characterized a kind of play in which the stakes are so high that from a utilitarian standpoint the play is completely irrational. In Geertz's case, the play is cockfighting in a small Balinese village and the stakes are gambling away huge portions of the player's income. What we see in JR's story are these breaks in the kind of *tongzhi* play, in which JR began to wonder if the stakes of play were too high. In the snippets of conversation we get from the Auntie, we see that a concerned outsider clearly seems to think so. When she tells JR that these *tongzhi* and trans people, "eat well, play hard but happiness for them is short and vulnerable" and warns JR she had better get married for her own security as a woman while she still can, we can see this Auntie's point of view that the stakes of living a *tongzhi* life are reckless. Her understanding seems to be that people are seduced by the fun of their youth without taking the precautions they will need to get married and live a stable life. In this moment, JR also panics about HIV, worrying over whether she has been too casual with Wei Wei and Jianping, having fun with them without taking the necessary precautions to protect herself. Obviously the logic could be extended to the host of men who have sex without condoms as a form of intense fun, and risk the potentially life-threatening illness and intense social stigma, or even *tongzhi* men who attend a camping trip and risk being exposed to their friends and family.

What has always struck me as odd about Geertz' article is that, despite the utility of 'deep play' to describe an important facet of humanity, his ethnographic example is so poor. Obviously the stakes of losing one's honor and pride are important, but in Geertz's characterization it is notably confined to the symbolic. Even as he addresses the stakes of the wagers he points out that the gambling is so frequent that the money more or less just moves around between regular participants, and over time it all evens out. As he writes, " 'Poetry makes nothing happen,' Auden says in his *Elegy of Years*... The cockfight too, in this colloquial sense, makes nothing happen. Men go on allegorically humiliating one another, day after day, glorying quietly in the experience if they have triumphed, crushed only slightly more openly by it if they have not, but no one's status really changes" (p 78). In the gambling version of deep play, the stakes are built into the play itself, as a possible outcome meant to heighten the fun and tension of the game. In the same way that the non-drinking games that I described during the camping trip in Chapter 5 impose punishments to one's feigned propriety, there need to be some stakes to the game itself in order to make it fun. If you did not show some embarrassment while pantomiming sexual acts and just enjoyed it, then it would not be a fun game. Similarly, without the possibility of losing large sums of money and one's honor in a cockfight, the game would not be nearly as meaningful to the players or the spectators. Even as we might say that the stakes of winning and losing are higher in the cockfights than the camping trip non-drinking games, these stakes are built into the game itself and there are mechanisms for winning back your money and reclaiming your honor.

Geertz notably does not use the police raid of the cockfight in the beginning portion of his article as a data point of the stakes of play. This seems in part because he does not truly see the stakes of the police raid as sufficiently high, or 'deep' as it were. After all, despite the occasional raids, the penalty is usually some nominal fine which the gamblers all agrees to pay collectively. The lessons that the police try to impart upon the people are never fully learned.

The police raid, however, does point to another potential type of deep play, in which the stakes of the play come from consequences and reactions that originate outside of the game itself. If a more zealous police department had actually rounded everyone in the gambling ring up and thrown them in prison, this could have had much higher stakes for the gamblers and their families going forward. The fact that the police could raid cockfights and inflict penalties on them is known to the players, and thus the risk is accounted for, but it's not built into the game design itself. If they could have their cockfights and avoid confrontation with the police, that is certainly better. The fact that they continue to risk such



confrontations with the police is the real conundrum that perplexes rationalists like Bentham. Perhaps a better example of this might be the sherpas in Sherry Ornter's *Life and Death on Mt. Everest* (1999), in which she examines sherpa guides risking their lives to take wealthy tourists to the summit. In such cases everyone is well-aware that their risk of death is much higher, and the tourists are in a sense compelling the guides to risk their own lives. And what exactly is this risk for? The exhilaration and sense of accomplishment from climbing the highest mountain in the world? For the fun of it? For the honor? The risk of death is not built into the game in the same way that losing a wager is built into the cockfight.

The question then for the players of the *tongzhi* games that I have been describing is, to what degree are the risks built into the games they are playing, and when might they suffer consequences for things beyond their control? Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie might say that there is a risk to having anonymous sex in the bathhouse, but making sure that you wear a condom protects you from the risk of HIV. It is a way to make the the play more shallow, if you will. Liu Laoshi might also say that the bonds and networks that are being built during the weekly *langren sha* nights are a way of hedging the risks of being a *tongzhi* and not getting married. If you have a network of *tongzhi* friends who can help you as you get older, then you do not need to worry about some of the concerns that the Auntie might have. All of these MSM CBOs would say that colluding with the CDC to accomplish their HIV testing quotas is a way of structuring the play such that they have some political protection for their group. In this way the potential threats posed to the *tongzhi* men may not be so worrisome, just as the police raids were not the real stakes of the cockfights.

And yet, there is still a lingering feeling that perhaps the situation is not as stable as you think. Perhaps the Aunties are just being polite to you, even as they consider you a little demon. The concept of deep play points to the ways in which it is easy to get lost in the fun of the game, so confident in your invincibility, that you fall victim to its risks. If the sherpas and the wealthy tourists did some cost benefit analysis, like Bentham would want, they might decide that the thrill of reaching the peak of the mountain is not worth the risk of death. And yet they (at least the wealthy tourists), are so enraptured by the thrill of the climb that they do not fully consider the risks. Might the organizers who are hosting Pride Events or allowing public sex in the bathhouses, similarly have forgotten how risky their behavior is? How easy it would be for their normals to be breached.

In the following chapter I will make this very point. During my time in Kunming I experienced two of my own breaches of a *tongzhi* normal. During one visit to the bathhouse, the police came in and

interrogated each of us about the activities in the space. Similarly, in the month of May, Colorful Spring was called up by the police to “drink tea” as a way of investigating events that they considered activities that were too political. In each of these moments I began to question whether or not my friends were as secure as they initially seemed to be. Despite these interruptions, it did not take long for the ‘weirdos’ to go back to their “normal’ lives, thus proving the organizers right: such interruptions were built into the organization of play.

However, I also look into an incident wherein a *tongzhi* bathhouse in Chengdu was shut down in October of 2020. This incident was a public spectacle and unearthed the same kinds of public critiques that the Auntie had whispered to JR. It reminded all of us that even when our own worlds felt stable, there was always the threat of other Chinese people discovering what was happening and voicing their disapproval. This leads to my final discussion about how the pragmatism of HIV CBOs still must find ways of grappling with public discourses that may accuse them of being ‘chaotic’ or lacking in *suzhi*.

## Chapter X: Breaches and Repairs

The situation, as I have described thus far, is that people higher up in the national and provincial governments set target goals for HIV testing, oftentimes interested in presenting impressive data to the international community. Lower level district cadres become tasked to make sure that those targets are reached as part of their yearly evaluations. They cooperate with MSM organizations and other types of CBOs to make sure that, no matter what happens (unprecedented pandemic included), those targets are satisfied. The MSM organizations do their best to test enough people to fulfill their goals, but where they are lacking they produce the needed data so that the paperwork is made beautiful. In exchange the *tongzhi* men get financially compensated, and everyone agrees that the S&M show for the Pride celebration counts as an HIV educational intervention. As long as the actors that I have listed thus far are holding each other accountable, then this normal can be maintained. Events take place, people have fun, some people get tested for HIV, cadres are promoted, higher ups feel that progress is made.

The problems that may occur for our actors are when people begin to notice things that they are supposed to ignore, and it becomes impossible to continue to hold each other accountable. This causes what Garfinkel would call a 'breach', which means an interruption to the 'background expectancies of everyday life' that make it difficult for the players to understand what they should be doing (1967, p. 54). Sometimes these disruptive observers are new employees or casual participants who can be instructed on how to follow the rules, thus quickly and easily repairing the breach. One such example occurred when Pao Pao, during his first Table Day, asked a question that would require admitting that they needed to create a certain amount of imaginary HIV tests every month:

Pao Pao: Why couldn't we just write the names on the testing boxes and take pictures when we did the tests?

Liu Laoshi: Don't ask so many questions, just do what we tell you to. Now you tell me how to predict which test goes to which district list while you are doing the tests?

Xiao Mei: Pao Pao, I have asked this question three years ago and now I knew this is the right way to do it. So you can shut up and go now!

In this instance, Pao Pao is told to 'shut up' and continue with his work. What may have been for him a genuine question about productivity became an important lesson on the things he should not pay attention to. I have often wondered what would happen if some undisciplined new employee came into Colorful Spring and began asking too many questions about HIV test reporting. Xiao Mei told me that one

time a disgruntled employee that had quit tried to call the CDC and report that Colorful Spring was engaged in fraudulent data production. The CDC, according to Xiao Mei, did their own form of instructions and nodded along to the former employee's complaint and then completely ignored the report. Nothing was done about the allegation and life continued on as normal. The CDC effectively let the former-employee know that they were not going to notice this data hydration without a much larger breach occurring.

While oftentimes these breachers can be ignored or instructed on how to behave, sometimes the breacher can force non-participants to take notice of the activities in such a way that is not easy to repair. This is particularly the case when certain kinds of activities are noticed by a nosy Auntie who makes you doubt the games you have been playing, a police officer who wonders what Pride events have to do with HIV interventions, or a nasty band of internet trolls. As I shall discuss in this chapter, such breachers can be more difficult to instruct and can be quite disruptive to the normal that has been established. It's thus not enough to create normals through the limited collusion of a small band of actors; oftentimes retaining such a normal requires attending to pesky breaches from unexpected actors.

In this chapter I will describe three breaches that threatened to dis-assemble the organizations and groupings that I have thus far analyzed. In the first two examples, the police departments notice that these HIV CBOs are not doing exactly what they might have expected. During these incidents, the police were not able to just ignore certain behaviors and actions, as the given conditions or other publics were holding them accountable to respond to the behavior of the CBOs. Here I further the concept of deep play by taking the 'police raid' as a possible threat to the MSM organizations. That being said, in these two examples, much like the police raids of Geertz's cockfights, they were disruptive to the games, but did not ultimately pose much of an existential threat. I then compare these instances to a third moment in which another MSM bathhouse in Chengdu is exposed to a larger public and is ultimately closed. In analyzing the differences between the MC bathhouse in Chengdu and the two police raids in Kunming, I argue that this demonstrates the affordances and limits of these HIV CBOs thus far. In creating social networks that remain relatively hidden from public view, they are able to do a lot of work in holding each other accountable and creating important deviations of resources to support their gatherings. However, in so doing they never engage with public discourses in such a way that could instruct the public about how they want to be treated.

## Breach 1: Anti-Homophobia Day

May 17<sup>th</sup> is International Anti-Homophobia Day, and to commemorate this day, Colorful Spring was planning an event in which people would come to the office dressed in rainbow colors and wearing makeup, or at least matching rainbow t-shirts, and then go out to Nanpingjie (南屏街), one of the busy shopping streets in the heart of Kunming, to ask people what they knew or thought of LGBT people. They hoped to video record some of the answers, hug some people and edit together an optimistic video about how the residents of Kunming could embrace (literally) sexual minorities. This was not a new idea for Colorful Spring, or for the other organizations in Kunming. The year before, Colorful Spring had done the exact same thing and Bentong Weiyi had done their own version. Nor was Colorful Spring's event going to be particularly large in scale. Liu Laoshi estimated, based on the previous year, that there would only be about 10-20 people in attendance. To put this in context, Nanpingjie likely would have hundreds of people bumbling about on any given Sunday afternoon, including many people from businesses and companies, also dressed in strange clothes, asking pedestrians questions and taking recorded evidence.

So it was a shock to Colorful Spring when on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 11 days before the event, they got a phone call from the police asking about this “International Homophobia Day” and requesting that they come to *he cha* (喝茶)-‘drink tea’. Drink tea, I was told is a euphemism for when the police want to ‘correct’ a breach, to reprimand a group without fully launching an investigation, or make an arrest. Clearly Colorful Spring was in trouble. Liu Laoshi, knowing exactly what was happening (he had experience with police after they canceled the 2018 Pride Events), quickly explained the event on the phone and then said that they would be canceling it. Nonetheless the police insisted that they come by the office and answer some questions about this particular event.

The Kunming municipal-level police's involvement meant that the breach was big, necessarily dragging in all of the district-level police offices as well. In the coming week, Liu Laoshi jumped from office to office meeting with the District B police, the District D police and finally culminating in the large meeting at the District A office. For that meeting he, along with all the Colorful Spring staff, met with the Kunming city police, the District A police, the CDC and representatives from the *shequ* (社区) (a smaller council of community officials that help to govern collections of neighborhoods). In all of the meetings they basically were required to say the same things. ‘The event was going to be small, they didn't think it

would be disruptive, but upon further consideration they decided to cancel it. So there will be no event.’ One would think that the first phone call would suffice, but in fact this breach necessitated that each of the different police offices all demonstrate that they were seriously investigating it.

What exactly was the breach in question? After all, they had done events like this many times. It seems that the police took notice of the event because of the demands of two other, somewhat abnormal, conditions. The first is, of course, the coronavirus. In fact, Colorful Spring was rather cavalier towards the coronavirus, keeping their office open even as other businesses were forced to remain closed. By May, Kunming had not seen any new cases in months and most economic and social activity had returned to the city. A few more people in an already busy outdoor public square would not be a significant increase in the public health risk. But in terms of the continued official health restrictions at the time, no public events should be hosted that might attract a larger crowd of people who could potentially transmit the virus.

The second condition that Colorful Spring was breaching was not a ‘new rule’ and Colorful Spring should, as JR put it, have been fully aware that hosting an event during this time was sure to induce a greater degree of scrutiny. This was the breach of *liang hui* (两会)—the weeks long set of meetings at the national, provincial and city levels in which the state sets its policy agendas. One of the rules of *liang hui* is that there should be no major public events during this time, especially around sensitive topics that might cause criticism or scandal for the government. Thus during this time police were instructed that they should monitor any group or event that might erupt into a political scandal more closely than usual. Colorful Spring employees believed that after their 2018 Pride Events had been flagged by the police, meaning their WeChat account had been put on a special list that could be monitored for such activities. Typically *liang hui* is held near the beginning of the year, but due to the Covid 19 outbreak it had been moved to May, which is partially why Liu Laoshi had not considered it when planning the events. This is not, according to JR, really an excuse, as *liang hui* is heavily covered on the news and is important for any semi-political organization to monitor.



*Screenshots from the original WeChat posts announcing the Anti-homophobia Day event*

The official reasons for the investigation were a concern for public health restrictions and interference with governing events. From what I know of Colorful Spring events, it seems likely that the way that Liu Laoshi described the original event plan to the police officers was in fact how the event would have occurred. There likely would not have been many people in attendance and most people walking through Nanpingjie would not have even noticed what was happening. However, if the police saw the Colorful Spring event through their WeChat post, it is easy to see how they might have feared that it would be a large, disruptive affair. Similar to the Colorful Spring event posters that advertised the Camping Trip I featured in Chapter 5, the virtual representation of the event almost ironically relies on discourses of a radical queer world that is not truly expected to be actualized. By using symbols that would create linkages to the Global Gay movement, Colorful Spring was saying, 'come join in this worldwide event, where you do not need to feel marginalized for your sexual identity.' The poster featured pictures of international Pride parades with scantily clothed men, drag queens and expressive people of all ages decked in rainbows, glitter and feathers dancing in the streets. In assuming that their WeChat

group was being viewed by a very specific audience with specific imaginations and understandings about what would happen in reality, they made the mistake of not expecting the police to notice. They did not expect that unrated peripheral participants would see this poster and mistakenly take the virtual representation of the event as potentially actualized.

The meeting in the District A office was at first relatively polite, as expected. They asked about plans for the event, whether or not it was funded by a foreign government, and how many people they thought would come, all of which Liu Laoshi explained. However, it became relatively contentious when one police officer remarked, ‘why do you need to do LGBT events at all? Aren’t you just supposed to be helping the CDC with HIV testing? Why not focus on testing and avoid all of this gay propaganda (*xuan chuan*--宣传)?’ In Liu Laoshi’s telling of the story in the Colorful Spring office, he describes his own reaction as infuriated, needing to do everything in his power to stop himself from erupting in the police officer’s face. Yet he held his tongue. People in the office nodded, and indicated support for their leader in both his outrage and restraint. The *shequ* leaders also were a bit irritated that Colorful Spring hadn’t even registered when they moved into the building. Liu Laoshi (at least in his re-telling) secretly rolled his eyes. He would be damned if he started to *bao bei* (报备)--report to the *shequ* committee.

By the end of the meeting the police were satisfied that the event was canceled, but warned Colorful Spring about doing these kind of events, threatening to shut them down again. Here is a paraphrased conversation I had with Liu Laoshi shortly after District A meeting.

Andrew: Could the police just come in here and shut you down?

Liu Laoshi: Nah, we are too important to the CDC. There is no way they could finish their articles without us. I could tell that they (representatives from the CDC) were sweating during the whole meeting, because they would be lost without us.

Andrew: But could they really stand up to the police in such a matter?

Liu Laoshi: Maybe they couldn’t stop them from shutting us down, but they would make sure that we continued to exist. Maybe they would rename us and we would work under an alias, but they wouldn’t let us disappear.

Andrew: But perhaps they will get nervous if you keep doing these kinds of events that put them at risk?

Liu Laoshi: Nah, they gave us a little warning after the meeting, but nothing is going to happen.

Andrew: What about the upcoming Pride events next month?

Liu Laoshi: That, we will have to wait and see, but I think we should be able to. After all if it was really just about the Covid 19 restrictions and *liang hui*, then in June they won’t care what we do.



They will have forgotten and we should be able to do the Pride Events. That is, *if* it is truly about the Covid 19 and *liang hui*. If it's about something else...then we will find out.

Sure enough, after the police meeting, life in Colorful Spring went back to normal. They even hosted an alternative Anti-Homophobia Day event as a live stream as an act of defiance showing that they would not be totally silenced. They cast three interviews about homophobia on Blued, where supposedly over 1,000 gay men watched and interacted with the guests.<sup>18</sup> They continued other events and hosted the Pride events as expected.

### Breach 2: Raiding the Bathhouse

As you will remember, the District C MSM HIV organization was located in a bathhouse and often tested men who came there to have sex with one another for HIV. Intercourse was not confined to back rooms or the sauna, but openly engaged in two semi-public rooms. Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie actively participated in making the bathhouse a safe place for men to have sex by passing out condoms, offering free HIV tests, and encouraging them to fulfill their desires. Before I ever entered the bathhouse, I was a bit shocked that such a place was allowed to exist in China. Whereas more high-end gay bathhouses in the West or other parts of Asia like Thailand's Babylon (Dacanay 2011) clearly mark their intentions, this bathhouse had no such indication. It was conscientiously hidden from most of the world, and to the untrained eye would resemble any other sauna in Kunming. For all the years that this bathhouse had provided space for men to have sex, it seemed likely that at some point a straight man would have entered, been groped or touched and then caused some sort of breach.

'Actually no,' Huang Cheng explained to me. It was my second time visiting the bathhouse and I was curious how the place had been allowed to stay open for so long and avoid trouble. 'Sometimes we might get a straight guy in the bathhouse, but normally they figure out pretty quickly what kind of place it is, and are so embarrassed they will just leave.' 'So then you have never had any sort of run-ins with the police or authorities?' 'Nope, none at all,' Huang Cheng explained. 'Actually, the owner of our bathhouse has really good *guanxi* (关系)—relationships.' This may have meant with the police, or someone in a higher position of authority. 'After all,' Huang Cheng continued, 'if we ever had an officer come by it

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<sup>18</sup> I write 'supposedly' here because Blued and other streaming platforms in China apparently do their own version of hydrating their data and frequently indicate that more people are watching a livestream than actually are. Here I think is another opportunity for future research, especially since everyone I talked to seemed to think that this kind of inflated viewership was normal.

wouldn't be a problem. We are not doing anything illegal. As long as you aren't selling sex or knowingly spreading HIV, it's not a problem.' Upon further review of this claim, I don't think it is entirely true that public sex in the bathhouse were completely legal. China's Criminal Law Article 290 prevents people from organizing "licentious activities" and a violation can be prosecuted with prison time (Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China 2017). However, the meaning of "licentious activities" was ambiguous enough for Huang Cheng to believe that the bathhouse was not in immediate risk of illegality.

I was at the bathhouse that day with Pao Pao, who was helping me with translations. We were preparing to leave around 6pm when the bathhouse closed, but Pao Pao was curious about some activities in the lounge, and lingered a bit longer. I stood off to the side with Huang Cheng and some of the other patrons and chatted a bit about finishing up their quotas. It was near the end of the month and it looked like Huang Cheng would have a long night finishing all his tables. Just then a man in uniform walked in the room and began to look at the activity. I don't think that anyone was having sex at the time, but at least some people were cuddling together in ways not so normal for a typical Chinese bathhouse. One patron was a bit concerned, asking Huang Cheng what was happening. 'Oh don't worry,' he replied, 'it's just the *bao an* (保安)—security guard, they come in and make sure that everyone is safe. It's a good thing we have this kind of security.' The man walked out and quickly returned with 5 fellow officers. They flipped on the lights and asked who was in charge. It was quickly clear that they were not just the *bao an* and the lazy sensuality of the afternoon quickly dissipated, leaving a handful of naked men struck with panic as they were confronted by a squad of police officers.

Huang Cheng immediately stepped forward, making clear that he was the leader of an organization that worked with the CDC. He was not the boss, but he was there to make sure that everything in the bathhouse was safe. They were curious why a person associated with public health would need to be present in a bathhouse. They also needed each of us to give a statement about what we were doing there and if we had engaged in or witnessed any inappropriate activity. Fortunately, Pao Pao and I were both dressed, as we were brought into the former dark room, now fully lit and asked to provide our information. Condoms lay about the room, a testament to Chen Xiaojie and Huang Cheng's efficacious teachings, but also a damning piece of evidence about what had occurred in that room only moments earlier. The officers interviewed Huang Cheng, perplexed about why a men's only bathhouse would have any use for condoms. Despite the obvious, everyone interviewed stood in solidarity, insisting that none of us were engaging in sex, nor had we seen anyone else engage in sex.

The police were professional, and seemed eager to finish their paperwork and be done with the entire affair. They allowed all of us to continue to use our cell phones, allowing me to message JR for advice the entire time. They also seemed to decide they did not really want to get involved with a foreigner, and didn't question the fact that I had no ID, electing to just write me out of the report. Huang Cheng had managed to escape to the office and busy himself with filling out tables while the officers questioned the rest of us. I snuck back and talked with him, under the actual excuse that I needed to charge my phone. He advised me to just tell the truth. 'We hadn't done anything illegal,' he insisted. After about an hour we were let out of the bathhouse. Soon after we were standing outside the bathhouse and watched Huang Cheng ride away with some officers to make a statement at the police station.

I tried to meet with Huang Cheng in the following days to interview him with JR and track what was happening with the bathhouse. He explained to me that the owner had decided they needed to close down for awhile, but not to worry, it would be open soon enough. Remember, the owner of the bathhouse had *guanxi*. As he predicted, after 4 weeks or so he invited me to come back to the bathhouse: it was fully reopened and ready for customers. He never granted me a full interview on the topic, and I have to assume that there are many details of the bathhouse raid that I will never fully know, in particular how exactly Huang Cheng and the owner prevented the incident from becoming a larger scandal.

It wasn't until months later that I found out the trigger for the police raid on that particular day, or at least the reason as it came to be understood through the gossip and popular moralizing of the workers at the Piao Piao Bathhouse. I met up with Chen Xiaojie at the Kunming Pride final event where he explained to me that the official police report was that a straight man had come into the bathhouse, was groped by another patron and then reported the incident to the cops as public indecency. However, according to the gossip in the WeChat groups, people had seen the man who reported the incident hanging around the bathhouse before and insisted that he had an account on Blued. It seemed that it was a case of jealous lovers. The object of this man's affection had been spotted in the bathhouse with other men and he was trying to get him in trouble. However, this was just the most agreed-upon of many speculative theories in the WeChat group. Some had claimed that I was the one who called in the police, saying that a straight foreigner was there and got offended, and then including a picture of me. Chen Xiaojie found this incredibly hilarious and was excited to correct the WeChat record.

## Guanxi and Chinese Politics

For both Colorful Spring and the Piao Piao Bathhouse, the police interventions were both responses to behavior that was not explicitly approved by the state, and yet at the same time were relatively typical. While the Anti-Homophobia day occurred at a politically inconvenient time, the idea that Colorful Spring would celebrate an international LGBT event with a small group of friends happens multiple times throughout the years, and of course the Piao Piao Bathhouse maintains its erotic atmosphere nearly every day of the week. I remember at the time being incensed by the relatively arbitrary exercise of power, that the great panopticon could just see a WeChat post they didn't like or get an anonymous tip and in an instant destroy the lives and work of these men.

It is for this very reason that most organizations go to great efforts to remain as invisible and uncontroversial as possible. There was one meeting between two Chinese organizers for the Kunming Pride events, where they talked themselves out of hosting even a bar event for fear that the police would see it and ask questions. One group in Chengdu refused to let its members wear the organization's shirts in a marathon, worrying that the press might be too curious. Even Colorful Spring and the Piao Piao Bathhouse typically try to plan events that remain relatively invisible to the police and the broader public. To the extent that the Anti-Homophobia Event had a public audience, the small number of people and the one-on-one interactions meant that the event itself was a far cry from a public demonstration that might cause unwanted attention. The bathhouse is located in a relatively private place where it's unlikely to be seen or heard of from anyone that didn't already know the nature of what happens inside.

As I spent the weeks after these interventions fretting about the future of these organizations, it is striking that neither leader showed much outward concern. In fact, both during and after their interactions with the police, Huang Cheng and Liu Laoshi exhibited utter confidence that the organizations would be okay. This may have just been a performance for me, their employees, and the others who were worried about their organizations, but it also speaks to the degree to which they are prepared for this kind of intervention and the strategies they have taken to ensure their survival. The fact that the police did not regularly raid the bathhouse or shut down Colorful Spring events speaks to the degree to which they understood that actually the police were also willing to ignore quite a bit as long as it was not too disruptive. This was particularly true if you understand the logic of the state when it came to two important concepts: fulfilling quotas and maintaining *guanxi*.

After spending so many years working with the CDC, filling out paperwork and attending the demands of an endless series of forms, both Huang Cheng and Liu Laoshi were well-aware that the government officers, including the police, had their own quotas that they needed to meet for their evaluations. In the case of the Anti-Homophobia day, Liu Laoshi later explained that he could understand why the police officers had to meet with them, after all they had quotas for investigations and arrests. Surely during the the weeks and months leading up to *liang hui* they would need to prove to their superiors that they had looked into some pre-determined amount of potential cases. Their decision that they needed to look into Colorful Spring entailed certain interventions, like all the district police officers going to the offices, lest they appear incompetent on their evaluations. As annoying as it was, each meeting, including the longer meeting in the District A office, never extended beyond 30 minutes.

Similarly, the officers who came to check out the Piao Piao Bathhouse were likely required to look into what happened because a person had made a report. Once these kinds of police calls had been made, they had no other choice but to go and look for themselves and write up some paperwork in the system as evidence they had taken the necessary responses. I suspect that these police officers were well-aware of this bathhouse long before they investigated it, and they knew exactly what they were going to find. In the way that they choose not to notice the condoms and unquestioningly took our statements that no sex had occurred, they were trying their best to avoid the obvious. Huang Cheng and the owner of the bathhouse realized that, after the raid, the best response was to not invoke further provocation and just stay quiet for a short period. Once the police were given enough time to move on to other matters, it would be safe to reopen.

Liu Laoshi similarly understood that the level of scrutiny towards Colorful Spring was also temporal. During *liang hui* the police departments are all under greater pressure to make sure that no organizations do anything that threaten this politically sensitive time. This also occurs during important anniversaries or when some important leader is visiting. During these times the state can exercise immense power, but it will only last during these moments when everything must be perfect. As soon as the governors' meetings are over, the dates pass and the dignitaries go home, everyone will let down their guard and things can go back to normal.

There is a way in which the modern Chinese state tries to create Foucault's panopticon such that they are able to randomly and arbitrarily catch people in acts of disobedience (1977). Certainly the government is able to accomplish this feeling to an extent, but there is a way in which the bureaucratic

institutions that govern departments like the Chinese police both demand that they act like a panopticon while also giving them the affordances to practice the same kind of formalism that Colorful Spring and the CDC exhibited when they did their HIV education events. They do enough to check the box and say that they investigated the matter, without doing the difficult task of ensuring that it stays closed down. It is not that all the actors are being disciplined by fear that the state is watching, rather they are learning how to not be noticed when the state looks, and to regroup when the state turns its back.

The second important concept that Huang Cheng and Liu Laoshi understood was the power of *guanxi*. This concept was discussed in Chapter 8, and is also frequently invoked theory by regular Chinese citizens for how to deal with the state, especially during these kinds of moments of police meddling. Both Liu Laoshi and Huang Cheng derive a great degree of security from their relationships with members in the CDC. In the previously mentioned vignette, Liu Laoshi brags that the CDC could never afford to lose Colorful Spring because without them they would never have enough data to finish their reports. He even suggested that if the police did try to close them down, they would just start a new organization under a different name. Huang Cheng similarly assured me that the bathhouse was safe because of the relationships that the owner had with somebody in a powerful position, and that is why it lasted so long without any interference from the police. It is telling that for the District A meeting, Liu Laoshi invited his partners at the CDC to attend, and Huang Cheng similarly volunteered to the officers that he was working with the CDC, as a way to tell the police that they were not just chaotic homosexuals, but partners of the government itself. To mess with them would involve dealing with another department's projects and could potentially risk whatever *guanxi* they might have with that department.

The confidence that these men put into their relationships may be overstated. It is easy for people to have competing *guanxi*'s with different important people, and when they come into conflict with one another they may not be as strong as they think. In laying out my understanding of the role that the CDC could play in protecting organizations like Colorful Spring, an informant I had in Chengdu who worked for an MSM HIV CBO was quick to point out that the police always have priority over the CDC. If the police truly wanted to shut Colorful Spring down they could certainly do so, irrespective of what the CDC might need or want. That being said, I think that Liu Laoshi's calculation is that by demonstrating that they have *guanxi* with the CDC, it becomes a further hurdle in the police officer's willingness to shut them down. If they had no protection from a government agency, the officer would not need to worry about the decision, but with the CDC officials there, they knew that shutting down the organization would

be more complicated. Liu Laoshi also understood that the police interaction with Colorful Spring was a momentary breaches, and once they are satisfied and the breach is resolved, they quit paying attention to Colorful Spring, giving them the space and opportunity to re-group. In a sense ,every interaction with the police is a finite interaction that needs dealing with, whereas the *guanxi* with the CDC is an ongoing partnership that needs to be maintained.

Despite their bravado, both men took immediate steps in the period after the police breaches to attend to their relationships with the CDC. Liu Laoshi made sure to help take on new research students that the CDC was mentoring who needed field sites. He also invited several key CDC officers to the next Colorful Spring event, which was a barbecue in District D. In addition to the usual gathering of young *tongzhi* men, this barbecue also had middle-aged women with their husbands and kids in attendance. Huang Cheng went a bit further and organized a multi-day trip to Anning with several close friends at the CDC, where they went apple picking and were treated to a large feast. *Guanxi* after all requires constant attendance and establishment of not only feelings of reciprocity but also *reqing* (热情-)—warm feelings towards one another (Yang 1994).

#### Is this Deep Play?

I suspect that Geertz did not treat the police raid itself as deep play, because it was not seen as particularly deep by his players. If they knew that this would occasionally happen but the stakes of the raid were relatively low, or at least not high enough to stop them from gambling, then perhaps the state was not the real stakes posed by the cockfight. I wondered, as I analyzed my notes and wrote this chapter, if my informants too were not actually worried about the threats posed by the police. It was annoying that the police might come and interfere, but their relationships were strong enough and their actual infractions minor enough that they were just manageable breaches, and even the police officers would go back to not noticing them in due time.

As we shall see in the following section, no organizer can treat such breaches with total indifference. Even well-connected organizers may find themselves in positions where the state or other actors can ruin their life's project. Preventing such dangers from manifesting requires constant attention, which is the reason why Huang Cheng and Liu Laoshi must maintain the ongoing positive relationships with government officials. During one interview, Liu Laoshi complained that the problem with the police was that they had no project to work on together, no way of building up their *guanxi*. They had tried to

think of potential projects or even infiltrate the department with *tongzhi* associates that were also police officers, but to no avail.

The fact that the leaders of these organizations spend so much time trying to avoid state inspection speaks to the threat it poses. They are far more like expert sherpa guides, looking out for perilous rock slides or dangerous ice patches, than they are to cock fighters making heroic gambles. They see the ongoing threat and are constantly trying to learn the rules so as to protect themselves from peril and continue to play. Liu Laoshi and Huang Cheng thus watched carefully when in October of 2020, one of the most prominent *tongzhi* bathhouses in Chengdu was dramatically shut down.

### Breach 3: The MC Bathhouse

The MC Bathhouse in Chengdu, Sichuan was similar to the Piao Piao Bathhouse in that it was a place where MSMs could freely enter and engage in sexual intercourse with one another. However, unlike the Piao Piao Bathhouse, MC was much larger in scale and had a greater reputation across China. Located in the center of Chengdu's commercial district, MC branded itself from the outside as a gay bar, with flashing lights, posters for dance parties and the beats of house music emanating from within. On a Friday or Saturday night you would frequently see a line of young men waiting to get in, like any trendy gay club. The clientele on most nights was considerably younger than the men who went to the Piao Piao bathhouse, and represented cities from across China. Chengdu has a reputation for being one of the most openly gay cities in China, and the MC bathhouse is one of the main gay tourist attractions. The facilities are also slightly higher quality than the Piao Piao Bathhouse, built with long winding hallways for men to slip away with their newfound lover. They also have a room lined with beds, but unlike the Piao Piao Bathhouse's facilities, MC's beds are equipped with lube and condom dispensers and covered in plastic, which makes them easier to clean.

When I was living in Chengdu, MC was partially a joke to indicate that a person was particularly bad or naughty. Many of the more 'high quality' (有素质的) *tongzhi* men had never been to MC, and worried about the cleanliness of having sex with strangers in a room down a dark hallway. Others might build a trip to MC into their weekend party plans. If they did not meet anyone interesting at Hunk Sky, the most popular bar, then they would head over to MC to ensure that they had a satisfying end to the evening.



Also similar to the Piao Piao Bathhouse, MC had close connections to an HIV prevention organization in the city of Chengdu. According to the historical work of Wei Wei (2012), when the Chengdu CDC began to engage MSM organizations to do HIV testing, they relied heavily on business owners of gay bars and bathhouses like MC to run the organizations. Thus Tongle, the primary HIV organization in Chengdu, had a history of working closely with the owners of MC, not only for public health matters, but for other businesses and political influence. These men have, as far as rumors go, excellent *guanxi* with all of the important officials. Tongle, as far as HIV organizations go, works very closely with the CDC and much like Tong Xin, emphasized that they are first and foremost a health organization, not an LGBT organization. Much to the disappointment of other organizational leaders and some employees, they took great pains to not host any events that might convolute that message. Tongle never had an office in MC in the same way that the Piao Piao Bathhouse did, but they regularly sent volunteers there to pass out condoms and schedule HIV appointments.

Much like in Kunming, a comfortable normal had been reached. The CDC met their HIV quotas, Tongle had a place to consistently recruit HIV testers, and MC could be a popular nightlife location without too much scrutiny. That is, until an unwanted observer noticed what was happening in MC and tried to hold the police accountable. By the fall of 2020, I had been living in Kunming for nearly a year and had not been in Chengdu for quite some time, but still the news of the MC scandal shook much of the *tongzhi* world across China. I was unable to interview anybody about the details of the scandal itself, so this story is primarily an analysis of its media representation.

As the story goes, an undercover heterosexual infiltrated the MC bathhouse during the National Holidays weekend after hearing rumors about what happened inside. He brought along his phone and began to take photos and videos of crowded rooms full of men having sex with one another. Soon after he posted these images on Weibo, where they attracted attention from a predominantly heterosexual audience that could not believe that this kind of debauchery was allowed to occur in the middle of one of China's most developed, larger cities. The posts quickly turned into a kind of homosexual voyeurism, with people wondering why it was that *tongzhi* men felt the need to seek out such unsafe and 'disgusting' venues to have sex. One user on Zhihu wrote:

In fact, this has less to do with homosexuality per se and more to do with male nature. A gay is a man first, whether he plays the top or the bottom. Gay people don't want to be women, transgender people want to be women. Men, the nature is too promiscuous, they want to have sex with the entire world, so they can have more offspring. It's a genetic reality that can't be changed. It has nothing to do with being gay or straight. The same thing is written in the genes when a

woman gives birth to a child. (Please don't refute it with small odds). Of course, we are not entirely slaves to our genes, and moral codes and social laws can suppress the desires in our genes. The implications of such comments were that, while all men had extreme biological sexual desires, heterosexual men were controlled and moderated through their relationship with women and the “social laws” of marriage. Homosexuals, however, were destined to engage in this kind of promiscuity, unconstrained by normal moral codes. Others brought up the fact that these men frequently were married to straight women, and still could not help but cheat on their wives and put these women in danger. If gays wanted rights in this country, some posters insisted, then they needed to start taking responsibility for their actions.



成都MC昨天出现一名艾滋病传播者一晚和十三人发声无保护的关系. 厉害了!	Yesterday, at Chengdu MC, an HIV positive person had sex with 13 people without wearing a condom. Wow! Impressive!
效果很好的	Wow! The results are really good!
所以我不去那种地方	So that is why I don't go to this kind of place.
我昨天看直播一人山人海	Yesterday I saw a livestream—it was a sea of people!



MC昨晚一千多人	Last night there was more than 1,000 people in MC
不到五百个储物柜	There are not even 500 lockers!
眼睛都看花了	Everyone is just blurring together
一晚上总一千多人，不是一千个人在里面	In one evening there are always more than 1,000 people who come, but not 1,000 people inside at one time
每时每刻都有人在啪啪啪，一个床上六七个人群P	All the time there are people in there having sex. In one bed there are 6 or 7 people having an orgy!
佩服有的人，抹点口水就进去了，无油无套	You have to admire some people! They can just use a little spit and enter. They don't need lubricant or condoms.

Soon, as online discourse is prone to do, the rumors began to grow and became more and more insidious. Two damning rumors in particular became part of the canon of the MC Bathhouse. First, the rumor that the place regularly hosted over 1,000 gay men all having sex with one another circulated. The second is that many of these men were known to be HIV positive and were still having sex without a condom. It fed into stereotypes that gay men were only motivated by an insatiable need to have sex and chaotically ignored the risks of HIV to satisfy their carnal lusts. Figures began to be thrown around about how 90% of all new cases of HIV were spread by gay men, or how gay men in fake marriages were infecting their wives with the virus and should be thrown in prison. Another poster wrote:

Whenever people talk about homosexuality, the gay community always says confidently: you must agree with homosexuality or else you are homophobic, you are out of date or you are lower. But when gay people make trouble, such as when a national survey found that more than 90 percent of the increase in AIDS in recent years has come from gay men, these groups are silent.

The fact that Tongle had ongoing relationships with MC and took steps to distribute condoms and encourage regular HIV testing seemed to be of little relevance to many online warriors. Instead, people

began to wonder why the government was knowingly spending money on an organization that helped men engage in such reckless sexual behavior. Shouldn't the government be trying to stop this kind of indecency, not giving money to gay men to pass out lubricant?

Even among *tongzhi* the incident caused a degree of self-reflection and embarrassment. One *tongzhi* posted, "it was a shock to me. Especially a few photos... I shouldn't have read it. Since then, I have had a strange sense of guilt and remorse." I had multiple conversations with men in Kunming who wondered why it was that gay men were so chaotic when it came to sex. Why couldn't they just have happy monogamous relationships like straight people? Other leaders took the approach of explaining this 'indecent' behavior as the understandable product of a homophobic society that doesn't allow gay men to live in stable, happy relationships. Xia Shu, the former leader of AiBai, a *tongzhi* organization in Chengdu, wrote of the incident:

But in the meantime I also have to admit, there were some people in this community whose ways of gaining sexual pleasure are definitely not so "decent". In terms of that, I believe if everybody had enough money to own and enjoy their own residences, if everybody had enough resources to get enough information about sexualities and safe sex, if everybody had enough social space to get to know the people they wanted to know, the "indecent" behaviors and the space they occur in maybe could be less frequent and shrink. But all the good wishes here were started with a hypothesis of "if". Therefore in reality, being "indecent" is a choice some people in this community had made to satisfy their real needs.

For leaders like Xia Shu, they tried to turn the public discourse's attention away from the behavior of the bathhouse to the 'indecent' behavior of the internet gawkers, who easily condensed these images into homophobic tropes.

Still, the attention that these posts received meant that the incident could not be ignored. People across China were writing and talking about the MC Bathhouse. Even my straight sister-in-law in Shanghai called me to ask what was happening in Chengdu. This level of attention required that the police take action, and so they ensured that the bathhouse was closed down, and opened investigations into claims that people were knowingly spreading HIV, and how complicit the owner of MC was in this behavior. Even Tongle was called in to answer questions about their relationships to MC, although it seems that they will continue to operate as usual. I had originally expected that the incident would follow the pattern of Panlong, wherein they would lie low for a few weeks or months, and then slowly return. This still might be the case, but as of the writing of this chapter (March 2021), my Chengdu friends assure me that this was the end of the MC Bathhouse.

## The Problem of Publics

Reading the online messages about the MC bathhouse felt for many *tongzhi* similar to how JR felt when the Auntie whispered to her ‘demons want to be like mankind and men always act like demons.’ Only the year before, there had been an official legislative poll of the country that signaled overwhelming support for same sex marriage (The Economist 2020). When restrictions had been placed on the depiction of homosexuals in the media, hashtag campaigns popped up across the internet signaling broad solidarity with *tongzhis* in China (Hernandez & Mou 2018). There has been a feeling in 2019-2020 that at least among younger people, there is true acceptance of homosexual identities. And yet, as people read these comments and reflected on the activities of the MC bathhouse, there was a fear that perhaps the public was not as accepting as they had previously thought. Perhaps *tongzhis* were too chaotic or lacking in *suzhi* to truly be a welcome part of the Chinese mainstream culture. Maybe people had acted like they appreciated *tongzhi*, but in fact harbored the idea that *tongzhi* were spreading HIV/AIDS.

The leaders of MC surely felt as though they had gone too far. If Liu Laoshi and Huang Cheng can say that they benefit from good *guanxi* with the CDC, the leaders of MC can claim that and more. Being such a popular place for *tongzhi* sex in the middle of Chengdu’s busiest part of town, MC most certainly had developed important relationships that extended beyond HIV workers and the CDC. They must have experienced their fair share of police raids before this incident, and felt confident in their ability to maintain the previous normal. So it was likely a shock when they became the center of public outrage and disgust.

The important difference between the events in the Piao Piao Bathhouse and MC was a case of who noticed what, what could no longer be ignored, and how people were holding each other accountable. When it was just a single complaint from a heterosexual who wandered into the Piao Piao Bathhouse, the police could investigate, do their best to ignore the condoms and obviously misleading statements, erase the sex that had happened, and allow the institution to continue. However, when the ‘netizens’<sup>19</sup> of China became aware of videos and rumors of spreading HIV, they did their own work to erase the condoms provided by Tongle and force the local law enforcement to notice HIV positive people spreading the virus (whether or not that actually happened). Under such circumstances, MC could not

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<sup>19</sup> Netizens is a popular term in China to represent frequent internet users, a combination of the terms ‘net’ from internet, and ‘citizen’. It could also be understood as an online community.

hope to continue as it had previously. If nothing else, the building had been marked by the public as a space in which lewd activities occur. The careful work that had been done to separate the bathhouse from the heterosexual norms that existed outside of this world had been broken. Now if MC were to reopen and people noticed a line of men waiting to get in, they would almost certainly create another online outrage campaign that would cause more trouble. In this way it is not so much the police or the Chinese government that was responsible for closing down MC, in fact they likely were helpful in keeping it open for so many years. It was an outraged public that made the conditions that allowed this *tongzhi* world to exist impossible going forward.

In fact in each of the three breaches described, the threat is always that a broader public will find out about these *tongzhi* assemblages. In the Anti-Homophobia day, the police are worried that a public demonstration in a busy shopping center might garner unwanted attention that could disrupt *liang hui*. In the Piao Piao Bathhouse and the MC Bathhouse, we have a case of an unrated participant noticing and forcing other people to notice. In the Piao Piao Bathhouse instance, they compelled the police to notice, and the police needed to investigate it to prevent a broader public from also observing and asking why the police had not done anything about this kind of activity before. The key different with the MC Bathhouse is that the observer did not take his videos to the police, but instead went directly to the online public, who would then build up a larger reaction and call to do something.

The *tongzhi* assemblings in my research find themselves in a double bind in terms of how they should engage with the public. Obviously under the current situation, it is easier to create small gatherings that do not exist in the public consciousness. In the small gatherings of play, you can avoid public scrutiny and create your own norms and relationships. Avoiding activism and public critique not only helps you build better working relationships with the government (who can provide you funding and political support), but it also spares you from these broader forms of public scrutiny. Under the current situation, Liu Laoshi and Huang Cheng feel a sense of security in their play because they only need a small collection of actors to agree on what to take seriously and what to ignore. At the same time, as long as these organizers do not do the kind of public-facing work of convincing the public that they are not 'demons' or conduits of a virus, they will always need to play these kinds of games, and risk their underground worlds becoming exposed.

This exposes a strong counter-critique to the work of HIV CBOs. Throughout this dissertation I have argued that there exists a great deal of political work that is being done through assembling men

together and creating the norms and rules that organize them. I have argued that we should to some extent ignore the public discourses and look to the ways in which these groups create their own internal sets of play and fun. However, if the main political project in China is not to influence or advocate certain policies to the state, but produce broader social norms amongst a Chinese public, then these groups do have noticeable limitations.

## CONCLUSION

### Chapter XI: Conclusion

In Chapter 2, I stated that this dissertation was a start to an academic career in which I began to think about gender and sexuality beyond the legacy of Foucault. What I meant by that assertion is that I have found Foucault's treatment of the power of discourse to influence the mental states of human individuals to be totalizing and to some degree unhelpful in terms of looking forward. Throughout this dissertation I have provided ethnographic examples in which dominant discourses were located within particular situations and interactions, and illustrated that rather than being a disciplining mechanism these discourses are frequently manipulated, defied and reinterpreted to fit the particular exchange between the people involved. The point has been to show, using ethnomethodology that meanings of these discourses (aka social facts) is determined not through the epistemologies they create or the ontologies they imply, but rather through the specific ways that people hold each other accountable to their application.

In the first section of this dissertation, I introduced multiple discourses about *tongzhi* identity, i.e. chaotic sexuality and *suzhi* (quality), and located these discourses/social facts into the daily practices of MSM HIV CBOs. In particular, I discussed the usage of these concepts during moments of playful interactions between the CBO organizers and their 'target population'/*tongzhi* community members, and how together they reinterpreted these discourses. In Chapter 3, I described moments of sexual play in which Huang Cheng and Chen Xiaojie helped to redefine the implications and applications of the 'chaos' discourse around sexuality as a productive way to ensure that men having anonymous sex in the bathhouse use condoms. Whereas the discourse itself may have tried to discourage this kind of sex more broadly, Chenrgong and Chen Xiaojie narrow the ideas around being responsible to one another by insisting that truly chaotic men are the ones who have sex without condoms.

In Chapter 5, I introduce a similar discourse around *suzhi* which in the anthropological literature is supposed to impose a form of governmentality in which *tongzhi* men restrain their sexual behavior as a tactic for broader acceptance by the Chinese public. What I demonstrate through an examination of *tongzhi* dirty humor, is that rather than being disciplining, the *tongzhi* men I encountered had a somewhat ambivalent relationship to the idea of *suzhi*. Frequently they mocked the kind of propriety discourse in favor of parodying the kind of sexual selves that *suzhi* is supposed to discipline against. Rather than



producing a particular mental state, the discourses around “sex”, are employed by the men in these groups as a way of relating to one another and building social ties. They become proficient in these humorous rhetorics of sex and *suzhi* as a way of creating a self attached to others, as opposed to a particular mental state or form of discipline.

In Chapter 6 then, I finish up this section by indicating that many Queer activist scholars have become preoccupied with discourse as it relates to dominant understandings on the nation-state level, however if we are to trace the application of these discourses and the shifts in meaning, then it is better to look at the quotidian assembling(s) of particular groups of people. Here I suggest that ideas about what a *tongzhi* need not be adjudicated as an abstraction, but rather should be understood in terms of how it is used to bring people together within specific moments. Through my descriptions of a weekly game of *langren sha*, I demonstrate that as a social fact *tongzhi* is important in that it orders people to come and participate in the event, but once the men are all together, the implications of what it means to be *tongzhi* mostly become unmarked. It is such an understood background to the assemblage, that it need not be commented on or further the interactions, and becomes replaced with doing other things. The point here is that in thinking about what the impact of these discourses are to the ordering and structures of people’s lives, not only are they locally interpreted, but their ongoing presence moves in and out of signification. By tracing out when and how ideas like *tongzhi* are used and interpreted in these spaces, through messing around and regular interactions we might see how these discourses will grow and evolve.

What becomes apparent in these three chapters is that discourses are less about producing regimes of truth and epistemic realities and are more about how people develop relationships with one another. It becomes the underpinning for gathering together, or becomes a rhetoric that allows for communication. In a similar way in Chapters 7 and 8, I argue that rather than producing governmentality the Chinese state endorsed discourse that links MSMs to HIV/AIDS and public health issues is often used in localized interactions to facilitate relationships between these organizers and CDC partners. Through my descriptions of ‘hydrating the data’, I explain that these organizations are engaged in a kind of ‘collusion’ between their organizations and the local bureaucrats to exchange data which can be helpful for these bureaucrats’ careers as a way of obtaining funds and political cover to host *tongzhi* events. In these situations the data and descriptions of gatherings as public health are less understood as representing the truth as rather a way of establishing connections and relationships between the different individuals.

In these five chapters, I describe a *tongzhi* world in which discourses have been 'queered' in a sense to produce their own normal. The meanings of these ideas and concepts may not reflect the dominant discourses of the Chinese nation state exactly, but they allow for the men to assemble together, have fun, gain resources, stay safe in terms of their health and live their lives. These normals that have been created should not be erased by a preoccupation with nationalized understandings, and if we as scholars are really interested in queering (as a verb) discourses, then we need to readjust our sense of scale to pay attention to how discourses not only serve as an extension of power, but are employed within specific interactions to do other things.

That being said, in my final section (Chapters 9 and 10), I demonstrate that the broader public's ideas about '*tongzhi*', '*suzhi*' and 'chaotic sex' do matter as well. In the description of the MC bathhouse internet reactions, I illustrate that actually a broader public's interpretation of what happens in localized spaces can disrupt the worlds that these organizers have carefully created. This incident implies that it is often not the state which poses the main threat, as low-level cadres can often be worked with to build reach common localized understandings. Rather it is the Public, as an abstracted, national level entity, which may impose their own interpretations on a local practice. To the extent that the police, in the cases of the Anti-homophobia Day and Piao Piao Bathhouse breach these moment, it is in anticipation of this Public.

Here is where the Queer activists might insist that participation in shaping the Public discourses is important, as it can help to build broader understandings of the local and not reduce behavior into chaotic or lacking in *suzhi*. If, as was evidenced in the quote I provided by Xia Shu about the MC bathhouse, people were to understand the ongoing existence of bathhouse sex not as evidence of *tongzhi* depravity, but rather the limited options from an oppressive system, then they might develop sympathy rather than stigma around these men.

However, as I have suggested this presents it's own kind of double bind for the organizers of these HIV CBOs. While from an activist standpoint engagement in the public discourses might feel necessary to guard against these public incidents, developing a public facing persona risks their relationships to the state. Contextualizing their behavior with the understanding of the Chinese state as a fragmented authoritarian regime, we have seen the benefit for these organizers in developing close relationships with local officials to gain resources and protection for their smaller groups. It is difficult to do the kind of formalistic political tactics that typify HIV CBO politics if you gain too much attention

grappling with online internet posters about scandals in the bathhouse. It is easier, in a sense, for these organizers to develop quiet collaborations with key figures to allow for these small normal worlds to exist, rather than engage in quixotic quests to grapple with national conversations about the meaning of 'tongzhi'. However, failing to engage with these public discourses leads to ongoing marginalization of these groups, as they erase themselves from the broader deliberative process.

### Double Binds, Play and Middle Ways

This is an example of a classic double bind, in which neither option yield a fully positive result. Bateson describes double binds as being a kind of paradox, in which the two frames of an event directly contradict one another. To do A is wrong, but to do not A is also wrong. In this instance the frame around publicly grappling with national understandings of key concepts and discourses directly conflicts with a politics of silent collusion. In this instance both frames threaten the ongoing viability of the other. To speak out would end the possibility of continuing to cooperate with the state, while failing to speak out means that one's positionality remains contested and marginalized to the broader public. One can continue to muddle through, performing one set of discourses to the state while using another iteration in the interactions with fellow *tongzhi* only up unto the point that there is a major breach in the social, in which case the entire world may be quickly dis-assembled.

One of Bateson's methods of coping with the double bind is the ongoing existence of play. Much like double binds, play is also a paradox, in that in terms of frames it both resembles and requires people to believe (in a particular context) that it is one thing, while at the same time saying that it is not that thing. Bateson famously uses the concept of nips and bites among dogs, asking how is it that a dog knows when a particular action is a nip or a bite? Purely in observation the nip and the bite are indistinguishable. Even though they look just like one another, and there is an important meta-sign around the nip that communicates between dogs to say that even though this nip looks like a bite, it is actually not so serious, it is just for fun. Play then requires that the players are able to maintain this paradox in their mind, that both the resemblance of the bite and the framing that this is not actually a bite can exist at the same time.

Within the paradoxical nature of play, there are also important opportunities for players to rearrange the important signifiers and signified, while claiming that they are not actually doing something so important. Take for instance the humorous dirty rhetorics that Colorful Spring produces during their events. Rather than affirming or resisting the *suzhi* morality implications, of which neither position is ideal,

they re-contextualize the meanings of sex as a game, as not real and ultimately innocent. This in some ways responds to the double bind in that it neither makes a claim about *suzhi* directly, but at the same time changes the order and feeling around sex, such that it does not fully have the same potency as it does during the *suzhi* examples. After playing the games in the camping trip, if someone began to lecture the other men about their lack of *suzhi*, the campers could say, oh come on! It was just joking around! Don't take sex so seriously!

The reconfigurations of the dominant discourse occurs in these localized spaces as people apply new competing frames and rearrange the orders and contexts in which these discourses happen. Often as we study these discourses at the national level, it can feel that it is impossible to escape their power of these epistemological frames. However, if we know that in their usage, people might impose other frames of humor or indications that it is not taken so seriously, or does not reflect actual truth values, then we might track how shifts in the meanings of discourses might change.

In a conversation I had with Xia Shu, the leader of Aibai in Chengdu, he repeatedly made the case to me that the kind of confrontational American style politics is not suitable for China. Public debates about LGBT rights would not help their cause, but rather could make things more difficult to organize and may make the issue more polarizing. Instead he advocated for a 'middle way'. Pulling together the language of Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, his concept of the middle way implied that it was not good for society to push towards radical extremes. Harmony and wisdom lay within the bounds of what is commonly understood by the social at the time. If you want to move society in a particular direction, then you do so gradually, using the ideas of moderation and popular understanding to slowly reconfigure the meanings of a particular idea or symbol such that eventually everyone more or less comes to agree that is what the thing meant. If, Xia Shu went on, you wanted your boss or the government to change their ideas about a particular issue, you should never directly attack or confront them about that issue. Instead you needed to surreptitiously convince them that they always had a shared understanding of that idea.

At the time of the interview, JR and I were rather perplexed with how Xia Shu's middle way fit into an LGBT politics. How do you convince people that *tongzhi* sex, marriage or gender meant something so different without direct confrontations and public statements? Didn't you need to speak out? However, as I go back to thinking about play and double binds, I think that there might be something rather valuable to thinking about what Xia Shu was saying. In many ways Xia Shu's group was faced with same double

bind as the HIV CBOs. Even though they did not work directly with the state, they too were limited in what they could say publicly and did not want to create scandal or controversies. Thus they wanted to change the public's understanding of *tongzhi* while at the same time not becoming embroiled in confrontations about the issue. Instead, what they could do is play around with localized meanings and hope that these new meanings would radiate out to a broader public.

Play then, is helpful from a semantic understanding, because it also allows for the meaning and ordering of things to be repositioned in ways that are not threatening. In framing itself as just a nip, play implores the viewer to not take it too seriously, to not be too worried about the greater issues. This gives activities of play the freedom to then reconfigure meanings in creative ways that they would not normally be expressed or understood, without threatening the dominant order. However, in these moments, these new configurations of meaning may in fact convey an idea that requires new interpretive work by the people involved. It may inspire people to leave that space and rethink their understandings of particular ideas and concepts. The tactics of play may then prove to be useful for these *tongzhi* as they try to engage in a broader public and attempt to queer dominant discourses. By taking popular ideas and messing around with their meanings, putting them in localized context, this may be a useful form of Xia Shu's middle way.

I cannot say for certain that play will be a transformative tactic, but what I will say is that ethnomethodology is a powerful rejoinder to the traps that discourse genealogies impress upon anthropological inquiry. The extent that we are interested in looking prospectively towards how ideas about topics, such as sex or gender, are changing in the future, we need to locate how historical understandings are located within contemporary interactions, and how their usage is being shifted to create new orders.

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