

Interview with Li Yinhe on Homosexuality

For us, the value of a meaningful study is not to offer the moral judgement, but to discover the truth and what we do not know. This is the main reason we do this study and the goal of our study as well. --Li Yinhe

Sociologist Li Yinhe, expert on the study of homosexuality in China, will tell you about the conditions of homosexuals in China, a social phenomenon that should not be neglected.

Li Yinhe, who holds a Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Pittsburgh, is one of the famous sociologists with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. She mainly focuses her research on social phenomena such as marriage, family, women and sexuality in China. Her main works include *Sexuality and Marriage of Chinese People*, *Chinese Marriage and Family and Their Vicissitude*, *Emotions and Sexuality of Chinese Women and Subculture of Homosexuality*. As the first woman scholar to study homosexuality in China, Li Yinhe did a large amount of research both in the field of western theories and the actual cases of the homosexuals in China.

Reporter: As far as I know, you began the research on homosexuality in China from 1989. How did you get the idea to do such research?

Li Yinhe: When I came to the Sociology Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences I had prepared several subjects to study, such as the phenomena of singles and divorce in China. Homosexuality was also one of these subjects. Because, before 1989 there was not any studies on the homosexuality in China, I thought it was absolutely wrong that we neglect a group of people who account for approximately three to four percent of the adult population, according to estimates in China. With a curiosity for this group of people who have different sexual tendency and lead a unique life, I began to study the subculture of homosexuality. I wanted to fill the gap in this field and tell people the facts about homosexuals.

R: In your book you give us a lot of specific cases of the life of gays in China. Was it difficult to find the research subjects? Were they willing to tell you their stories?

L: Actually, I started my survey on homosexuality from a single man. I had originally interviewed him for my study on singles. He told me that the reason he kept single was that he was a gay. From him, I got to

know his gay friends and began my further research. I don't feel it is difficult to make gays speak about their feelings and stories. Most of them were willing to tell their experience and are very cooperative. I also received a lot of letters from gays and lesbians who knew that I was doing such a study. When I was talking with them I found that the interviewees were very calm and had a well-adjusted mentality. They want other people to know what they really are and to have a better understanding of them. Of course, a few gay males felt embarrassed to tell me their experience, since I am a woman; so, my husband has helped me with this. There were also some gays who were not willing to speak to anyone about their life. They have a strong sense of guilt and great mental pressure.

R: What are the reasons for homosexuality?

L: Experts have done a large amount of research in the field of physiology, psychology and sociology, but now it is still not clear what will cause homosexuality. At present there are two main views about the causes. One is that homosexuality is a congenital sexual tendency due to the effect of the genes, or the level of hormones or the structure of the cerebra. The other is that homosexuality is acquired and caused by the environment and a person's experience, which affect one's psychology. There is no last word yet as for the causes, but no matter if it is nature or acquired, according to our statistics and some medical reports, it is very hard or impossible to change a person's sexual tendency. If you want to change them it is as impossible as trying to make heterosexuals to love the same sex. Therefore, I am rather confident in saying that homosexuality is the natural and normal sexual tendency of a small percentage of human beings.

R: Are there any differences between the homosexuals in western countries and China?

L: Yes, there are some big differences. The biggest difference is that Chinese homosexuals face greater pressure in their lives. Expectations that one should have a heterosexual marriage are the first biggest pressure they have to cope with. The traditional idea that a person must get married and have his or her offspring in his or her life profoundly influences their parents, the last generations and sometimes the homosexuals themselves as well. According to a statistic, in the 1980s, people who choose a single life account for only about three-percent of the Chinese population. Through my study, I don't think that figure would change very much today. However, in the western countries, such as France and the US, one fourth of the population choose to not marry, so it is very normal for one to not get married in the West. In China one who does not get married until 30 years old is regarded as abnormal in the eyes of many Chinese people, especially the older

generations.

In addition, the percentage of homosexuals in the western countries is much bigger than in China and they are much more powerful because their liberation movement had already begun in the 1960s. They are more open in public. They have their organizations and clubs, such as Ten Percent Society (the homosexuals make up about 10 percent of the population in a few western countries), and have demonstrations against the discrimination and prejudice against them or have protests for their equal rights on the streets. Chinese homosexuals are still more hidden and are not so known by the public, but they already have had their own web sites to exchange with each other all over the country.

R: Could you tell me something about the marriage life of the homosexuals who have already been forced to marry the opposite sex?

L: There are mainly three kinds of modes in these kind of marital relations. One is that a part of gays try to inhibit their antipathy to the opposite sex and cultivate a very strong consciousness of family responsibility. They try their best to practice the duty of being a good husband and a father, since they feel guilty towards their wives. For them the relation with their family members can be maintained well. The second are the gays who choose sexually impassive women as their wives or try to change their wives into being suitable to their situation after marriage. The third is that all their efforts end in failure and the divorce is the final result of their marriage. Since most of homosexuals are forced to marry with the opposite sex by the secular ideas in China, the possibility of a broken marriage is much higher than in the true heterosexual marriage. Most of the wives of gay males are not always told the truth by their husbands and it is not easy for them to discover the behavior of their husbands behind their backs, since their husbands hid their behavior well. I would like to suggest to the wives of the homosexuals to get rid of the tragic marriage once they know the truth. But if the wife loves her husband very much and is reluctant to leave him, she should be sure if there is the possibility that her husband can be a bisexual person before she keeps the marriage.

R: What is the situation of Chinese homosexuals at work?

L: In the workplace, homosexuals hide their sexual tendency and their work is not greatly affected by their sexual tendency. Many of them can do their job very well. However, a few cases show that the homosexuals are discriminated against in their work. Take a man who has worked in the public security department for example. He is a gay and lacks the masculine appearance, so his boss does not like him and finally fires him without any reasonable excuse. Obviously, it is unfair that he or she is deprived of the

right to work only because of one's appearance or different sexual tendency.

R: Because of this, should the rights and interests of homosexuals be protected by a special law?

L: Yes. Although historically Chinese law does not have discriminatory clause against homosexuals, China does not have a protective law for them at present. This is different from the West, where there is a history of laws prohibited homosexuality. However, from the interviewees I discovered that in the last several years homosexuals who gather together in public places have been detained by the police for being rascals or bad people. Most of them receive the punishment of several days of detention. In the western countries, because of the active movement against prejudice and for gaining the same rights launched by homosexuals since the 1960s, the law has been changed to admit the legitimate rights of the homosexuals, so they now enjoy equal rights in employment, sexuality and marriage. The countries, such as Holland and Belgium, already allow same sex marriage. Compared to them, there is a long way to go for the Chinese homosexuals to receive equal rights under the law.

R: What do the homosexuals think about their situation?

L: Many Chinese homosexuals think that the biggest difficulty they face now is not that there is no law to protect their legitimate social status; it is that the society does not understand and accept them. At present they mainly face the neglect and disdain from the mainstream society, instead of cruel persecution and extreme hostility. Therefore, many of them do not want or dare to launch a radical movement against the prejudice and to gain equal rights. The doctrine of Confucius and Mencius still deeply rooted in the mind of Chinese people. So the conservative homosexuals leading a secret life only expect understanding and tolerance from the public, instead of launching a large-scale movement like those took place in the western countries. Just a very few homosexuals, usually young and well-educated, have a stronger awareness of rights, hoping China can establish a law to protect their rights and restrain the unlawful behavior against homosexuals as well.

R: At present, what are the Chinese public's attitudes towards the homosexuality?

L: As time goes on, the Chinese public is better acquainted with the phenomena of homosexuals than before. The public has a better understanding of them and is more and more tolerant of them in the open. China's third edition of "Standards on Classification and Diagnosis of Mental Disturbances," published this April, does not treat homosexuality as

a mental disorders anymore. It is social progress to not treat homosexuality with a morbid mentality. However, there are still a lot of people who keep their negative attitudes toward this minority group. Some think that homosexuality is a kind of immoral conduct, others that it is a kind of mental disease, still others think that gays are perverts and fear them. They regard them as queer people and do not want to approach them and even laugh at them. In fact, many people do not know, or even do not want to know, the truth that homosexuals are only a group of people who have different sexual tendency and lead a different sexual life from us. Refusing to know the truth is the obstacle to understanding homosexuals. When people got to know that homosexuals might cause AIDS, some newspapers or magazines said that such behavior is one of the main public harms that can affect health and corrupt public morals. In fact, the main channel of getting AIDS in China is through blood, which accounts for about 80 percent of the entire cases. It is not fair to condemn those homosexuals who do not hurt anyone and have a correct sexual behavior. Only sexual promiscuity could cause AIDS, which also happens to heterosexuals.

R: What attitude do you think we should take towards homosexuality?

L: I believe that there are two ways to treat homosexuals. The low level is that at least you should regard them as equal, instead of discriminating against them just because they have different sexual inclination or tendency. On the high level, heterosexuals should realize that homosexuals reveal a complete new relation among people and a possible lifestyle. According to the Queer Theory (a theory on homosexuals) the phenomena of homosexuals challenges the current marriage and sexuality in today's society. The Queer Theorists propose a lot of very challenging questions against the traditional views, such as why people must get married, why people must practice monogamy in a society, why people can not have open relations with each other and why one must have a child. According to the French philosopher Michel Foucault, the lives of homosexuals are absolutely not poor and seamy. On the contrary, the lives of the homosexuals have their own value and create a more open relation among people. For me, I agree with multi-culturalism and think we should be ready to listen to different voices.

[\(Women of China 2001,1](#)