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THE PRODUCTION OF ALTERNATIVE  
MEDIA IN MAINLAND CHINA: A CASE  
STUDY OF THE JOURNAL “FRIEND  
EXCHANGE”

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# The Production of Alternative Media in Mainland China: A Case Study of the Journal *Friend Exchange*

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Abstract: Through an ethnographic study of the journal *Friend Exchange* that is part of the “Health Prevention Project for Homosexuals” in mainland China, this article explores the following two issues: (1) *Friend Exchange* as an example of the dynamic operation of alternative media (by analysing its production and circulation with a vision of multiculturalist equality), and (2) *Friend Exchange* as a media representation of the gay community (seen in the construction of a public sphere for the underprivileged in China. The examination of these two issues is framed as a contribution to contemporary communication studies.

Key words: alternative media      multiculturalism      *Friend Exchange*  
gay community      public sphere

## Section 1 Research Rationale, Question and Methodology

The revolutionary development in communication institutions and technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has changed communication industry landscape in the world and has been challenging many classical theoretical concepts. New media mergers are constantly shifting the alignments and increasing the conglomeration, integration, and synergy within the handful of global communication companies that now control most of the world’s media. In the integration context of globalisation in terms of economy, culture and academics, democracy and citizen participation in public affairs have been threatened by

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the trend of concentrationization, commercialisation, privatization and deregulation that manifests itself in the organisation of global media (Herman and McChesney 1997). Moreover, instead of weakening, this trend has been reinforced in the Western communication industry and give great impact on Chinese media reforming. In vying for mainstream audience and advertisers, a fanatic pursuit of commercial interests on the part of mass media production has been an anti-democratic force to squeeze public sphere and distort the representation of the underprivileged. Different from pluralism that is premised upon a presumptive liberalism and seeks to legitimate the interests of the privileged, multiculturalism that became popular in the 1990s empowers such underprivileged groups as the gay community, women and ethnic minorities. Alternative media plays a positive role in helping the underprivileged to struggle for social participation, social due and cultural identity, so as to achieve multiculturalist equality.

The goal of profiting for media organizations has been increasingly connected with capitalism and cultural privileges of the developed countries. China is not sitting out this process of the global economic integration, and the production of cultural products has been gradually geared to the market and to the organization structures modelled on the Western economic pattern. Of course, this international force with new idea and diversity resources empower for minority people to struggle for their rights in Mainland China. Gay and Lesbian that entered public discourse in the mid- and late 1980s was heatedly debated concerning the visibility of this gay community in China, especially after the publication of *Their World* that was co-authored by Yinhe Li and Xiaobo Wang (1992). *Friend Exchange*, a bimonthly journal that is non-publicly circulated and aimed at AIDS prevention, was founded by Beichuan Zhang, a professor at School of Medicine, Qingdao University. It thereby constitutes a case of the alternative media. This media product that serves directly the gay community with a readership of over 100,000, has by far received continuous funding from the Ford Foundation. Since its initial publication in 1998, the readership has already exceeded one million<sup>1</sup>. The project was aimed at not only effective prevention of HIV/AIDS, but also respecting the difference of the gay and lesbian community, safeguarding their cultural identity and empowering them to struggle for an equal participation and articulation of rights, so as to realise social justice. In 2009, *Friend Exchange* proposed new slogans, namely ‘Science, Human Rights, Health and Civility’. Kyung-Hee Choi, a Korean American scholar at UCSF, in her paper presented to the International Conference on ‘Preventing the HIV/AIDS Spread among MSM’, held at Kunming in June 2003, mentioned her data on the readership of *Friend Exchange* during her survey in mainland China. Among

the surveyed, 49% read FE, of whom 89% liked and wished to continue the readership. During my field study with the LGBT organisations in Chengdu and Kunming and LGBT hotlines, interviewees expressed their gratitude to *Friend Exchange* (Cao and Cao, 2007). Up so far, two organisations in the US have collected to *Friend Exchange*, one being the Yen-ching Library at Harvard University, while the other the Centre for Chinese Studies Library at UC Berkeley. On November 26, 2008, Chinese Prevention Medicine Association hosted a ‘National Conference on the Experiences Communication with HIV/AIDS Prevention of the MSM Community, the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Friend Exchange* and the Ceremony for Belly-Martin Award’. The Conference was attended by leading international organisations, state officials of the Ministry of Health, cadres from Disease Control Centres (CDC) and activists of grassroots organisations, who came along to this conference to discuss the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS in China. This signified a recognition and support for *Friend Exchange* from both national authority and civil society.

As far as the research question is concerned, I hope that within limited length, I can demonstrate two issues. Firstly, *Friend Exchange* as a typical case of the alternative media can be used to analyse how its edition, production and circulation have helped with practising the notion of multiculturalist equality, so as to examine the concrete operation of alternative media in Mainland China. Secondly, *Friend Exchange* initiated a media representation of the gay community, through which this paper wishes to discuss the construction of public sphere for the gay and lesbian community in China. Hopefully, both issues, with its reflexive, critical perspective, can contribute to the present debates on gay and lesbian issues and communication studies in Chinese scholarship.

In terms of research methodology, first of all, I have used quantitative analysis based on survey data, to be accompanied by a content analysis of the 34 *Friend Exchange* sample journals. This is a statistical way to analyse the research subject, so as to uncover the implications of *Friend Exchange* through the raw materials. By this means, the research findings will become quantifiably falsifiable, which shall lay a solid foundation for further research.

The limitation of quantitative study lies in its sweeping analysis of the issue concerned, without being able to unveil the deeper layer of social implications. Moreover, sheer number is incapable of telling the emotional experiences in the gay community. For this very reason, a qualitative analysis

thus becomes necessary to supplement the quantitative counterpart, in revealing the social context behind the operation of *Friend Exchange*.

In particular, I resorted to ethnography, such as visiting Professor Beichuan Zhang in his office at Sexual Health Centre, Affiliated Hospital of the School of Medicine, Qingdao University, for purpose of field studying and in-depth interviewing. Through his help, I also interviewed the gay readers and volunteers of *Friend Exchange*. Apart from these, I interviewed gay readers from Shanghai, Chengdu and Kunming, so as to gather their feedback on *Friend Exchange*. Questionnaires were not used for this study, as I was told that questionnaire could be received with unease, precaution and even suspicion among the gay community. The feasibility of using questionnaires as a research method may also be questionable, such as research fatigue. Therefore, to avoid the methodological predicament of questionnaire as well as the risk of jeopardising the trust between me and my interviewees, I decided give up using questionnaires.

Finally, to verify the research findings by ‘participant feedback is a means to learn more about the site ,as well as about the relevance of inferences’(Miles and Huberman 1984; cf. von Zooner 1994: 146), the draft of this paper was given to a few participants for their feedback, comments and suggestions. Upon receiving this feedback, I revised the paper, of which the final version was submitted again to the participants for feedback. In the end, it was generally held that the research explanation accord with the experiences and reality of the gay community.

## **Section 2 Literature Review**

From a macro-level perspective, there is a consensus in the Anglo-American scholarship upon alternative media, in that the latter channels the struggle for freedom and democracy. Certainly, there are disagreements. Firstly, the American scholarship emphasised alternative media as a revolutionary media tradition and a single outburst with national characteristics; while for the British scholarship, alternative media is a radical media tradition, with its focus on class emancipation. As Raymond Williams put it, alternative media is transcendental in terms of time and space. It is thus a thorough struggle during an ongoing revolution. Secondly, with its focus on national system and characteristics, the American scholarship neglected social stratification. Accordingly, a radicalist reading of alternative media as political movements for working class is rejected. The reason can be due to the lack of a swelling

number of working class, as well as the absence of a relevant social party in the US. By comparison, the British scholarship recognised the incessant process of social stratification and acknowledged the necessity of radicalist arguments. They are thus more concerned with class emancipation (Hamilton and Atton 2001: 119-35).

As far as the operation of alternative media is concerned, at least three key aspects of communication: skills, capitalisation and controls (Williams 1980: 54). Those who are working in alternative media never regard themselves as media professionals, but as activists, with an interest in ‘exposing the dynamics of power and inequality, rather than reporting hard news’ (Curran and Seaton 1997: 15). In terms of formula, Roger Silverstone talks of the employment of production techniques borrowed from mass media ‘to pursue a critical or alternative agenda, from the margins, as it were, or from the underbelly of social life’ (Silverstone 1999: 103). As far as content is concerned, alternative media ‘created new spaces for alternative voices that provide the focus both for specific community interests as well as for the contrary and the subversive’ (ibid). In terms of organisational form, John Downing pointed out that alternative media is normally a media programme with an emphasis on self-management, usually resulting in small-scale, collectively run projects, it embody ‘prefigurative politics, the attempt to practise socialist principles in the present ,not merely to imagine them for the future’. It attempts to practise socialism rather than imagine it as some future occurrence (Downing 2001: 71). This is a necessary supplement to the mainstream media, and a concrete measure to democratise media. Chris Atton has extensive publications on alternative and radical media. One of his books is titled *Alternative Media* while in his paper *Organisation and Production in Alternative Media*, he sought to delineate the different operation of alternative media by using three cases, namely *Counter Information*, *Undercurrent* (an activist audio magazine) and *Indymedia*, a radical Internet programme. From the case of *Counter Information* it can be seen that in the production of an issue, the participants (journalists, editors and layout designer) played a collective role and deployed multifaceted technical know-how, while *Undercurrent* shows that local journalists also have two other roles to play, namely reporter and technician. These two cases thus demonstrate the necessity of collective professionalism within production. Finally *Indymedia* aims to explore a radical Internet programme globally, to provide activists taken the world over with an unbound space for creativity. Through these case studies, alternative media are able to ‘give voice to the voiceless’, ‘that is ,to give media access to those who find themselves under-represented in mainstream media (Atton 2003: 41-55).

These research findings have substantiated the opinion that alternative media is shouldered with the responsibility of promoting social justice, as well as to construct a communication sphere to overcome inequality. Moreover, the production of alternative media without market control co-exists with the expanding monopoly of commercial media. Robert McChesney (2004) acutely criticised that American news and entertainment media are in nature subject to the control of capital and commercialism, resulting in the public function of media being usurped by market competition for commercial interests. The reason for American media to be manipulated and controlled by enterprises and corporations is due to the decadence of regulatory agency on communication policies. In this context, the production of de-commercialised and de-marketised alternative media has promoted the expression and democratic participation of the excluded groups, together with the critical communication studies against market and administrative controls. An indigenised discussion of the abovementioned issues shall help us to re-construct of the critical communication theory's system in China.

### **Section 3 Column Analysis of *Friend Exchange* The selection of samples**

The 34 samples of *Friend Exchange* cover the period from the April, 2000 (Issue No.14) to April, 2006 (No.50), of which the February, 2001 issue (No. 19) and the April, 2001 issue (No.20) are anthologies of papers presented at the HIV/AIDS Prevention Conference and *Friend Exchange* Discussion, for which they are not included in the sample data. The website of *Friend Exchange* provides the electronic version of the magazine, but this paper is mainly based on the paper versions of *Friend Exchange*.

#### ***Cover***

For the paper versions of *Friend Exchange*, since Issue No.22 (October, 2001), an aesthetic consideration has changed the style of the cover, from the previous condensation of texts that are now transferred to the inside front, to a simplified text that contains only the name of journal (in both Chinese and English), the issue number, the date of publication, the motto of the journal and a statement of 'no reprint without permission'. Since October, 2001, the cover design of *Friend Exchange* has been a white foundation with light grey frames. Under the journal name, publication date and issue number, there is a specific indication that this is a Health Prevention Project. The top right-hand corner has an explicit statement that 'this project is funded by Ford Foundation', while the bottom left-hand corner is the motto of this journal, 'Science, Health, Love and Civility'. On the inside back cover and back cover, it is emphasised that

'*Friend Exchange* is not for sale or to be distributed commercially; Requests are welcome; Donations are welcome', together with the hotline number. At times for survival purposes the cover design might be modified. In 2001, the August and October issues have no issue number printed on the cover, so as to circumvent censorship from state authorities.

Table 1 Columns in *Friend Exchange* and Their Percentage of Content (2,603Pages in Total)

| <b>Column</b>                     | <b>Pages</b> | <b>Percentage of Content</b> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|------------------------------|
| 1.News                            | 221.5        | 8.51%                        |
| 2. Education on HIV/STD           | 349.5        | 13.43%                       |
| 3.Activities of the Volunteers    | 49.5         | 1.90%                        |
| 4. Correspondences on STD/HIV     | 92           | 3.53%                        |
| 5.Correspondence from the Experts | 20           | 0.77%                        |
| 6.Understanding Homosexuality     | 610.5        | 23.45%                       |
| 7.Arguments                       | 72           | 2.77%                        |
| 8.Book Review                     | 5            | 0.19%                        |
| 9.Arts                            | 1.5          | 0.06%                        |
| 10.Global News                    | 103          | 3.96%                        |
| 11.Figures                        | 7.5          | 1.44%                        |
| 12.Miscellaneous                  | 2            | 0.08%                        |
| 13.Life                           | 12.5         | 27.37%                       |
| 14.Letters from the Readers       | 200.5        | 7.70%                        |
| 15.Books Message                  | 5            | 0.19%                        |
| 16.Friendship                     | 4            | 2.46%                        |
| 17.Activities                     | 2            | 0.07%                        |
| 18.Other <sup>2</sup>             | 8            | 1.84%                        |

## **Column**

From the 18 columns and their percentage (Table 1), 'Education on HIV/STD' ranks the second, at 13.43%. The global perspectives as in the journal can be seen from such columns as 'News' (8.51%), 'Correspondences on HIV/STD' (3.53%) and 'Letters from Experts' (0.77%), which represent its specialisation in health prevention, as one of its purposes is to scientifically 'prevent HIV/AIDS'. Of the total 2,603 pages, 'Understanding Homo-sexuality' takes up 610.5 pages, at 23.45%, indicating the top concern of the gay community for this journal. During a journalist interview, Beichuan Zhang revealed that according to his research, '33.9% of gay and lesbian thought about suicide, 13.7% ever attempted to commit suicide... while 74.5% of gay and lesbian, wished to have a same-sex partner' (Cai, Ping 2002). Through this Column, Beichuan Zhang wished to break the silence for the invisible gay community that had for long been discriminated and stigmatised. He called for society to scientifically understand 'homosexuality' and encouraged gay and lesbian to respect their own sexual orientation. 'Global News' (3.96%) and 'Figures' (1.44%) have a wider perspective, to include same-sex legalisations and legislations worldwide, celebrities with HIV infection and issues on sexual orientation. This shows that homosexuality is a global issue, with its representation varying considerably by law, policy and cultural traditions of the different nations. This provides certain policy orientations for China, as well as to offer prospect and hope for the gay and lesbian community.

The two most participated columns, 'Life' (27.37%) and 'Letters from the Readers' (7.70%), are also the most read among the readership. My interviewees invariably (100%) responded that upon receiving new issues of this journal, the first pages they turned to were often these two columns that were written and edited completely by the gay community. Before the publication of FE, the most inspirational published work was the book *Their World* (1992) that was co-authored by Yinhe Li and Xiaobo Wang. The interviewees unanimously expressed their interest in the book and acknowledged the enormous courage it gave to the gay community. One of the readers argued that up so far he still treasured the book that feels like a chicken soup for the soul. Due to the lack of channels for expression, sharing other's romance and life stories has become a means for cognisance, imagination and self-empowerment for the gay community. The prevention HIV/AIDS and recognition of homosexuality are the two most important purposes for these two columns, thereby at a greatest percentage of content. Obviously, using HIV/AIDS prevention as an entry into the discussion of homosexuality is a strategy deployed by *Friend Exchange* in the current Chinese context. For one

thing, homosexuality in current mainland China is still a tabooed area and runs the risk of stigmatisation. *Friend Exchange* bridges the closeted worlds, not only to represent the justifiability of Gay and Lesbian, but also to preach to the heterosexual mainstream society the recognition of such issues as homosexuality, HIV/AIDS and STD.

As the submissions to ‘Life’ and ‘Letters from the Readers’ are completely by, of and for the readers, the subjects of the articles (which have been abstracted as keywords) can well reflect the real issues among the gay community in contemporary China, through the following figure and table:

Table 2 Keyword Analysis in ‘Life’ and ‘Letters from Readers’ in *Friend Exchange*

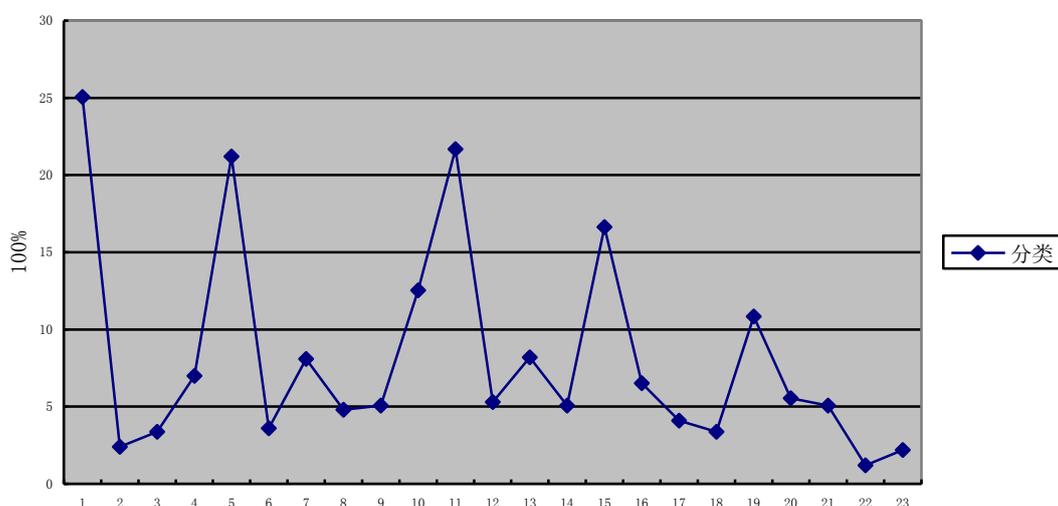
| <b>Keywords</b>                             | <b>Number of articles of the total 464</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|---|--|-----------------------|
| 1.Family/Other relatives                    | 115  | 24.78                 |
| 2.Friends                                   | 13   | 2.80                  |
| 3.Study/Work                                | 20   | 4.31                  |
| 4.Adolescent Experiences                    | 38   | 8.19                  |
| 5.Homosexual Experiences                    | 101  | 21.77                 |
| 6.Crime                                     | 17   | 3.66                  |
| 7.Social Recognition                        | 50   | 10.78                 |
| 8.True Love                                 | 30   | 6.47                  |
| 9.Same-sex Marriage                         | 22   | 4.74                  |
| 10.Marriage pressure                        | 58   | 12.50                 |
| 11.Heterosexual Marriage                    | 101  | 21.77                 |
| 12.Suicide/Leaving Home for Buddhist Temple | 25   | 5.39                  |
| 13.Self-identification                      | 40   | 8.62                  |
| 14.Collective Identity                      | 24   | 5.17                  |
| 15.Inspiration                              | 87   | 18.75                 |

|                                    |    |       |
|------------------------------------|----|-------|
| 16.Sexual Promiscuity/Prostitution | 34 | 7.33  |
| 17.Safe Sex/STD/HIV/AIDS           | 19 | 4.09  |
| 18.the Gay Circle                  | 16 | 3.45  |
| 19.Emotional Depression            | 51 | 10.99 |
| 20.Sex Role                        | 23 | 4.96  |
| 21.Coming Out                      | 23 | 4.96  |
| 22.Seniority                       | 5  | 1.08  |
| 23.Cruising Places                 | 9  | 1.94  |

N.B.: the articles in this statistics were regardless of their length, as long as they touched upon the keywords, they were counted as valid data.

Figure 1 Subject Analysis of the ‘Life’ and ‘Letters from the Readers’ Columns in *Friend Exchange*

《朋友》中“生命”和“读者来信”的主题分析曲线图



As we can see from Table 2, there are several key issues for homosexuality in China. China has a long tradition of emphasising consanguinity, the reproductive function of sex and a heterosexuality-centred social ethics that excludes homosexuality. Family as the most important field for the reproduction of heterosexuality is the primary environment that confronts gay community in China, of which parental monitoring of children’s friend-making is predominant. As the saying goes, ‘both man and woman, in their adulthood, should be married’ (*nan da dang hun, nü da dang jia*). Therefore, most articles

(24.78%) talked about 'Family/Other Relatives'. By comparison, the mention of 'Friend' (2.80%) is relatively few. In this family-bound society, more often than not, 'family/relatives' are associated with such factors as 'marriage pressure' (12.50%), 'heterosexual marriage' (21.77%) and 'coming out' (4.96%).

A gay interviewee with whom I conducted in-depth interview had a face-to-face conversation with Beichuan Zhang when he was being confronted with emotional anxieties. Finally he became a volunteer for *Friend Exchange* '. Economically he was independent, with a stable job and income. Though in his forties, he was still single. His mother had passed away many years ago, for which he was living with his father. As he related,

Should my mother live till today, she would always urge me to marry like before. When she passed away, my father was relatively quiet [about it] and did not press me hard on marriage. For this I was dangling for years. I have experienced many emotional frustrations. In our current society, even heterosexual relationship is very unstable, let alone the homosexual affair that is not marriage-bound. But I cannot be single like this for ever. When meeting with my friends and ex-classmates, they've all got their partners and children, talking and laughing, and leaving me alone with myself. I have thought about this for a long time. I think it would be better to find a lala (lesbian). With the same sexual orientation, it will be easier for us to understand each other. Moreover, the clothes of marriage and family can help to not only satisfy the expectation from my family, but also gain social recognition.

The comments of this gay interviewee can be quite common, where under the current heterosexuality-centred ethics and social gender preference, gay and lesbian normally use heterosexual marriage or contract marriage between gay and lesbian homosexuals to cover up their sexual orientation. Similar strategies have been deployed by the gay community in Taiwan (Zheng, Meili 2007). It is true that the reform in mainland China has provided ample space for personal economic liberty. However, cultural autonomy still waits to be seen, where gay and lesbian may find themselves inescapably bound by such traditional notions as of the necessity of marriage.

Coming out refers to an open expression of one's sexual orientation. Under most circumstances, gay and lesbian were more pressurised than voluntary to reveal to their parents their concealed sexual orientation. The pressure may come from the confrontation and inquisitiveness from their parents. Here the statistics only count those that proactively come out. Many of the articles talked about same-sex marriage or legalising the cohabitation of gay and lesbian (21.20%), which is not possible in current Chinese legislations.

However, there is a certain proportion of the gay readers that are in a relationship that approximates marriage. Moreover, as is pointed out, the legalisation of same-sex marriage can maximise the effect of STD and HIV/AIDS prevention, de-stigmatisation and anti-discrimination. In such Western countries as Holland, Spain and Canada, same-sex marriage has already been legalised.

## **Section 4 Research Findings and Discussions**

### **4.1 The Production of Alternative Media: Editing and Circulation of *Friend Exchange***

*Friend Exchange* is a programme that seeks to combine health prevention and research. The director is Dr. Beichuan Zhang. His supervisor Shide Qin was subject to insults and persecution as openly gay. Respecting his supervisor in terms of personality, virtue and professional qualification (Qin was the first intellectual to admit his sexual orientation in mainland China), as well as out of a sense of intellectual conscience, Dr. Zhang defended his supervisor. His supervisor's experience also intrigued Beichuan Zhang to research on the gay issues. Moreover, as dermatologist, from 1994 to 1997 he conducted a research on sexual workers, through which he acutely sensed the presence of severity of STD and HIV/AIDS in China. These are the factors that led to the publication of *Friend Exchange*.

#### **Flexibility of Self-autonomy of the Programme**

The office for the *Friend Exchange* programme was at a small room of 15 square metres affiliated to Qingdao School of Medicine. It was only in August, 2007 when a funding from the Ford Foundation was received that the office was relocated to a office building near the Hospital. The two non-medical staff members that work in the office are responsible for routine office administration, such as typing, replying emails, writing letters, and answering phone calls. There are 10 volunteers on regular terms for the programme, with an annual cost of 370,000 yuan. In case of problems, the team will respond swiftly, with efficient self-management. For instance, the 'Comment' Column on the website in January, 2005, was attacked by advertisement bugs and had to be closed. For this, Beichuan Zhang immediately posted a personal statement on *Friend Exchange* (p.70, April, 2005), condemning the hackers' attack on the website.

In the late 1980s, among the students of sinology in the West, mainland China and Taiwan, civil society was introduced into the discussion of 'civil

society/public sphere' that contained a dichotomy of 'state' and 'society' (Deng 1999: 1-21). Philip C.C. Huang opposed this simplistic dichotomy, proposing that between state and society there is a third space. 'The relaxation of state control had led to the expansion of conciliatory space between state cadres and unite leaders' (Huang 1999: 442). From the management of *Friend Exchange*, it can be seen that with the political-economic reform, the totalitarian control and intervention from the state into society since the 1949 was completely changed, with the emergence of a new power relation between state cadres and unite leaders. Individuals from unite could now break through the state monopoly over resources and rigid monitor of private spaces. Dependency upon unite politics and resource allocation was gradually weakened. Thereby a new sense of personal independence and freedom gradually took root.

On the other hand, the market reform in mainland China has led to the gradual abolition of the highly centralised plan economy, with power decentralised. There was a fast growth of NGOs in China, although the state was worried that through funding, Western power might wield power to intervene Chinese politics, distort Chinese society and even incite a subversion of the government through funding the NGOs and propagating such notions as equality, democracy and social justice. At the same time, the state in seeking modernisation was keen to link with the West. Now, to eradicate the tumour that threatens human health – HIV/AIDS, it was hoped to use the capital, technology, management and intellectual power of the NGOs to solve certain social issues. So there are either fissure, conflict or synergy between NGOs and state apparatuses that representing and intersecting within the STD/HIV/AIDS prevention programme . This is the general context within which Beichuan Zhang's programme was operationalised. In his recounting, the affiliated hospital to Qingdao School of Medicine did not offer active support for his work, where the head of the hospital had personal vexations with him. He has the title and salary within the institution and also supervises Master students. However, he will not receive bonus and neither will he be able to work in the outpatients department. The cost of his dedication to the programme is that he has no chance for promotion and awards. Conversely, he also gains the freedom from the unite politics. Actually the complicated *guanxi* in unite and social discrimination against HIV/AIDS have made Beichuan Zhang feel that he is a Don Quixote fighting an invincible windmill. Despite these difficulties, he persisted with the *Friend Exchange* .

In the beginning, Beichuan Zhang received funding from Asia-Pacific AIDS Service Organisational (APCASO), the Barry and Martin Foundation in Britain and personal donations. Since the late 1998, he also received funding

from the Ford Foundation. As he is not completely cut off from his unite, Zhang was able to use his unite title (Professor of Dermatology) and medical expertise to secure external funding for the operation of the health prevention programme that targets the sexual minority groups. He has by far opened a new flexible sphere between state apparatuses and grassroots organisation. The discussion of public sphere for the gay community thus becomes relevant.

When prompted by the international community and threatened by the severity of STD and HIV/AIDS, state sectors in their turn proactively approached this public sphere in seeking to understand the situation of STD in primary society. As an expert, Beichuan Zhang was invited to a series of conferences on anti-HIV/AIDS that had been organised by the State Council and the Ministry of Health, where he delivered keynote speeches. As he recounted,

Fairly speaking, since the planning of *Friend Exchange* in 1997, I received support from officials in the Ministry of Health. Since 2004, this support was enhanced. In a conference in this July, I was sitting with Longde Wang, Deputy Minister of Health, who told me explicitly that should *Friend Exchange* experience any problem at all, I can go to him for help. ... The Ford Foundation never directly intervened my work. On the contrary, they actively supported my work. The only contrast is that the hospital's attitude did not change significantly' (Zhang's email, 2007-09-05).

After ten years of development, the *Friend Exchange* programme now gained recognition from the international society and state agencies. On July 17, 2007, the UNAIDS presented to him an award on 'Outstanding Contribution in HIV/AIDS Advocacy'.

Through this self-management, Beichuan Zhang was leading a small-scale, collectively-operation health prevention programme, which can be commonly seen in the alternative media in the West. *Friend Exchange* is effectively used to combat social injustice. Nonetheless, this programme is not like the radical political organisations of alternative media that organise opposing movements in the West, with a non-cooperative attitude and political ambitions to seek an alternative governance to capitalism. By comparison, the *Friend Exchange* programme shuttles between state apparatus and grassroots organisations, calling the government to combat social injustice, receiving state research fund and advising legislatures on the prevention of STD and HIV/AIDS, so as to cure governance ills. With support from the Ford Foundation, this programme can also be regarded as one part of the global

efforts targeting the prevention of HIV/AIDS, STD and empowerment of sexual minority groups.

### **Editing and Production**

In contrast to the commercialised LGBT publications that openly advertise sexual prostitution, or the gay magazine *Passion* in Taiwan that contains pictures and texts of explicit nudity to attract readers' attentions, *Friend Exchange* is focused on the prevention of HIV/AIDS and STD, as well as to relay the emotional and life experiences of the gay community. It is thereby not a consumer's guide to either brands or sex. The motto of the journal that is printed on the cover, namely 'Science, Health, Love and Civility', as well as the text that 'This programme is funded by the Ford Foundation', indicates the non-profit nature of this magazine that seeks to serve the public, receives funding from an international foundation and attempts to combine sense and sensibility. It thus ceases to be a scientific magazine.

In the magazine, expert recommendations appear in three columns, namely 'Education on HIV/AIDS STD' (13.43%), 'Correspondence on HIV/AIDS STD' (3.53%) and 'Letters from the Experts' (0.77%), of which two are using the form of correspondence to answer all sorts of gay-related inquiries, thus avoiding the dogmatism and hierarchy in other scientific magazines, or publishing a medical magazine. Readers and experts are placed on an equal footing. Resolutions or recommendations are suggested with understanding, recognition and tolerance. Information sources for the content come from not only experts (including advisors), but also feedback from the *Friend Exchange* readership through phone calls, email or letters. More than 10,000 letters from readers since 1988 are currently stored in the two wooden closets in the office. All these contain the latest news and feedbacks from the readers. From the very beginning, the programme team invited four gay volunteers in Qingdao (journalists from mainstream media in Beijing), who could decide on the content by themselves. At the same time, the programme team selected letters for the column 'Letters from the Readers' (7.70%), which were passed on to the five volunteers from Beijing for editing, so as to ensure a participatory interaction with the readers.

'Activities of the Volunteers' (1.90%) is also the information storehouse telling about voluntary activities nationwide. Plus the column 'Understanding Homosexuality' (23.45%), the self-autonomous content of homosexuality occupies 60.42%. This shows that between the readership and the magazine there is a close tie, with a high level of participation in the magazine compared to the mainstream media. Submissions to other columns are selected either by

Beichuan Zhang or invited from academic experts. There are digest articles gathered from other news sources on information related to STD, HIV/AIDS and homosexuality. Beichuan Zhang also wrote articles by himself. The production strives to represent positive elements in homosexuality. The discussion of romance and sex at *Friend Exchange* has a tendency of desexualisation, in that discussions are centred on the emotional side of romance and relationship without explicit content of nudity in its reference.

Between the programme team and the gay community there is a close correspondence by means of letters, emails or phone calls. When the team received information from the sexual minority groups at the grassroots level, even if it was published, it would be stored in the information database as administered by Beichuan Zhang. Among all the columns of *Friend Exchange*, only articles for 'Understanding Homosexuality' and 'Life' columns are remunerated, at 70 *yuan* per thousand Chinese characters. For the volunteers from Beijing, the fact that they are from mainstream media precludes the possibility of openly admitting their sexual orientation despite the privileges this 'mainstream' media entails, such as salary, reputation and social recognition. Sexual identity cannot be openly discussed, information for their own community cannot be formally collected and concerns for their groups cannot be voiced. Censorship and the pressure of commercialisation have literally rendered it impossible for these media workers to change the status quo. The voluntary work for *Friend Exchange*, though unremunerated, releases their energy, protects their identity, and helps to make contributions to social diversity and multiculturalism in media.

These features of *Friend Exchange* share certain similarities with *Undercurrent* and *Counter Information*, where volunteers use their professional expertise in editing *Friend Exchange* for the gay community. This is in sharp contrast with their work in their normal post, where no community-specific autonomy is required, and their personal latitude has to be subject to the ideological regulation and hierarchical management at the media organization. Therefore, in editing *Friend Exchange*, their self-identification is actor rather than journalist with professional expertise. The emphasis was placed upon sharing and collective efforts to promote equality and intra-organisational democracy. The editing and production require fixed personnel and roles. Due to the limited financial resources, the work by volunteers can help to relief financial burdens and encourage participation, as a gesture of anti-commercialisation, anti-hierarchy and anti-bureaucratisation. What matters most is not the number of volunteers, but a collective goal for action, solidarity and synergy.

One of the limits in this programme team is its elitism. Although the programme has specifically recruited professionals to voice concerns for every walk in the gay community, during its operation and management, an elitism is unavoidable, as 39.58% of the pages were decided by Beichuan Zhang in terms of content, while the remaining 60.42% of self-autonomous pages were filtered by such urban elites as the volunteers at the editorial board in Qingdao and those in various cities.

### **Circulation Model**

When the copies of *Friend Exchange* are printed, the assistants of Beichuan Zhang will start labelling envelopes, as every issue will be posted in more than 3,000 envelopes to individuals. The post office also offers support for this non-profit publication, by visiting the office to collect the packs (normally over 100) of *Friend Exchange* in person. At the Qingdao work team, on regular terms there are 10 volunteers coming to the office on weekends to offer help in distributing *Friend Exchange* through post. Who comes when for how long is not fixed, but rather depends upon who has the spare time. Of these volunteers there have been professionals working at foreign or joint ventures, postgraduate students or military officials, for purpose of offering help to their own community by volunteering for *Friend Exchange*. Plus, this voluntary work helps to build a sense of self-identification, as they no longer need to conceal their identity and receive from their peers respect, recognition and understanding. Upon returning to unite, they will have to be hidden inside in their closet again.

*Friend Exchange* is normally distributed to the gay work teams in nearly 60 cities, with 2,500 gay people in regular contact with the project team and 2,000-2,500 medical staff working on HIV/AIDS prevention, mental health, CDC, clinical STD, and media professionals. This list also includes state officials. The number of subscribers varies considerably from one province to another. It may be 600-700 subscriptions in one province, where magazines are distributed not only in the capital city but also the gay volunteer work teams in a dozen of medium-sized cities (such as Henan). In other provinces, like Tibet, only 20-30 subscriptions will be provided. Currently, for every issue 15,000 copied will be printed. After distribution, only 100 to 200 copies will be left, which will be posted to readers upon requests within the next two months (2009-07-30 Interview).

In recent years, there has been a strong demand from organisations targeting HIV/AIDS prevention in medium-sized cities (2009-07-30 Interview). During my field study from June to July, 2006, the gay work teams in contact

with the programme spread in 45 cities. In August 2007, Beichuan Zhang remarked that their gay work teams distributed the magazine to local gay communities. For instance, the Yunnan Province is a heavily impacted area by STD, for which reason since 2002, FE dispatched 200 copies of *Friend Exchange* to Yunnan Health Education Institute on regular terms. After 2004, the number was increased to 300 copies. Health workers, officers working at regulatory body and NGOs in Kunming also receive copies of FE (2009-07-30 Interview). *Friend Exchange* in Chengdu (around 200 copies per issue) is mainly distributed by the Care Team led by Xiaodong Wang<sup>3</sup>. In general, these magazines are distributed in gay bars and circulated among friends (2007-02-03 field study notes). Apart from that, mental health agency in certain cities may distribute to health workers, where the CDC in certain cities will distribute *Friend Exchange* among the gay community.

By and large, apart from the individuals in regular contact with the programme team, work teams, CDC and mental health agencies in nearly 60 cities in mainland China by means of secondary distribution, will distribute *Friend Exchange* to local gay communities. Through distribution *en masse* by voluntary work teams and individual postal subscriptions through the *Friend Exchange* office, this non-profit magazine travels around the country, enabling the gay communities to share their information and values unheeded by the mainstream media.

Electronic media as a fast, interactive force for social mobilisation can achieve great effects, such as the Independent Media Centres (IMC) networks, which as an independent global media network for anti-capitalism, has a demonstrable record in organising demonstrations against the WTO Summit on November 30, 1999 in Seattle, California. New technology has spread across cities – a radical use of Internet technologies (including text, audio, video and multimedia) spread to 31 countries, with 78 IMCs established worldwide. Up so far, its communication sphere is being continuously expanded (Atton 2003: 53). The circulation of paper version, as well as browsing *Friend Exchange* on the Internet, has created a cross-boundary sphere for communication. In cities where the Internet was developing fast, there has been a dramatic increase in browsing *Friend Exchange* on the Internet. With an increasing influence of the brand, in late August, 2007, the domain name of *Friend Exchange* was cyber-squatted. The cyber squatter demanded an annual fee of 3,000 *yuan*, to which Beichuan Zhang refused and re-registered the domain name. In late November, 2005, Sina as a famous Chinese web portal opened a blog for Beichuan Zhang. Statistics showed that for twice the click on the blog exceeded 90,000.

For me, the potentiality of circulating *Friend Exchange* electronically can be further developed. A nationwide web team for editing, production and distribution can be established. Contacts with other voluntary organisations in cities around China can also be expanded dramatically by electronic means. Readers in large or small and medium cities can make the best of the technological advantage of the Internet for information sharing and interaction, while the paper version of *Friend Exchange* can be reserved for rural readers. By this, the coverage can be increased, availing a social mobilisation of both urban and rural areas, as well as to overcome the financial bottlenecks that have for long troubled alternative media due to the cost of printing and circulation. However, Beichuan Zhang disagreed, 'It is not possible yet for *Friend Exchange* to develop an Internet sphere. It is mainly because I'm too occupied, and we have limited financial resources. There has been an increasing number of gay people using the Internet for reading, for which reason the distribution of *Friend Exchange* is now towards small and medium cities and rural areas (2007-09-10 email interview).

Zhang's comments point to a common problem of financial shortage and difficulty of expansion facing alternative media these days, due to social prejudice, neglect of national communication policy and lack of advertisement opportunities. *Tongxin* (Chengdu) and *Rainbow Sky* (*qikai tiankong*, Kunming) that I interviewed also experience with financial difficulties. The tremendous transformation of communication technology and readership has indeed posed new problems for the *Friend Exchange* team: how to follow the latest social development, to link with the Internet of urban gay community as well as to penetrate rural areas with the paper version. If the programme team does not respond to the technology challenge in a timely manner, *Friend Exchange* will lose part of its influence due to the failure to catch up with the latest development in Internet technology.

From the editing, production and circulation of *Friend Exchange* it can be seen that alternative media is far from a competitor to mainstream media in terms of production and market penetration. Unlike mainstream media, alternative media are neither commercially-driven nor competent in promotional distributions. What is supported, represented and concerned by *Friend Exchange* is the life of alternative media actors, which is closely related to the daily needs and demands of the gay community. It has nothing to do with the economic determinism of the media. The programme team through collective organisation represents a distinction from mainstream media. There is a fundamental principle for the editing policy of *Friend Exchange*. '*Friend Exchange* is for the gay community to see, understand, recognise themselves,

while not others (heterosexuals)' (2006-06-29 Interview). The production commonly used for mainstream media is a vertical interaction model from generality to particularities, while between *Friend Exchange* authors and readers there is a horizontal communication. This has played an important role in helping the underprivileged to voice their concerns.

## **2.2 Constructing a Public Sphere for the Gay Community in Mainland China**

The Habermasian notion of public sphere denotes open criticism on state by civil society, where citizens are empowered to defend their individual rights. However, due to the inequality in social structure, the gay community can be powerless to challenge the hegemony of heterosexual discourse, which is a blind spot in the Habermasian theory on communication liberation (Jansen 2002: 31). In *Habermas and Public Sphere* as edited by Craig Calhoun, several papers also criticised the limitations within the Habermasian notion of public sphere, pointing out that for the underprivileged and marginalised groups, due to lack of equal access to resources, they cannot freely participate in public affairs. Rationality as defined and benchmarked by the dominating class, is used to exclude the participation of the dominated. Gay, lesbian and women that are regarded as irrational thus face exclusion from sharing the bourgeoisie public sphere. In other words, rationality, freedom and equality are illusions rooted in the bourgeoisie notion of public sphere or hegemony (Calhoun 1991). Bruce Robbins directly equated the Habermasian public sphere with fantasy, as his research revealed that historically there existed no public sphere that was truly open to the whole citizenry and free from domination and control. Women, gay, lesbian and other underprivileged communities were positioned external to public sphere (Robbins 1993). These theoretical critiques illuminate my observation of the public sphere in mainland China. In the following I will attempt to use a historical notion of public sphere as an extensive concept to build social capacity for minority groups to defend individual rights. Moreover, Huang's argument on the third space shall be introduced to the current debate, so as to expand the public sphere/civil society discussion as originally proposed by Habermas.

The next question in line is who to shoulder the responsibility for constructing a visible public sphere for the gay community. Such public instrument as mass media can be counterproductive. For instance, it was generally held that mass media could play an important role in de-stigmatising HIV/AIDS. Nonetheless, researches have revealed that mass media can equally distort the public image of HIV/AIDS. Media is focused on inciting emotional reactions from their readers. It may also view the image of HIV/AIDS as

homosexuality problems, this issue repeatedly represented by *Sun Daily* (Beharrell 1993). The HIV/AIDS reportage in Taiwan has gone through six stages, including a 'gay disease cycle' from mid-1985 to late 1988 (Hsu, Lin and Wu, 2000, quoted in Xu 2001: 63). In entertainment media, the gay community is a selling point for the 'eyeball' economy. As Moritz pointed out, cable TV and cinemas have proven that the gay themes can be profitable, as they attract audience. Besides, Moritz argued that the American audience embrace controversial entertainment and knowledge programmes (Moritz 1989: 62-79). In contemporary US, although gay movements have availed certain positive results, but 'homosexuals were conceived as "security risks": enemies within, to be coerced, brutalized, and confined to closets' (Jansen 2002: 214). Obviously, the mainstream society has instituted exclusion, silence or even a symbolic annihilation of the homosexuality issue.

The situation in China is not only similar to the US and Taiwan, but also due to certain limitations, the media representation of these issues appears relatively laggard. In China, the issues of HIV/AIDS, STD and homosexuality were regarded as social tumours that negatively impact modernisation. At legal and policy levels there lacks a proactive approach to devise timely measures to combat these problems. The state plays the ostrich strategy to tell media to cover up these issues. *People's Daily*, one of the mainstream media can be a telling example. The reports on homosexuality, though manifesting a trend of objectivity and science, has neglected the emotional side and living experiences of the gay and lesbian community, which was rarely reported in positive, authentic and constructive manner. The coverage is at best meagre and limited.

This undesirable situation in media coverage can be attributed to the fact that the Party-controlled media organizations a key element in the whole national monitory structure. The reform of journalism as dictated by Central Publicity Department and General Administration for Press and Publication aims mainly to, under the premise of maintaining ideological stability, improve efficiency and profitability. By this policy, media organization will all become commercialised and competitive in the industry. The reform of corporatisation after 1992, together with media commercialisation and the marketisation of media industry in 1996, has become an irreversible trend for the whole industry. However, these changes do not mean that journalism in China will become fully marketised and in full accordance with market logic. Neither will it pursue objectivity, impartiality and justice. Instead, the reform of journalism in China experiences a tension between marketisation and ideological control by the state (Lee 1994, Zhao, 1998; Yan, 2000). In fact, the reform of journalism in China oscillates like a pendulum between control and relaxation (Chan

1995). There is a coexistence of self-dependence in management and lack of autonomy in content production for news media (Chan, 1993; Yu 1994; Luo et al. 2004: 20). The reform of the printing industry in mainland China is similar, with the only difference in that the publication of books are regulated through the granting of ISBN and ISSN, without which publication in any form will be prohibited. These reforms have failed to take into account the culture of minority groups, media diversity and social justice, of which the ecology will not be conducive to building social cohesion.

To the accompaniment of the mainstream media's ignorance, there is a severity in the issues of HIV/AIDS, STD and homosexuality. According to the estimate by WHO, the annual new infection rate of STD is 16 to 20 million (the Health Newspaper, 2004-05-18). Research findings indicate that there is a rate of 1.35% of HIV infection for gays (Jinghua Times 2004-12-2). China Joint Assessment Report on AIDS Prevention (2004), co-authored by China-AIDS and UNAIDS, recorded that the HIV infection rate for gays in Beijing, Harbin, Guangzhou and Shenyang reached as high as 1%. Beichuan Zhang's investigation is more on the living conditions of the gay community.

A project of the Tenth FYP I'm chairing at the moment was granted in October, 2004 while in September, 2006 it was checked upon delivery. I have investigated 2,250 MSM<sup>4</sup>, of whom around 200 identified themselves as heterosexuals. Of these 2,250 MSMs, the screening infection rate was 2.4%, while the confirmed infection rate was 2.5% (several did not attend the confirmation test). Among the GBT (Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual), the unmarried group that had sex with women has an infection rate of initial selection of 3.28%, and a confirmed infection rate of 2.81%. For the married group, the infection rate of initial selection and confirmation rate were both 1.66%. This fully demonstrates that there is a potential danger for the HIV virus to spread to the general public. The HIV infection rate among the gay community has already broken through the threshold of 1%. According to international experience, it will be difficult to control once it surpasses the threshold of 1%. However, different from the West, the spread of HIV among MSMs in China is not restricted to gays, but with the potential to spread to the public. The main reason is social discrimination. Research has revealed that the mental health for the gay community is more worrying: over 60% of the surveyed gays felt very depressed about their sexual orientation, which heavily impacted their life, study or work. The main reason for this depression comes from the lack of understanding and discrimination from the general public and their family<sup>5</sup>.

According to Dr. Xiaoyan Zhang, from CDC Beijing,

Among homosexuals in Beijing, the infection rate of HIV already surpassed 3%. Among the 526 surveyed, the infected were 17, at 3.23% of the total; there were 8 infected with HCV, at 1.52%; 59 with syphilis, at 11.22%. These figures did not show a sharp increase from the general situation of infection in China. However, the HIV and syphilis infection rates for the HCV patients were as high as 17.65% and 35.29%. It is very alarming'<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, the living condition for homosexuals can also be worrying. Research finds that

Due to discrimination and lack of amiable environment for socialising, around two thirds of gays felt “very lonely”, while nearly two thirds felt “quite depressed”. Over half, due to no understanding, experienced emotional frustration that heavily impacted their life and work, of which three fifths explicitly regarded their vexation as the result of discrimination. 38.0% were physically hurt during sex. 21.3% were harmed by heterosexuals. 5.6% had such harm in the most recent year while 31.5% experienced harm from other gay peers, while 14.2% experienced such harm within the most recent year. Apparently, the gay community is underprivileged. What is particularly notable is the relatively high percentage of the investigated being subject to physical harm. It is only when a group has been heavily excluded that so many cases of harm would appear. Our and international studies have shown that harm on gays is clearly related to high-risk actions' (Beichuan Zhang, 2004).

Actually, the gay issue is not only concerned with homosexuals. According to the calculation of 3.7 people per family in China, the number of people impacted is 3.7 times of the gay group, not to count the number of people to be impacted after the gay get married heterosexually. Obviously, for the gay community in mainland China, on the one hand there exists discrimination and pressure with this ‘high-risk group’, while on the other, there is a concealed identity due to lack of social acceptance, understanding and tolerance. They, even their family members that already know, all live in a closet. Although this closet with the spread of scientific knowledge, progress of public policy and law, and change in social awareness may become easily to break, its presence is still real and pressing at the moment. Access to providing care to the gay community can only be channelled through the issue of HIV/AIDS. Predictably, the legalisation of this group is a process intertwined with discrimination, de-stigmatisation, and link, delink with and struggle for prevention of HIV/AIDS.

These reports by mainstream media in mainland China, as well as the social context, have shown the urgency to attend to the issue of homosexuality. It is a matter of necessity to construct a public sphere for the gay community.

However, at the moment, General Administration for Press and Publications not willing to grant ISSN or ISBN on any publication on STD, HIV/AIDS or homosexuality. How to make up for the failure in the mainstream media? In contemporary China, I feel that the production of alternative media like *Friend Exchange* is quite a concrete measure. Funded by overseas foundations, the programme has a magazine that is led by experts, participated by volunteers, published on regular terms and targeting minority groups. This programme fully concretises the idea of multiculturalist equality, to avoid gimmick commercialisation, emotional stirring, and power discipline by the regulation system.

It is in this general social context absent channels for homosexuality that the importance of *Friend Exchange* can be seen. With a gay community of 30 million and 47,000 HIV infected gay people<sup>7</sup>, *Friend Exchange* is capable of continuously representing the gay community, channelling public discourse on homosexuality, and defending the media right by gay groups. This has shown that professionals and the gay community have been engaged in countering the hegemony of discrimination and injustice in mainstream social ideology. The efforts between experts and homosexuals have availed particular media attention for *Friend Exchange*, which in a timely manner remedied the failure of mainstream media by constructing a public sphere for the gay community. For instance, in the issues published before August, 2001, the back cover was printed with such words, 'when you finish reading this *Friend Exchange*, please give it to other friends so as to share information'. The purpose was to expand its readership. Actually, the coverage and readership of the magazine were also increased rapidly within a short time. The magazine was initiated in February, 1998. In March, 1998, the first and second issues were published at the same time, with 3,000 copies each. In May, 1998 the third issue came out. Afterwards, the magazine remained to be published bimonthly. By June, 2006, 51 issues had been published. The number of copies for each issue ranged from 3,000 to 5,000, rising again to 8,000. In 2001, the number of copies for every issue reached 10,000 and today it has already reached 11,000. During an interview in July, 2009, the number of copies per issue was 15,000, with a circulation rate of 6 to 7 persons per issue<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, in the April, 2002 issue, one of the co-partners of FE, namely Taishan School of Medicine Mental Health Clinics, was upgraded from a regional into a national body and renamed as Mental Health Research Institute of Peking University.

The inside front of *Friend Exchange* contains the telephone and Fax number, email address and correspondence address of the team. The inside back cover and back cover include related hotlines in the capital cities of every

provinces and medium cities. FE built an enormous communication platform for its readership and engaged its readers through such technologies as hotlines. The programme team conducted a third survey on MSM in 2000 and an initial statistics of the survey questionnaires (n=635) revealed that:

Around 70,000 directly receive information from FE, of which one fourth will give to heterosexual contacts and confess to the latter their sexual orientation. 50% of the heterosexuals after reading FE become friendly to MSM, 42.6% without attitude change while only 3.7% become hostile. Among the MSM readership of FE, 75.3% felt that FE has a significant or relatively significant positive effect upon their mental health... 66.3% felt that FE has a large, relatively large part in strengthening their self-confidence, 24.9% felt that the part was relatively small, while 5.2% felt no help at all. 47.6% felt that FE is a big help in advancing personal work quality, 35.6% felt it to be relatively small while 12.9% felt it to be of no help (Zhang and Li, 2001).

More importantly, the homosexual issue concerns the severe issue of sex that is related to personal mental health, family harmony, economic development and social security. The gay community has felt their natural homosexual passion. Without a rational, scientific understanding of their sexual orientation, it is easy to acquire a self-hatred and self-blame mentality that is common to minority groups or the marginalised. However, without coming out, it is difficult to discern sexual orientation through corporal expression. Gaysthus have to internalise the pressure in a concealed manner, and their mental world is constantly in the anxieties, resulting in mental or physical depression. Contemporarily in China, the majority of homosexuals are subject to the heterosexual values and become married. This increases the possibility of intra-marriage disharmony. *Friend Exchange* played a role in preventing suicide and its result showed that 'of the surveyed, 35.9% had the idea of suicide due to social discrimination against homosexuality but did not take action. The idea of suicide was dissolved by FE for 45.2%, abated for 41.2%, increased for 0.9% and 12.7% without amelioration. Another 9.4% not only had the idea of suicide but also attempted in action, of which 43.3% had their idea dispelled, 31.7% abated, 0% increased and 25.0% without amelioration' (Zhang and Li 2001). Obviously, *Friend Exchange* has to a certain extent dissolved the confrontation between the dominant and underprivileged groups, which equals partial dissolution of the anti-social force and the suicide crisis for the underprivileged.

During my field studies in Chengdu and Kunming, the feedback from state or grassroots organisations that are related to HIV/STD prevention and the gay community shows that *Friend Exchange* plays a leading role in

constructing a public sphere for the gay community in mainland China. Yunnan Health Education Institute is an important official body to prevent HIV/STD in Yunnan. It was responsible for such important projects as China-Britain HIV Prevention during 2000-2006. In December, 2006, I conducted an in-depth interview with Dr. Ming Wang, Director of the Programme Office. Dr. Wang talked about the support they received from *Friend Exchange*:

On the one hand Professor Beichuan Zhang gave a big support to refine our prevention know-how, institutionalise and share information/resources. For instance, at the beginning of the China-Britain project, we had had no contact with the MSM group, while Professor Zhang had already established a contact network for the national gay community in the late 1990s through the programme of *Friend Exchange*. In areas where there is a low penetration of the Internet, the inquiries are normally answered through correspondence. It is Professor Zhang who proactively maintained correspondence with over 30 MSMs in Kunming and use his opportunity to attend a conference in June, 2006 to help us to meet MSM in Kunming, upon which to build a volunteer group. Only with this was our work carried out smoothly. After this, *Friend Exchange* held many prevention training sessions for MSM, and invited us along to attend with volunteers' (2006-12-23 Field Note).

In May, 2004, Yunnan Health Education Institute, with the funding from International HIV Alliance, established the first gay magazine in Kunming called *Rainbow Sky*. Beichuan Zhang is one of its advisors. By December, 2006, during my field trip in Kunming, this magazine had already published 5 issues. This is another magazine targeting the gay community after *Share and Exchange* (fenxiang yu jiaoliu), published by Ji' and Health Education Institute in Beijing and *Tongxin* by the Gay Care Work Team in Chengdu. When it was first established, the Gay Care Work Team in Chengdu also received support from Beichuan Zhang. Xiaodong Wang the director recounted with passion:

In 2002, Professor Zhang participated in a mobilisation meeting of the HIV Comprehensive Prevention Programme (a China-Britain programme 2000-2006 in Sichuan) for the gay community in Chengdu... In 2004, when the Gay Care Work Team experienced difficulty, I was thinking about giving up it. I gave a phone call to Professor Zhang and told him about my ideas. He encouraged me by saying that there should be someone to do the job for the gay community. He urged me to look forward and not abandon it. In many circumstances, he has sung highly of our work. Since May 2002 when I was involved in this job, I read every issue of *Friend Exchange*, no matter how busy I am. The magazine made me feel at peace to accept my own identity. Now, the spread of the Internet has enabled gay people to receive a lot of information. However, *Friend Exchange* makes it possible to know more of

the expert opinions and work information on the HIV prevention and gay community both within China and without' (2007-02-03, Field Note).

Certainly, this public sphere was born in the context of combating HIV/STD. The experts and volunteers who are involved into editing, production and circulations are invariably elite of the gay community and activists of the gay movements. However, the elite class led by experts cannot represent the whole gay community or help to fully realise the potential of their agency. From the perspective of health prevention, the readership has already shown how *Friend Exchange* can help them to find their own life and particular information they need. However, due to the limits of knowledge and focused targets during organisation and operation, there is certain failure in the public sphere. Firstly, compared with the situation of HIV in the whole China, the programme of *Friend Exchange* is still powerless to a great extent, with limited coverage, especially for the homosexuals living in rural areas who are precluded from sharing this information in a timely manner. Secondly, the *Friend Exchange* programme has relatively neglected the issue of lesbians. Gay is relatively well attended to under the umbrella of HIV/AIDS prevention. By comparison, for lesbians, due to weaker relation between their sexual behaviour to the HIV infection, as well as the strict requirement on women in terms of reproduction and ethnic status, there is a marked under-representation for lesbians. 'Feminism in China is focused on enlightening heterosexual women to engage in counter-heteropatriarchy actions, fighting for gender equality in marriage, family, employment, education and politics. This neglects the internal differences of Chinese women between the homosexuals and heterosexuals. Moreover, the mutual exclusion between feminists and lesbians can make it difficult to formulate a synergic strategy for actions, thereby resulting in a weak discussion of the lesbian issues' (Cao and Cao 2007).

Up so far, only Professor Yinhe Li has researched extensively on this issue. From the two columns of the 34 samples of *Friend Exchange*, namely 'Life' and 'Letters from the Readers', if the representation of gay and lesbian is used as the analytic unit, the data thus availed show that there is a serious disproportionate representation of gays. There are 280 articles in 'Life', of which 166 are on life of gays at 59.29%, while only 36 on lesbian, at 12.86%. In 'Letters from the Reader', there are 196 articles, of which 110 came from gays at 56.12% while only 12 from lesbians, at 6.12%. There might be fewer lesbians who seek to conceal their sexual orientation through marriage or by other means. This nonetheless does not mean that they do not exist. They will equally experience frustration of being closeted, or even have to endure rape in heterosexual marriage. Beichuan Zhang also admitted that due to the limits of

his own research orientation and the magazine, his exploration of lesbians remained insignificant. However, since 2009, Beichuan Zhang started liaison with the lesbian organisations in Beijing to discuss the tragedy of gays marrying lesbians. There has been attention paid to domestic violence, particularly the right and situation of homosexual's wives, in mainland China.

A proportion of the readership in *Friend Exchange* in Chengdu and Kunming felt that there is an insufficient representation by FE of the real life, emotion and opinions for the gay community, while the experts and HIV health prevention team have a dominant voice. Ming Wang in practice also felt the abovementioned opinion.

I also feel confused, mainly because there is no internal consensus between us and the gay community. The purpose of our work may still has certain distance from the real needs of the community. We are incapable of solving all the issues in the community. The gay community is prone to change the centre of gravity between HIV prevention and community development. The community may want to organise more entertainment activities without necessarily placing community development and HIV prevention to the top priority. Now, Yunnan has established many care teams, of which the power is not integrated (2006-12-23 Field Note).

These voices have shown that state should pay more attention to this issue. Policy-makers should strengthen their research surveys, implement the communication policy on diversity, and allow organisations to establish arts and entertainment media for minority groups instead of asking *Friend Exchange* or other prevention organisations to satisfy such needs. For one thing, the centre of gravity for the work, as well as the content of the magazine, can still have certain distance from daily needs and emotional experiences of the gays and lesbians community.

Mainstream media is faced with the tasks of improving efficiency and profitability, which can only be realised through commercialisation and corporatisation. The institutional reform thus entailed seeks to nurture consumer groups for media. Every flow process has been commercialised, with advertisements situated at its core. Media, audience and advertisers are mutually embedded in a web of commercialisation. The pursuit of profits, as well as the hegemony of mainstream ideology, has muffled the voice from the underprivileged. Simultaneously, alternative media in mainland China through the overseas NGO funding has developed gradually, which is a movement to challenge social inequality. To a certain extent, this is also a timely remedy when mainstream media ignores social realities, minority groups and significant social issues. *Friend Exchange* respects the distinct identity of the

gay community. It ensures their communication right, so as to encourage the gay community to overcome the oppression of the society. Plus, it helps the underprivileged to find policies for struggle against discrimination and oppression.

In this sense, *Friend Exchange* as a programme is also a language arts movement for homosexuality. ‘The purpose of language arts is persuasion, of which the operation has important political implications. It is a key element to channel social transformation’ (Wu 1996). Nonetheless, as far as I can see, the direct effect is to avoid coming out in the public. ‘As a way to actively voice concerns to the heterosexual society, it safeguards personal anonymity through collective coming out’ (Jian 1998: 90). This is different from demonstrations where individuals coming out to fight for equality by the gay community in the West. This might be more viable strategy for contemporary China. Our attention to the diversity in the production of media has showed that alternative media corrects the failures of mainstream media. Out of the 9,000 journals granted ISBN by General Administration for Press and Publication, there is no magazine that is specifically targeting the non-consumption demands from the gay and lesbian community. Multiculturalism, this core principle in communication, is to secure a non-discriminatory representation in media by the right to communication. For me, the production of alternative media in China is an effective supplement to the absence of attention in mainstream media and during the monopoly of commercialisation. This helps to revise the narrow Habermasian notion of public sphere, by including multiculturalist equality external to bureaucracy and institutions in 21<sup>st</sup> century China.

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<sup>1</sup> These data were received during my interview with Professor Beichuan Zhang in his office. Beichuan Zhang referred to *homosexual* (*tongxinglian*) as *homo-amour* (*tongxing'ai*). For uniformity of terminology, only *homosexual* will be used in this article.

<sup>2</sup> This category refers to ‘donations’, while short announcements do not belong to any column. ‘Safe Sex Guidelines’ since the August, 2001 issue, was included in the column of ‘Education on HIV/STD’. Every issue contains it, with the same content. Afterwards, it was set as an independent column. For statistical purposes, this is still included in the column on HIV/STD education. From February, 2003, the edition of FE was changed profoundly. News was now renamed as Information, with page number increasing to 78. The Column on Life was focused on a particular theme in every issue. The theme is set as affiliate to ‘Life – [theme in issue]’. The columns on debate and hundred schools of thoughts were similar. Moreover, they did not appear together in the same issue, for which these two were conflated together. ‘Friendship’ is for making friends. With the declaration of December, 2001, this column was printed on a separate sheet of paper detached from the journal, but tucked inside the journal. In February, 2004, this column was revived.

<sup>3</sup> In June, 2002, Gay Care Team (*tongzhi guan'ai xiaozu*), a community NGO in Chengdu was established, with a hotline opened. From 2002 to 2005 hotline consultation was continuously carried out. In December, 2003, the gay care team published *Tongxin*, the first gay community magazine, while in July, 2007, a Tongle health consultation centre was registered to replace the gay care team. This was registered as a company, with legal status and organisational autonomy. On the one hand, the

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company has management risks and taxation pressure while on the other hand, it represents the =flexibility and civil self-awareness for grassroots organisation to engage in social struggles. This organisation opted for the strategy of ‘Cooperation, Participation, Thinking and Action’ to respond to the challenges in contemporary society. Using right accretion as their orientation, the organisation is dedicated to the health development of gay culture, attending to the living conditions of gay people, and cooperating with the government to conduct prevention of HIV/AIDS. During interview, the gay people in Chengdu are used to using ‘tongzhi’ (comrade) to refer to the gay community. The term “*tongzhi*” is now a common way of addressing homosexuals in the Chinese-speaking world, suggesting that the Chinese have to some degree revised the usual understanding of homosexual as defined in the West. As described by Chou Wah-shan “The term ‘tongzhi’ (comrade) does not involve ‘sex’. It refers to a noble as well as politicized idea which means ‘of the same will’ or ‘the sharing of the same belief,’ with the expectation of achieving a society of common volition. It does not contain the negative implications of ‘excessive sexuality,’ ‘sexual abnormality,’ or ‘femininity tones,’ which are so frequently found in conventional discourses on homosexuality. The term ‘tongzhi’ de-sexualizes the homosexual relationship, hence forcefully rejecting dominant media representations of gays and lesbians. But the term does not thoroughly deny the sexual affair involved, as the term still keeps the character ‘tong’ (homo) which is also the same character in the Chinese term ‘tong xing lian’ (homosexuality). By echoing Sun Yat-sen’s famous saying ‘Revolution has yet to succeed and all comrades (tongzhi) must still work hard,’ the term signifies a noble and moving political ethos. The term ‘Tongzhi’ originally referred to the Party members who sacrificed their blood and life for the revolutionary cause. Nowadays, this original noble meaning has been displaced. The character ‘zhi’ (will) has turned into something like ‘homosexual crowd should not be discriminated’ and ‘homosexuals could still share true love’. (Chou 1997:362)” “As a conscious political practice, the term ‘tongzhi’ transcends the terrain of sexual orientation, be it heterogeneous or homosexual, and represents a subjectivity of counter-identity and counter-labeling. It is a political strategy which could only be implemented through a definition and redefinition by living experience. It transcends the conventional duality between ‘homo vs. hetero,’ thus speaking to a political identity that epitomizes a world of common wellbeing. (Chou 1997:363)”

<sup>4</sup> MSM, or men who have sex with men, mainly refer to gays and then male bisexuals. MSM, especially gays, are susceptible to HIV. The HIV prevention for MSM in industrialised countries is mainly through NGOs or community organisations. The advantage of this mode is the high ratio of cost-benefit. It nonetheless needs the support of relevant economic and cultural frameworks. The developing countries in general neglect the HIV prevention for MSM. The research and action of Beichuan Zhang were focused on HIV prevention for this group.

<sup>5</sup> These data were gathered during my interview with Professor Beichuan Zhang in his office in June, 2006. On January 24, 2006, HIV and Prevent Work Progress in China 2005, co-published by Ministry of Health, UNAIDS, and WHO, specifically mentioned that ‘there were around 47,000 infected and patients of HIV among MSM, taking up 7.3% of the assessed total’. Beichuan Zhang told me that through searching UNAIDS websites ([www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org) and [www.unchina.org/unaids](http://www.unchina.org/unaids)), or the website of CDC in China ([www.chinaids.org.cn](http://www.chinaids.org.cn)) where relevant information can be gathered.

<sup>6</sup> This material came from the Gobon Survey on HIV Prevention Awareness and Health Conditions gays in China, which was co-organised by China CDC, China Gay voluntary organisations and Guilin Latex Factory.

<sup>7</sup> This was a number in 2005, provided by the programme team at *Friend Exchange*. Every survey indicated that for the 2006-2007 period, there was a continuous increase of HIV infections.

<sup>8</sup> Data were gathered from the programme office of *Friend Exchange* in June, 2006.

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