

travel



BY LAURA MILLER

China is not most GLBT travelers' obvious choice as a gay-friendly tourist destination.

In fact, Hong Kong, more often than not, is viewed as little more than a stop-off point on the way to Bangkok. Nonetheless, Hong Kong boasts a formidable, if somewhat secretive, gay and lesbian scene that is well worth looking into.

The Tongzhi — a term encompassing all GLBT Chinese — have historically not enjoyed a great deal of tolerance within Chinese society. It was not until 1992 that the People's Republic of China officially declared that homosexuality was not illegal. Even today, the Lonely Planet guide reports that "[t]he PRC's offi-

any legal remedy whatsoever.

Moreover, the legal consequences of "coming out" in Hong Kong are not nearly as severe as the cultural and economic ones. In a society in which personal connections are a basic necessity for survival, the consequences of being disowned by one's friends and family are too terrifying for the average Tongzhi to even contemplate. In Hong Kong in particular, where affordable housing can be as difficult to find as in trendier parts of Manhattan, many young people live with their parents well into their thirties. To be thrown out by one's family is tantamount to becoming homeless.

As a result, the gay scene in Hong Kong is not one in which you can expect to find rows of houses and stores bedecked

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cial attitude to gays and lesbians in mainland China is ambiguous, with responses ranging from draconian penalties to tacit acceptance."

Hong Kong, however, enjoys different legal and cultural status, due in large part to the fact that it was a British territory until 1997. The British-run government decriminalized sodomy in 1991. Since the PRC is obliged to preserve Hong Kong's legal system for at least 50 years, the Tongzhi of Hong Kong cannot be criminally prosecuted for sodomy by the PRC, regardless of what rules apply to the rest of mainland China.

What the colonial government did not do for the Tongzhi was afford them any protection from employment discrimination. Thus a Tongzhi may be safe from police raids, but she can still be fired from her job solely on the basis of her sexual orientation, without

with rainbow flags, nor are you likely to see same-sex couples holding hands in the streets.

What you will find is a friendly and tight-knit group of people with the sense of community all too quickly disappearing from the more mainstream GLBT communities in the United States. Moreover, the Tongzhi community is one of the few sectors of Chinese society in which Chinese and foreigners appear to truly come together as a family. Elsewhere, the British, Canadian, and American expatriates who live and work in Hong Kong are frequently heard to complain that the Cantonese (the ethnic majority in Hong Kong) are generally uninterested in anyone or anything not Cantonese.

Making connections

There are several ways to tap into the Tongzhi scene, one of which is simply to roam

Tongzhi:

The Queer Guide to Hong Kong

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