

# Queer Mongolians: *Is Isolation Their Destiny?*

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The logo design for Mongolia's first annual Race for Life. In 1999 UNAIDS, the Mongolian Youth Federation, and the Mongolian Scouts Association sponsored a run/walk fundraiser for STI/HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness. After a 5 km race, health promotion materials were available at the finish line. Tavilan participated in the race and Tus Dem had an information table about sexual orientation.

Much of the literature written about Mongolia descends quickly into a nostalgic overview of Buriad Shamans, Tsaatam Reindeer people, or the suppression of Buddhism under socialism. This article explores the development of organized queer spaces during the rapid social change in the 1990s. Increased contact with international media, foreigners, and international organizations provided a catalyst for the formal incorporation of a gay and lesbian human rights organization. Also, the Internet provided more informal ways of communicating privately. Just as this anonymous space brings queers together, it also isolates.

By Richard Smith

In 1997, the United Nations signed a memorandum of understanding with the government of Mongolia on HIV/AIDS. The government of Mongolia pledged to support interventions for men who have sex with men. A social entrepreneur, Dr Urtnasen, opened an NGO that provided HIV/AIDS/STD prevention and education services to men who have sex with men. They also provided informal counselling with regard to sexual orientation and gender identity issues in general.

Some of Dr Urtnasen's clients eventually wanted to organize a group by and for gay men. They were inspired partially by the murder of a gay man and the subsequent police interrogation of known men who have sex with men. The group incorporated in March 1999 as Destiny, or in Mongolian, Tavilan. They struggled as an organization as to whether or not they wanted to be a service provider that would seek contracts with the donor community or be a membership organization. Several members accepted interviews with the local press to tell their coming out stories. Members also participated in a peer education-training course sponsored by the United Nations.

In the summer of 2000, Destiny had its second general meeting, but only had five people in attendance. Perhaps queer Mongolians were afraid to meet in the Children's Palace, a public building in the centre of Ulaanbaatar. At that meeting, a lesbian joined the group as a member of the board of directors. As an employee with a women's NGO, she held workshops at various universities on gender and was able to come out during some of her presentations.

During the meeting, Destiny discussed the issue of including bisexual and foreign members in the group. One attendee

remarked that '[s]ome older gay men have wives and children and have a gay friend in secret. I'm a clean gay person, I've never been with a woman.' And yet, he granted that there were few clean gays, so the group decided to include bisexuals. Although membership waned, the group was able to get a grant from the Mongolian AIDS Foundation to fund a 24-hour hotline for gay, lesbian, and bisexual Mongolians who had questions about HIV/AIDS/STD prevention. Unfortunately, as international donor interest in Mongolia declined, the funding for this grant dried up.

## Isolated cybergays?

Email and chat rooms like Mongol.net opened up doors for isolated queers who want to connect with members of Destiny. Students log in from abroad or in Mongolia at one of the many Internet cafés popping up in what used to be first floor apartments and government offices. This climate provides many opportunities for Destiny to achieve its public education and organizing goals in the very first public space where queers can discourse without fear. Yahoo groups presented another forum for communication. The subscribers are a combination of travellers from other countries hoping to visit Mongolia and Mongolians living in the country and abroad. Founding members of Destiny joined a Yahoo group discussion about gay Mongolia and presented their organization with hopes of gaining some interest of others in Ulaanbaatar to join the group and organize activities. Most subscribers, however, use the feature as a classified personal service rather than an organizing tool.

In April 2002, the founder of Destiny posted a call to organize one of the Yahoo groups: 'We just killing [sic] and sad. There is no gay community in Mongolia. And also there

is still no gay life in UB. Why do we have no connections, no trust, and no information? We need do something [sic] for gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, community.' An international virtual community is no replacement for face-to-face organizing and social support.

In a country with a population of only 2.5 million, it is very difficult to get the terminal mass of gay men and lesbians to organize a simple association, let alone a commercial and retail industry to cater to their economic desires. Mongolians who are educated enough to know about varied models of queer communities in other countries often have the skills needed to immigrate to these countries. Mongolia has no sodomy laws per se, but it lacks any specific human rights protections on the basis of sexual orientation and does not recognize same-sex relationships though a domestic partnership or civil union policy. Although Mongolia's queers fear rejection from family and friends and some have reported getting into fistfights with family, there are no organized hate groups.

Mongolian queers who immigrate to Europe or North America are not so much escaping persecution by the state or hate groups as they are seeking a place where they can experience their sexuality, free from the expectation that they will have a heterosexual family and kids. Several gay men and some lesbians have gone to North America on student visas and have stayed. Some gay Mongolians were able to immigrate to Europe using a same-sex partner as an immigration vehicle. These opportunities dilute the leadership potential of any queer organization in Mongolia. Thus, the national brain drain disproportionately affects queer Mongolia. In summary, when the iron curtain came down and let in new ideas and possibilities, it also allowed queer people to leave the country and assimilate into the global queer economy. Isolation could be the destiny of those left behind. ◀

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