

Tongzhi in Love

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World Premiere at SILVERDOCS AFI/Discovery Channel Documentary Festival

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

“Frog” Cui and his friends navigate the dilemmas of being gay in modern China, torn between the lures of city life and the stern demands of Chinese tradition. Frog loves his parents: does that mean he must honor his duty to them by marrying and bearing a child?

This question haunts the short film, “Tongzhi in Love,” directed by Ruby Yang, which will have its world premiere at the Silverdocs AFI/Discovery Channel Documentary Festival in Silver Spring, Maryland on June 18, 2008. It was produced by Thomas Lennon; Yang and Lennon’s prior documentary work in China earned them an Academy Award in 2006.

Modern China is a whirl of change and the lives of gay men are no exception. The mass migration of Chinese from village to city has brought with it new freedoms, including sexual ones; many of China’s largest cities now have an active gay bar and club scene. But tradition holds that it is a Chinese son’s solemn duty to produce a child and carry forward the family line. Gay men find themselves under intense pressure; many younger men and women lead an active life among a wide gay network, while maintaining absolute secrecy with family members, neighbors and employers. Many resort to sham marriages.

When his mother arrives in Beijing to find him a girlfriend, Frog, 27 years old, understands that he cannot delay much longer. “Some of my gay friends have married lesbians,” he confides. “At the wedding, I saw how happy their parents were.” That he loves his parents deeply only complicates his choices.

Also featured in the film is Long Ze, 22, who, even as he relishes his active sex life with men, lashes out against gays who refuse to marry. “That attitude is selfish, completely selfish . . . If you live your whole life for yourself, not for your parents,” he says, “how are you going to fulfill your responsibilities as a Chinese man?”

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Frog's good friend, Xiang Feng, has asserted that he will come out to his parents on his next visit home. But when he and Frog travel the thousand miles into the Chinese countryside to the family village, events do not unfold as planned.

Since 2004, Lennon and Yang have been working in China to increase AIDS awareness; they produced several national advertising campaigns on Chinese television, featuring such stars as Yao Ming, Jackie Chan and renowned folksinger Peng Liyuan. In December of 2007, working with China's health ministry, they wrote and directed China's first public health condom campaign, reaching over 400 million people.

"It was our concern with AIDS that first drew us into filming young gay men," recalls director Ruby Yang. "But the magic of documentary film is that you don't always know, or control, where your story is going to take you. There is not a single reference to HIV or AIDS in this film. It's a story about stigma, about being forced to lead a double life."

The title of the film has itself a double meaning: *Tongzhi* has for decades been the traditional salutation in China among fellow Communists, meaning "Comrade." After the death of Chairman Mao and the moves toward a market economy, the term became less frequently used, only to be revived by gay men in the 1990's in a very different context: as a way of referring to themselves.

"I'm gay, a *tongzhi*," says Xiang Feng in the film. "Whenever I go home, new thoughts come to me. Should I find a girl and settle down? Isn't that the most natural thing to do?"

Yang Yishu was the film's field producer and cinematographer. Guitarist Bill Frisell brought his highly original sound to the film score, which he and Brian Keane composed.

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