

With rigidly defined gender roles, unsupportive parents and a largely unsympathetic public, Taiwan's transgenders must turn to the Internet as the only means to find lovers, friends, information and support

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TAIWAN TG BUTTERFLY GARDEN

Taiwan's trailblazing transgenders

Anna wasn't aware of Cynthia's secret. The two had met on a bulletin board system, or BBS, an online forum popular among university students, and began seeing each other frequently. After a month of dating and with Anna still in the dark, the couple went to see a play.

"It was about cross-dressing and after the play, [Anna] asked me if I could accept a transgender person as my lover. I was a little nervous about the question and just said, 'I don't know, I would need a little time to think.' And I asked her: How about you? And she answered 'yes,'" Cynthia said.

Still fearful of revealing her true identity, Cynthia waited a few days before writing an e-mail and "coming out" to Anna.

"Even after I told her she thought I was female-to-male," said Cynthia.

Two years later Cynthia, a 29-year-old doctoral student, and Anna, 27, a self-professed "bisexual" who is doing her master's degree in gender studies, are still a couple. [Their names have been changed to protect their identities.]

If Anna and Cynthia's relationship seems exceptional, the manner in which they met is common among Taiwan's transgender community. With clearly defined gender roles, unsupportive parents and no public space — such as parks, cafes or clubs — available to them, Taiwan's transgenders have been left with little alternative but to turn to the Internet to find lovers, friends, information and support.

But this is changing. Last month, the Taiwan TG Butterfly Garden (台灣TG蝶園), a group established in 2000 and Taiwan's only transgender support group that meets on a regular basis, opened a hotline to provide information and support to transgenders and their families, build up a network throughout Taiwan and hopefully help make the transition from one gender to another less fraught with pain.

In Taiwan, like most Asian countries, the core unit of the community is the family. Parents play a fundamental role in making decisions for their children, often dictating what they study, who their friends are and even their general outlook on life. Individuals can count on the support of this family network throughout their lives. But paradoxically, it is within their own families where transgenders can expect the least support.

"My mother and father didn't want to talk about it," said Quinton Kao (高旭寬), 32, a female-to-male transsexual. "I kept wanting to discuss it with them, but they refused. And they kept on looking for any excuse to stop me from becoming a man," he said calmly, as though he were talking about any family issue. "They still can't accept it."

Kao said his parent's reaction is normal in a country with an education system that instills clear gender roles from a very young age. "You know, boys should wear blue clothes and girls should wear pink," he said.

One's peers can be equally — or even more — intolerant than the family. Several suicides of young, "sexually confused children," have occurred over the past few years because they were incapable of dealing with the stress of

conforming to social norms. In April 2000, middle-school student Yie Yong-chi (葉永誌) was found dead of his school in Kaohsiung County. Just before his death, he had requested to leave class early so he could go to the bathroom alone. It was later revealed that the boy was often taunted by his classmates and even forced to take his pants off to verify his gender identity.

Kao said that because his parents told him he "shouldn't act like a boy," and his teachers questioned him about his closely cropped hair and his refusal to wear dresses to school, he grew up assuming that he was homosexual.

But when he was 19 years old, Kao read a newspaper article about transgenders.

"It suddenly struck me: Hey! I'm not a lesbian. After that I went to speak to a psychiatrist," he said.

For Kao, the long process of trying to gain sympathy from his family overshadowed the relief of finally understanding his sexuality. Even after dragging along his parents to see his psychiatrist, they still refused to accept his identity.

"[The psychiatrist] told them that I wasn't the only one ... but when my mother saw her other friends and saw that their children were 'normal' that caused her tremendous stress. She was very upset. My parents, especially my mother, felt that it was their fault — that they raised me wrong, or educated me wrong, or that when she was pregnant she took some bad medicine. They really blamed themselves. And other parents blamed my mother as well," he said.

As with the extended family, the neighborhood and local community — especially in villages — exert a profound influence on parents' behavior and the added pressure reduces their willingness to support a transgender child.

"Taiwan ... [remains] very conservative about this kind of sexual issue," said Hwu Hai-gwo (胡海國), chairman of the Mental Health Foundation and a psychiatrist who has been working with transgenders at National Taiwan University Hospital for more than two decades.

"Especially with the older son. The parents feel very [ashamed] in their family circle or their neighborhood. An uncle becoming an aunt ... causes problems," he said, alluding to the importance parents in Taiwan place on the eldest son as the child who passes on the family lineage.

As a result, "the patient leaves home and becomes very lonely and has no family support in their life," he said.

But even when parents do remain in their child's life, they often do little to alleviate the social pressures their offspring is feeling. Hwu recalls an incident a few years back that encapsulates the difficulties transgenders face with their parents.

"The ... patient was being brought to the surgery room and the parents came in and they began hitting the operation room ... [forcing] the surgeon to stop the procedure," he said.

Surprisingly, NTU Hospital still doesn't offer a support group for either transgenders or their parents, although it does employ social workers to help parents deal with children's gender identity.

Cynthia's parents refused to take her seriously when she told them she would prefer to be a girl and even tried to talk her out of feminizing herself.

"My family did everything to change my mind and make me become a 'normal' person. But in fact their efforts made my life more painful. Through not wanting to make my life difficult, they made my life more difficult," she said.

But things began to change in her third year of university.

"The Internet had just started to take off and I discovered some information about transgender issues. I read some sites with stories related to what I was going through. Afterwards, I began to find the transgender community and got to know some people within that community," she said. "From then on, I became more comfortable knowing that I am transgender."

The late 1990s saw a proliferation of chat-rooms, blogs and forums devoted to transgender issues — but there was yet no place for the scattered online community to meet as a group. Although people shared information online, it was often scarce and anecdotal.

This changed in 2000 when a male-to-female transsexual named Winnie approached Josephine Ho (柯春蕤) at an academic conference on gender diversity.

"Trans was not featured as the important issue because we hadn't come into contact with any of them yet," said Ho, who researches and writes about gender issues and is coordinator at the Center for the Study of Sexualities at National Central University.

"She came and felt at ease. So we started talking and ... she contacted her friends on the Internet and we had our first meeting in June of 2000. More than a dozen people showed up," Ho said. From that first meeting the Taiwan TG Butterfly Garden was born.

What began with 12 people in 2000 grew into a network of more than 100 transgenders; 30 or so typically show up for meetings. In addition to meeting every two months, the group collects and disseminates information on transgender issues through the Center for the Study of Sexualities' Web site (sex.ncu.edu.tw).

The group just celebrated its 60th meeting.

Although they have made progress, many challenges remain. The group meets in Taipei, leaving transgenders in central and southern Taiwan with only online support. Additionally, the transgender community, because of its diversity, is fragmented into diverse subgroups — cross-dressers, transvestites, transsexuals — which rarely interact. Finding common cause is difficult because they have different needs and agendas.

Two years after the group was set up, Winnie, a co-founder of Butterfly Garden, disappeared.

It was left to Ho, rather than a member of the transgender community, to keep the group

going. Winnie's disappearance is symptomatic of a larger problem that hinders the formation of a transgender community: once a person transitions, they want to forget their former identity. It is an issue Ho empathizes with.

"Why would they want to hold onto the past?" she said. "I become a woman and if I can live everything presented as a woman — my identity papers say I'm a woman, I'm fine, I don't have any problem anymore — why would I bring up the ghost in my closet?" she said.

Ironically, for a group so dependent on the Internet, Ho said creating and maintaining a Web site is impossible. It is the same reason why it took eight years to start a helpline and why even now there are only enough people to staff it every Wednesday from 7pm to 10pm. The phone number is (02) 2394-9008.

But it looks as though things are set to change. After participating in the meetings for eight years, Kao was recently convinced by Ho to represent the group publicly — an aim that Ho hopes will eventually see the Butterfly Garden run by transgenders for transgenders.

"It took ... seven years for him to come through. In the beginning each individual is confused," Ho said. "What do I have to do to survive in this world? And you gradually grow together and learn, and you manage your life, and after seven years we have one, two, three, four, five, six people who are committed to the cause," she said.

As the Butterfly Garden has grown, its members have become more confident. The group has taken an increasingly proactive role in Taiwan's annual LGBT Pride parade. This year's parade on Sept. 27 saw their greatest turnout ever — an estimated 20 transgenders marched alongside other groups.

"More people would have shown up if it hadn't rained," Kao said.

Although the Butterfly Garden provides needed support and information, the group cannot replace the family structure, and bringing parents into the equation remains an important step in the transition process, even if painful at first.

Janet Hwang is an example of how family acceptance can give transgenders the courage and confidence to be themselves and face society. Hwang, who is married with two children, came out publicly in January of last year after telling her parents.

"When I told my mother ... she had difficulty accepting it. In our household, my mother — no matter what the situation is — will not make decisions without first consulting my father. But she didn't want my father to know. So I didn't want my father to know either. But eventually I told my father and his reaction was that I am an adult and it's my decision," she said.

Hwang, 49, said that her parent's acceptance gave her the courage to tell the principal of the Christian school where she teaches in Chiayi County.

Soon the whole community knew and a media maelstrom ensued with reporters tailing Hwang for days. When asked if she was concerned at the time that Taiwan's scandal-obsessed media might trivialize the revelation, she said they handled it well.

"My experience is that Taiwan's media generally puts a positive spin on transgender news," she said.

She had similar words for the students and parents of her school.

"They generally supported me. After the news came out I would be walking along the street and students would come up and give me a hug," she said.



Quinton Kao, far left, marches in last month's Taiwan LGBT Pride parade. The phone number on the yellow placard is for Taiwan TG Butterfly Garden's transgender helpline, which is open on Wednesdays from 7pm to 10pm.

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