

Asians of the Same Intent

Introduction >
Asia

The 1990s, as the articles in the upcoming pages demonstrate, have witnessed a growth of both Western and Asian scholarly interest in same-sex sexuality in contemporary and traditional Asian societies. We have just begun to scrutinize the wealth of historical documents on the subject, and to reconstruct conceptual models buried underneath modern discourses on health and sexuality largely of Western origin (if often appearing in quite different ideological guises).

By Giovanni Vitiello

Homosexuality has not simply been recovered as a legitimate field of academic study. The visibility of homosexuality in the Asian media, as well as in literature and in the arts, has likewise seen a marked increase over the past decade. It may not be just a coincidence that three of the best-known Chinese films of the 1990s, *Farewell My Concubine*, *The Wedding Banquet*, and *Happy Together*, deal with male homoeroticism. Indeed one is reminded of Chi Ta-wei's comments on the recent boom of gay and lesbian literature in Taiwan as a 'return of the repressed'. At the same time, the profile of a political movement fighting for the equal rights of sexual minorities (a movement in many cases triggered and legitimized by the AIDS crisis) has also become a growingly defined presence in the cultural landscape of a number of Asian countries.

As the authors warn us more than once, however, the increased visibility of homosexuality in the media is far from transparent – media representations are rarely devoid of discriminatory biases. Sharon Chalmers, for instance, points at the (perhaps predictable) gender bias that makes Japanese lesbians

much less visible than gay men. As she shows, even in Japan, where transvestite women have played an important role in the entertainment business for a century, and in spite of the growth of supportive spaces, especially in the last three decades, lesbians are still relatively invisible in their society. The fascination of Japanese popular culture with male romances, discussed by Mark McLelland, is not paralleled by an equal fascination with female ones.

While acknowledging the important role of the PRC media and scholars in informing audiences about homosexual culture, Cui Zi'en also laments a systematic objectification of homosexuals in various public discourses, through rhetorical approaches that filter or suppress the voices of homosexuals. Speaking of Taiwan, Fran Martin also remarks on the homophobic tone of much of the media 'buzz' around homosexuality. As she points out, even in Taiwan, where activism for the rights of sexual minorities has been particularly successful, changes in terms of political culture affect only a small, urban, intellectual fraction of the population, while prejudice is hardly countered elsewhere in society. As Rick Smith observes when speaking of Mongolia, although homo-

phobia in Asia does not involve 'organized hate groups', it may often take the form of rejection from one's family and hostility from friends. In Indonesian society, for example, transgendered males (or *warias*) have a traditionally acknowledged place. But as Dédé Oetomo wryly points out *warias* are respected precisely for having made it in spite of all the familial and social obstacles – that is, for being survivors – and people in general don't mind them 'as long as they are not their own kin'. In that *warias* operate beauty salons and tell fortunes, manage the sacred as shamans or mediums, provide silicon injections, and implant propitious fake moles, they can be said to be socially accepted – as long as they operate within the space traditionally assigned to them. Most importantly, although *warias* do have communities, those communities are not connected in a political organization.

The picture of Asian sexual culture has been complicated in the 1990s by the appearance of new models of same-sex sexuality with their attendant political identities and aims – some of them coming from the West (especially the US), such as the 'gay' and 'queer' identities, and some being indigenous developments, like the Chinese *tongzhi*.



Giovanni Vitiello

Maurice Sidermans

Tongzhi (literally, 'people of the same intent') has come to refer to homosexuality in the Chinese language – first in Hong Kong, then in Taiwan, and now even in Mainland China, where it has swiftly displaced its old meaning of '(Communist) comrade'. The phrase, notably transcending gender dichotomies, is inclusive of gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities.

It is tempting to link this conceptual flexibility with the 'existential ambiguity that refuses to be neatly boxed into identity categories', which Tze-lan Sang retrieves in the fiction of two women writers of the 1990s. The rise of the *dee* lesbian identity in Thailand, an identity based on sexuality rather than gender inversion, as Megan Sinnott observes, is another indicator that Asian (homo)sexual culture is changing. Foreign identities such as 'gay' and 'queer', and their lifestyles, have meanwhile made their way into the cultural scene of many Asian urban centres, inevitably coming to terms with local identities

and being renegotiated in the process, as the debate surrounding Qiu Miaojin's fiction, described by Martin, also shows. These new developments in sexual politics appear to trigger anxiety in some governments. The state-sponsored Thai homophobia that Sinnott considers, for example, cannot be explained in terms of continuity with a supposed traditional hostility towards same-sex sexuality.

Rather, it is more likely that this anxiety is related to the fact that the experience of gay and lesbian political activism in the West has become more available to Asian homosexuals. As He Xiaopei's account makes clear, the legacy of Stonewall is transnational, and its message can resonate powerfully in today's Asia, even if it is just whispered. ◀

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Restless Longing: Homoerotic Fiction in China

Research >
China

Since market reform began in China in the early 1980s, the era has brought many tumultuous changes, including dramatic transformations in sex culture.¹ While most Western studies of post-socialist Chinese sexuality have thus far focused on dominant heterosexual practices and narratives, researchers have also been quick to recognize that cosmopolitan gay and lesbian identities have sprung up in many mainland Chinese metropolises.² Indeed, the lives and subcultures of lesbians and gays in post-socialist China are now intently probed, not only by sociologists and anthropologists, but also by local and foreign journalists.³ What has perhaps been neglected by the growing social sciences literature and media reportage on the mainland Chinese lesbian and gay scene is the fact that same-sex sexuality has been at the centre of the oeuvres of some serious fiction writers in the People's Republic since the 1980s.

By Tze-lan D. Sang

Two cases in point are Lin Bai (b. 1958) and Chen Ran (b. 1962). Lin's short stories, novellas, and novels are noted for their sensitive treatment of female sexuality. They have long been acknowledged by Chinese literary critics such as Chen Xiaoming, Dai Jinhua, and Xu Kun as fine examples of Chinese feminist texts. Although Lin's daring exploration of female sexuality is not limited to the desire between women, lesbian desire is one of the recurring themes in her works. Years before cosmopolitan queer activists (such as the Beijing-based female painter and film producer Shi Tou) became vocal about lesbian issues in the media, Lin's fiction had already challenged homophobia as a form of internalized social discrimination.⁴ For

example, Duomi, the protagonist of Lin's autobiographical novel, *One Person's War* (*Yige ren de zhanzheng*, 1993), experiences instinctual urges as a child to explore the sensations of her own private parts and does so by enlisting another girl's assistance. As Duomi grows up, however, she learns to consider intimacy with other women as abnormal and comes to identify her childhood same-sex play as shameful. Even though Lin does not explicitly criticize homophobia as socially constructed, her depiction of a protagonist who constrains her own spontaneous polymorphous desire because of society's prejudices against homosexuals sets the stage for future critiques of heteronormativity and lesbian self-denial.

Chen Ran, like Lin, is one of the most discussed authors in the Chinese literary critics' debate over 'female writing' (*nüxing xiezu*) and 'individualistic writing' (*gerenhua xiezu*) between the mid- and late 1990s. Her representations of female sexuality, including female-female love, have frequently invited comparison with Lin's despite the fact that the two writers actually have rather different styles. Whereas Lin's language is lyrical, metaphorical, and highly evocative of sensory experiences, Chen's tends to be quirky, eccentric, and parodic. Ideologically, the two writers are also different. Contrary to Lin's morbid fascination with internalized homophobia, Chen adamantly defends the rights of minorities, including sexual minorities. Her opposition to heterosexual hegemony has been articulated most directly in her essay 'Gender-Transcendent Consciousness and My Creative Writing' ('Chao xingbie yishi yu wode chuanguo', 1994), and in her short story 'Breaking Through' ('Pokai', 1995). Her only full-length novel to date, *Private Life* (*Siren shenghuo*, 1994) also explores bisexuality in depth. She is, in addition, a candid sympathizer of a group of lesbian-identified young women in Beijing who started the

underground lesbian newsletter *Sky* (*Tiankong*; chief editor Shi Tou) in March 1999. In Chen's case, then, there is only a thin line between literary experimentation and social activism. Her pursuit of artistic freedom constantly gets translated into a passionate concern about individual freedom, and vice versa.

Despite their differences, one might see that Lin and Chen both champion an aesthetics of the liminal, giving seductive shapes to an existential ambiguity that refuses to be neatly boxed into identity categories. The recurring motifs of Lin's work are irreducible personal difference, self-doubts, and self-denial. Paradoxically, as can be seen in *One Person's War*, a salient performative lesbian identity is called into being precisely by her main character's repeated utterances to negate that identity. By contrast, Chen imagines a restless romantic longing that is unrestrained by conventional gender definitions, that subverts dominant post-socialist ideals of femininity and heterosexual courtship. Her desired fluidity disintegrates both gender and sexual identities.⁵ If one is intent on reading national allegory into these narratives, one might argue that Lin's and Chen's examinations of liminal states of being, aptly articulate the general discomfort with identity in a globalizing China, as the nation moves away from the memories of Mao and yearns to become cosmopolitan, yet resists foregone (i.e. globally dominant) conclusions of what it means to be cosmopolitan.

Significantly, as women writers' fictional representations of female homoeroticism proliferate, there is also in general a broadening social realm in which pluralistic interpretations of such works are becoming possible. The growing pluralism unsettles the dominance of traditional moralism, on the one hand, and the voyeuristic fantasies encouraged by the new consumer economy, on the other. Although thus far literary scholars in the mainland academic establishment have turned out far more feminist analyses than specifically queer readings of women's homoerotic fiction, China may be now poised at a point where specifically lesbian or queer critical analyses will enter the academic establishment from the margins. ◀

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- 1 For social scientists' perspectives, see James Farrer, *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2001); Judith Farquhar, *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press (2002).
- 2 See, for instance, Lisa Rofel, 'Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China', *GLQ* 5, No. 4 (1999), pp. 451-74.
- 3 For an example of local media coverage, see the January 2002 issue of *Modern Civilization Pictorial* (*Xiandai wenming huabao*), a special issue on lesbians and gays in China.
- 4 Shi Tou and the gay film critic and novelist Cui Zi'en came out on Hunan Satellite Television in December 2000. For a transcript of the programme, visit www.aizhi.org.hnws.htm
- 5 A more detailed discussion of Lin Bai and Chen Ran can be found in my monograph, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2002), chapters 7 and 8.