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Chinese Cultural Studies:
The Homosexual Tradition in China
Selections from Chinese Homosexual Literature

Traditional history has sought to understand past and present societies with categories of analysis such as politics, thought, economics, and, at least since Karl Marx, class. In the past twenty or so years other categories of analysis, not considered important in the past, have appeared as significant to many historians. Perhaps the most important of these is gender. To these historians Gender is the cultural meaning given to the rather limited facts of biology. One aspect of gender analysis consists in looking at how "men" and "women", "masculinity" and "femininity", are understood in a society - and at how such understandings play out in people's lives. Another, even newer, aspect of gender analysis looks at issues of sexual behavior and sexuality. In attempting to define the boundaries of subject it is often useful to look at the limits of social life - at where the lines are drawn . For this reason to understand heterosexual as well as homosexual behavior it is important to examine how a culture views homosexual behavior.

It was a Western medievalist, John Boswell, who legitimated lesbian and gay history as a field of study, and ended an older "great homosexuals of history" tradition. Although many people disagreed with his conclusions, he did demonstrate that a significant amount of source material existed. Since his book *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (1980) it has become increasingly clear that the study of sexuality in the past is not only possible, but is also an essential component of a full understanding of past and present societies. Brett Hinsch, from whose work the selection here is taken, has begun, for English speakers, the process of understanding the history of sexuality in China, although he is heavily dependent on recent work done by Chinese scholars.

Boswell is most famous for advancing the notion that "Gay people" have always and everywhere existed. Since 1980, however, a very different theory the history of sexuality, has come to be accepted by the majority of historians working in the field. The model now is this:

Homosexual behaviors exist in most societies, and in most, including European society until about 1700, homosexuality falls into two main patterns (at least for men.) One pattern is based on age-dissonant sexual dominance; an older man (not always very much older by the way)

will take a conventionally "male" role in a sexual relationship with a younger male, but will not, in doing so, be regarded as any different from other "male" men in general society. The second common pattern is based on gender-dissonant sexual dominance; this means that in a number of societies there were "biological" males who lived as "non-males" throughout their lives, and these people can also be the sexual partners of "male" men without the "men" losing any status. The Native American berdache is perhaps the most famous example of a widespread phenomenon.

Around 1700, in Western Europe a change took place. A subculture of effeminate men arose in major cities, men who identified themselves as different. The word "molly" was used in London and other words elsewhere. Although they were prepared to have sex with "male" men these "mollies" were also prepared to have sex with each other. This is not, it seems, common across various societies. Some historians have called this the emergence of a "third gender".

Since "a third gender" is not the model of modern homosexuality in the West, there has been a question of when the "modern homosexual" emerged. Most writers have argued that that the medicalization of homosexuality in the late 19th century resulted in the creation of a new creature - the "modern homosexual" (and the "modern heterosexual"!) What distinguishes "homo-" and "heterosexuals" from earlier models of sexuality is that they are in strict opposition to each other, and are defined not by gender role, or even sexual role, but by "sexual orientation". A major recent readjustment of this theory, resulting from the work of George Chauncey in his recent *Gay New York*. Chauncey has called into question the last part of the traditional formulation. He argues that elite terminology and labels (also known as "medicalization") had no immediate effect on the mass of working class New Yorkers (with the suggestion that this was probably true elsewhere.) That although there were, eventually, some self-identified "queers", until as late 1940 [!] it was common for working-class men to have "male role" sex with other men ["fairies"] without in any way feeling that they were "homosexual". What happened around 1940, the Chauncey-amended model says is that, first, more and more of the mass of the population began to identify as "heterosexual" and see any homosexual behavior as transgressive; and secondly among self-identified "queers" a shift in desired sexual partner took place. Previously "queers" had tended to prefer "male" men but now "queers" began to prefer other "queers" as sexual partners.

As you can see current discussion amongst historians focuses on Western sexual history. It would also seem to imply that there were no "homosexuals", or "heterosexuals" in the past nor in other cultures [there was of course always homo and heterosexual behavior]. In reading the various texts on Chinese homosexual behavior gathered and translated by Hirsch you might consider if the model above applies to the Chinese past? How can we

come to understand what their sexual behavior meant to the men discussed? What limitations do the texts impose on our abilities to understand?.

1. Zhou Models: Mizi Xia, Pan Zhang and Lord Long Yang

Discussion of homosexual behavior in Chinese literature referred back to three classic tales of love from the Zhou period, the Story of Mizi Xia, the Story of Pan Zhang, and the Story of Lord Long Yang.

The Story of Mizi Xia

as recorded in the Legalist philosophical work, the Han Fei Zi [Hinsch p. 20-21- from Burton Watson, trans, Han Fei Tzu: Basic Writings, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 78-79)

In ancient times Mizi Xia won favor [chang] with the ruler of Wei. According to the laws of the state of Wei, anyone who secretly made use of the ruler's carriage was punished by having his feet amputated. When Mizi Xia's mother fell ill, someone slipped into the palace at night to report this to Mizi Xia. Mizi Xia forged an order from the ruler, got into the ruler's carriage, and went to see her, but when the ruler heard of it, he only praised him, saying, "How filial! For the sake of his mother he forgot all about the danger of having his feet cut off!" Another day Mizi Xia was strolling with the ruler in an orchard and, biting into a peach and finding it sweet, he stopped eating and gave the remaining half to the ruler to enjoy. "How sincere is your love for me!" exclaimed the ruler. "You forgot your own appetite and think only of giving me good things to eat!" Later, however, when Mizi Xia's looks had faded and the ruler's passion for him had cooled, he was accused at committing some crime against his lord. "After all," said the ruler, "he once stole my carriage, and another time he gave me a half-eaten peach to eat!" Mizi Xia was acting no differently from the way he always had; the fact that he was praised in the early days and accused of crime later on, was because the ruler's love had turned hate.

If you gain the ruler's love, your wisdom will be appreciated; you will enjoy his favor as well; but if he hates you, not only will your wisdom be rejected, but you will be regarded as a criminal and thrust aside.... The beast called the dragon can be tamed and trained to the point where you may ride on its back. But on the underside of its throat it has scales a foot in diameter that curl back from the body, and anyone who chances to brush against them is sure to die. The ruler of men too has his bristling scales."

The Story of Pan Zhang

[Hinsch, 24-25]

When Pan Zhang was young he had a beautiful [mei] appearance and bearing, and so people of that time were exceedingly fond of him. Wang

Zhongxian of the state of Chu heard of his reputation and came to request his writings. Thereafter Wang Zhongxian wanted to study together with him.

They fell in love at first sight and were as affectionate as husband and wife, sharing the same coverlet and pillow with unbounded intimacy for one another.

Afterwards they died together and everyone mourned them. When they were buried together at Lofu Mountain, on the peak a tree with long branches and leafy twigs suddenly grew. All of these embraced one another! At the time people considered this a miracle. It was called the "Shared Pillow Tree."

The Story of Lord Long Yang

[Hinsch, 32]

The King of Wei and Lord Long Yang shared a boat while fishing. Lord Long Yang began to cry, so the King asked why he wept. "Because I caught a fish." "But why does that make you cry?" the king asked.

Lord Long Yang replied, "When I caught the fish, at first I was extremely pleased. But afterward I sought a larger fish, so I wanted to throw back the first fish I had caught. Because of this evil act I will be expelled from your bed!

"There are innumerable beauties in the world. Upon hearing of my receiving your favor, surely they will lift up the hems of their robes so that they can hasten to you. I am like a previously caught fish! I will also be thrown back! How can I keep from crying?"

Because of this incident the King of Wei announced to the world "Anyone who dares speak of other beauties will be executed along with his whole family".

2. Han Favorites: Another Kind of Evidence

[Hinsch, 35-36] Just as Edward Gibbon observed that all but one of the first 14 Roman emperors were either bisexual or exclusively homosexual, for two centuries at the height of the Han, China was ruled by ten openly bisexual emperors. The names of the emperors, with their acknowledge favorites

were recorded in the official histories of the period by Sima Qian and Ban Gu.

The Ten Han Emperors [with "favorites"]

Emperor Gao r.206-195BCE and Jiru
Emperor Hui r.194-188BCE and Hongru
Emperor Wen r.179-141BCE and Deng Tong, & Zhao Tan, & Beigong Bozi
Emperor Jing r.156-141BCE and Zho Ren
Emperor Wu r.140-87BCE and Han Yan, & Han Yue, & Li Yannian
Emperor Zhao r.86-74BCE and Jin Shang
Emperor Xuan r.73-49BCE and Zhang Pengzu
Emperor Yuan r.48-33BCE and Hong Gong, & Shi Xian
Emperor Cheng r.32-7BCE and Zhang Fang, & Chunyu Zhang
Emperor Ai r.6BCE-1CE and Dong Xian

[Hinsch also notes that following emperors from later periods also had open homosexual relationships]

Pei Kai 237-291
Yu Xin 513-581 and Wang Shao
Zhang Hanbian c.265-420 and Zhou Xiaoshi
Emperor Jianwen c.550
Emperor Xizong r.874-889 and Zhang Langgou
Emperor Wuzong r.1506-1522
Emperor Shenzong r.1573-1620
Emperor Xizong r.1621-1628
Emperor Pu Yi - the last Qing [Manchu] emperor

3. Homosexual Poetry from the Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties Period

[Hinsch. 70-71]

The complexity of homosexual relationships inevitably led to the creation of poetic works immortalizing conflicting sentiments. Ruan Ji (210- 263CE),

lover of Xi Kang, was one of the most famous poets to apply his brush to a homosexual theme. This work, one of several dealing with homosexuality

from the "Jade Terrace" collection of love poetry, beautifully illustrates the stock imagery on which men of his time could draw in conceptualizing and describing love for another man.

In days of old there were many blossom boys --
An Ling and Long Yang.
Young peach and plum blossoms,
Dazzling with glorious brightness.

Joyful as nine spring times;
Pliant as if bowed by autumn frost.

Roving glances gave rise to beautiful seductions;
Speech and laughter expelled fragrance.
Hand in hand they shared love's rapture,
Sharing coverlets and bedclothes.

Couples of birds in flight,
Paired wings soaring.
Cinnabar and green pigments record a vow:
"I'll never forget you for all eternity. "

4. Western Shock and Horror at Chinese Homosexuality

Early western observers, such as the Jesuit Matthew Ricci long noted the acceptance of homosexuality in China, but could do little to change it. In modern China, however, homosexuality is looked down on. Part of the reason for this was the huge impact made by the West from the 19th century on. After the impact of Buddhism, Western Science is the outside cultural force with the most impact on Chinese culture. Until recent years the full weight of this science depicted homosexuality as abnormal and evil.

Here is one British official's view from 1806

[Hinsch, 141, citing John Barrow, *Travels in China*, (London: 1806)]

The commission of this detestable and unnatural act is attended with so little sense of shame, or feelings of delicacy that many of the first officers of the state seemed to make no hesitation in publicly avowing it. Each of these officers is constantly attended by his pipe-bearer, who is generally a handsome boy, from fourteen to eighteen years of age, and is always well dressed.

5. Lesbianism

The very extensive tradition of male homosexual literature in China was distinct from any discussion of Lesbianism. You might consider reasons for this.

There are occasional references to Lesbianism, collected by Hinsch [pages 173-178]. The subject also comes up in the most famous Chinese novel, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* [also known as *The Story of the Stone*.]

[Hinsch, 176-77 - ref. Cao Xuequin and Gao E, Story of the Stone, (New York: Penguin, 1973-87), Vol 3: 375, 551-53]

"So who was she making the offering for?"

Perfume's eyes reddened slightly and she sighed.

"Oh, Nenuphar is crazy "

"Why?" said Baoyu. "What do you mean?"

"It was for Pivoine," said Perfume, "the girl in our troupe who died."

"There's nothing crazy about that," said Baoyu, "if they were friends. "

"Friend," said Parfume, "They were more than that. It was

Nenuphar's sappy ideas that started it all. You see, Nenuphar is our Principal Boy and Pivoine always played opposite her as Principal Girl. They

became so accustomed to acting the part of lovers on the stage, that gradually it came to seem real to them and Nenuphar began carrying on as if they

were really lovers. When Pivoine died, Nenuphar cried herself into fits, and even now she still thinks about her. That's why she makes offerings to her on

feast-days. When Etamine took over the roles that Pivoine used to play, Nenuphar became just the same towards her. We even teased her about it:

'Have you forgotten your old love then, now that you've got yourself a new one?' But she said, 'No, I haven't forgotten. It's like when a man loses his

wife and remarries. He can still be faithful to the first wife, as long as he keeps her memory green.' Did you ever hear Anything so sappy in your life?"

"Sappy" or whatever it was, there was a strain in Baoyu's own nature which responded with a powerful mixture of emotions: pleasure, sorrow, and an unbounded admiration for the little actress.

Sources:

from Brett Hinsch, Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990)