

HOMOSEXUALITY IN CHINA

Young men sipping tea, reading poetry, and making love; Individual panel from a hand scroll on homosexual themes, paint on silk; China, Qing dynasty (18th–19th c.); Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, Indiana.

The situation of homosexuality in China is currently quite ambiguous, although many instances have been recorded in the dynastic histories. In this article, "China" means the Chinese region, including People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan (Republic of China).

Terminology in Chinese

In the old days, the terms included "the passion of the cut sleeve" and "the bitten peach" Other, less obscure terms have included "male trend" "allied brothers" and "masculine-dragon preference"

The formal word for "homosexuality/homosexual(s)" is tongxinglian, literally same-sex relations/love) or tongxinglian zhe, homosexual people). Instead of this formal word, "tongzhi", simply a head-rhyme word, is more commonly used in gay community. Tongzhi (literally means 'comrade', and sometimes nū tongzhi, literally "female comrade") which was first adopted by Hong Kong researchers in Gender Studies, is used as slang in Mandarin Chinese referring to homosexuals, while in Cantonese gei¹ adopted from English gay, is used. This term is also somewhat common in Taiwan. "Gay" is sometimes considered to be offensive when used by heterosexuals or even by homosexuals in certain situations. Another slang term is boli, crystal or glass, which is not so commonly used. Among gay university students, the neologism "datong", which also refers to utopia in Chinese) is becoming popular. "datong" is short for "daxuesheng tongzhi" (university students [that are] homosexuals).

In Taiwan, lesbians usually call themselves, py or lala. These two terms are abbreviations of the transliteration of the English term "lesbian". These slang terms are also commonly used in Mainland China now.

Traditional views towards homosexuality in China's society

All major religions in ancient China do have some sort of codex, which have traditionally been interpreted as being against exclusive homosexuality when it interferes with continuation of the family lineage. For example the Confucians has the codex that a man should behave according to somewhat traditional male gender roles and a woman likewise.

So, for example, crossdressing is a deed that is against the Confucian natural law.

There were some historical accounts of emperors who used to dress themselves in women's clothes, and this was always interpreted as an ill omen; and to beget children (especially sons) is a very important duty for a man in traditional Chinese society. So a man who only has male lovers is not dutiful. Taoism emphasizes maintaining the balance between Yin and Yang. A man-man relation is thought to be a Yang-Yang relation and so is imbalanced and destructive.

In Buddhism sexual desire (regardless of being homosexual or heterosexual) is something that prevents a soul from achieving nirvana, so it is something to be avoided.

But on the other hand, none of the Chinese major religions condemn homosexuality as a sin as many Christian churches do. Compared to sin in Christian culture, the list of sinful deeds in the codex of Confucianism does not include homosexuality. As long as a man does his duty and sires children, it is his private thing to have other male lovers.

This is also true in Taoism. Although each man is regarded as yang (masculine), every man somehow has some yin (feminine) in him too. Some men can have much yin in them. So the presence of some feminine behavior is not viewed as unnatural for men. In this view, homosexuals can even be regarded as something very natural, according to the natural balance of yin and yang. It is also remarkable that many Taoist gods and goddesses live alone or together with some equal deities of the same sex. The very common example is Shanshen (mountain god) and Tudi (earthen disciple). Every place has its Shanshen and Tudi, and they always live together. Shanshen and Tudi are both males. More intriguingly, they sometimes manifest themselves as an old man and an old woman. (Such appearances are described quite often in the classical novel Journey to the West).

Same-sex love in literature

Another remarkable thing is the prominence of friendship between men in the ancient Chinese culture. There are many examples in the classic novels, especially in Water Margin, a book about very deep and long lasting male friendships. These bonds were based on revolutionary comradeship in war, instead of homosexual tendencies. However, other works depict less Platonic relationships. In the novel Dream of the Red Chamber, there are examples of males engaging in both same-sex and opposite-sex acts.

There is also a tradition of erotic literature, which is less known as it is supposed that most such works

have been purged in the periodic book burnings that have been a feature of Chinese history. However, isolated manuscripts have survived. Chief among these is the anthology "Bian er Zhai", Cap but Pin, or A Lady's Pin under a Man's Cap, a series of four short stories in five chapters each, of passion and seduction. The first short story, Chronicle of a Loyal Love, involves a twenty-year-old academician chasing a fifteen-year-old scholar and a bevy of adolescent valets. In another, "Qing Xia Ji" Record of the Passionate Hero, the protagonist, Zhang, a valiant soldier with two warrior wives, is seduced by his younger friend Zhong, an unusual arrangement as it is usually the older man who takes the initiative with a boy. The work appeared in a single edition some time between 1630 and 1640.

Ancient China

Young men engaged in erotic play; Hand scroll with homosexual theme, opaque watercolor on paper; Beijing, Qing dynasty, late 19th c. Private collection
Homosexuality has been documented in China since ancient times. According to the scholar Ji Yun of the Qing Dynasty, already at the very beginning Huang Di (The Yellow Emperor, 2697? - 2597? BCE), legendary king and founder of the Chinese culture, had male lovers. This is naturally not very trustworthy because whether there was really a person called Huang Di is not very clear. Two notable royal examples come from a formulaic expression or "the leftover peach", recorded in Hanfeizi, speaks of Mi, a beautiful youth cherished by Duke Ling of Wei who once shared an already bitten but very delicious peach with the duke, who appreciated the gesture (although once the growing Mi Zixia lost his beauty, the duke looked back on this event and said Mi was being insincere [1].) Duànxiù, or "breaking the sleeve", refers to Emperor Ai of Han China's act of cutting his sleeve, on which his adored male concubine Dongxian (董賢) was sleeping, in order not to wake him.

Scholar Pan Guangdan came to the conclusion that nearly every emperor in the Han Dynasty had one or more male sex partners. There are also descriptions of lesbians in some history books. It is believed homosexuality was popular in the Song, Ming and Qing dynasties. Chinese homosexuals did not experience high-profile persecution comparing with that was received by homosexuals in Europe during the Middle Ages.

In some areas, same sex love was particularly appreciated. The province of Fujian was especially noted for the widespread practice of male love, and even its tradition of boy marriage, a temporary arrangement that lasted only until the boy reached maturity and took a female wife.

The Qing official Zhhu Gui (1731-1807), a grain tax circuit intendant of Fujian in 1765, intending to improve the moral shortcomings of the people under his jurisdiction, promulgated a "Prohibition of Licentious Cults," criticizing the respect the people of Fujian paid to such cults (yinci). One cult which he found particularly troublesome was the cult of Hu Tianbao. As he reports,

The image is of two men embracing one another; the face of one is somewhat hoary with age, the other tender and pale. [Their temple] is commonly called the small official temple. All those debauched and shameless rascals who on seeing youths or young men desire to have illicit intercourse with them pray for assistance from the plaster idol. Then they make plans to entice and obtain the objects of their desire. This is known as the secret assistance of Hu Tianbao. Afterwards they smear the idol's mouth with pork intestine and sugar in thanks. (Michael Szonyi, "The Cult of Hu Tianbao and the eighteenth-Century Discourse of Homosexuality." Late Imperial China - Volume 19, Number 1, June 1998, pp. 1-25)

Same-sex love was also celebrated in Chinese art, many examples of which have survived the book burnings of the Cultural Revolution. Though no large statues are known to still exist, many hand scrolls and paintings on silk can be found in private collections[2].

In the year 1944, the scholar Sun Cizhou published a work stated that one of the most famous ancient Chinese poets, Qu Yuan, was a lover of his King. Sun cited the poetry of Qu Yuan to prove his claim. In Qu Yuan's most important work Li Sao (Sorrow of parting), Qu Yuan called himself a beautiful man (or woman, mei ren). A word he used to describe his king was used at that time by women to characterize their lovers.

The first law against homosexuals in China went into effect in 1740. There was no record in the history as to how effectively the law was enforced. The more devastating event for Chinese homosexuals was, ironically, the enlightenment that came after the Self-Strengthening Movement, when homophobia was imported to China along with Western science and philosophy.

Modern China

Homosexuality went underground after the formation of the People's Republic of China. Confucian morality and Communist Puritanism both frowned on homosexuality. The Communist regime persecuted homosexuals, especially during the Cultural Revolution, when many homosexuals were punished with long prison terms and sometimes execution. Social tolerance of homosexuality declined.

Since the policy of Reform and Opening Up in 1979, the communist party has been loosening its control over this kind of behavior. But the practice of homosexuality is still labeled as a "moldering life style of capitalism".

A notable change occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s, when sodomy was decriminalized in 1997, and the new Chinese Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Disorders removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses on April 20, 2001. The situation has continued to evolve in 2004. Many consider the magazine "Menbox" [3] to be a gay magazine in all but name. Recently, a transsexual woman, Chen Lili was allowed to compete in the China selection pageant for the Miss Universe competition.

An Internet survey in 2000 showed that Chinese people are becoming more tolerant towards homosexuality: among the 10,792 surveyed, 48.15% were in favor, 30.9% disapproved, 14.46% were uncertain, and 7.26% were indifferent. There are no radical conservatives or radical liberation activists, so gay-bashing is rare. But some scholars complain that the government is too indifferent on this issue, doing nothing to promote the situation of homosexuality in China. During the 2002 Gay Games, only 2 persons from the mainland were sent to take part in, and apart from gay websites the media gave little coverage to the event. Many gay men admit having unsafe sex, and more than one sex partner, which worsens the spread of AIDS in China, because the Chinese government makes little effort to educate citizens about the danger of AIDS among gay people. The authorities still refuse to promote either gay issues or gay rights in China. Although there is no explicit law against homosexuality or same-sex acts between consenting adults, neither are there laws protecting gays from discrimination, nor are there any gay rights organizations in the PRC. It is believed that the Chinese policy towards the gay issue remains the "Three nos": no approval, no disapproval, and no promotion.

The number of homosexuals in China remains unclear. From one source, the homosexuals number between 360,000 and 480,000, another statement based on Chinese government documents and academic studies states that the figure is 15 million. Compared to the higher proportions of homosexuals in other countries, many find these figures unconvincing.

The loosening of restrictions on Internet use has resulted in a blossoming of gay websites in the PRC, even though the police sometimes intervene and shut down such websites. The Internet has been very important to the Chinese gay community. Although there are no gay organizations in China, there are some organized Internet sites that function as advisory institutions.

The mainstream media sometimes cover notable gay events abroad, such as pride parades. But some critics charge that the purpose of the media is mostly to smear homosexuality. Lacking a film rating system, the Chinese government forbids gay movies to be shown on TV or in theaters because they are "inappropriate". Despite having received much attention in Taiwan, Hong Kong and other places, the movie Lan Yu is still forbidden in the PRC because it refers to gay issues although the actors are all Mainlanders, and the story is based on a quite popular Internet story written by a mainland netizen.

There are some gay bars and nightclubs in big cities, like Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing, which are subject to police harassment. The difficulties surrounding homosexuality in China make those gays who cannot afford to go to gay bars or nightclubs look for casual sex in public washrooms, parks, and public shower centers. As everywhere in the world, being gay is a huge problem in the countryside; in China this is especially severe as the vast majority of people lives in the countryside with no Internet access and no possibility to move to a city. Country dwellers do not often speak of homosexuality, and when they do, it is usually considered a disease. [4]

Many cases show that gays still have to endure prejudice from the justice system and harassment from police, including detention and arrest. In October 2000, a Beijing court ruled that homosexuality was "abnormal and unacceptable to the Chinese public" [Washington Post 24 Jan. 2000], which was the first time this official attitude was stated openly. Another notable case happened in July 2001, when at least 37 gay men were detained in Guangdong Province. Recently, in late April, the State Administration of Radio Film and Television has initiated a campaign to clear violence and sexual content from the media. Programs related to homosexual topic, scene or language are considered to be "going against the healthy way of life in China", and are banned. [5] [6]

Same-sex marriage in China

During the evaluation of the amendment of the marriage law in China in 2003, there was the first discussion about homosexual marriage. Though this issue was rejected, this was the first time that an item of gay rights was discussed in China. However, just not long before the new marriage law went into effect, an officer stated in a press conference that same-sex marriage is still forbidden in China, on August 19, 2003.

Li Yinhe, a well-known sexology scholar among Chinese gay community, has tried to legalize same-sex marriage during the National People's Congress in 2000 and 2004 (Legalization for the Chinese Same-Sex Marriage, in 2000 and Chinese Same-Sex

Marriage Bill, in 2004). According to Chinese law, 35 delegates' signatures are needed to make an issue a bill to be discussed in the Congress. Her effort failed due to her not being able to get enough supports from the delegates. Still, many scholars and homosexuals don't think it's possible for China to pass such a law in the near future.

Hong Kong

Male homosexual behavior was illegal before 1991 in Hong Kong, the maximum sentence being life imprisonment. The Legislative Council agreed to decriminalize buggery after the public debate that arose in 1980. But two other attempts of introducing anti-discrimination legislation failed in 1993 and 1997.

There are several gay-rights organizations in Hong Kong, such as Rainbow Action and Tongzhi Culture Society. In 2003, the Catholic Church of Hong Kong released an article condemning same-sex marriage. As a result, a group of protestors rushed into a church and interrupted the service.

Taiwan

The status of homosexuals has been developing in Taiwan. In 1970s, some novels regarding homosexuality were published. One of the most prominent writers is Pai Hsien-yung, who created many gay characters in his novels, and the most famous one is Crystal Boys. Nowadays, some gay TV series and movies have been made and gained great attention among gay community in both China and Taiwan, including the TV series Crystal Boys, adapted for the same name novel written by Pai Hsien-yung, movie Formula 17 etc.

Taiwanese Homosexual History

Taiwan is an immigrant society. In the 17th century, while the Chinese people immigrated into Taiwan, the Qing government had a strict limit that relatively few females may tide over the Taiwan Strait to Taiwan Island. This limitation resulted in a sexual imbalance in the society of Taiwan then. People who engaged in same-sex relations were referred to as "Luo Han Jiao".

Recent Taiwanese Homosexual News/Events

At the end of October 2003, the government of the Republic of China announced plans to legalize same-sex marriage, which would make Taiwan the first place in Asia permitting it. However, legalization is only a plan. There is no schedule for the legalization. On November 1, 2003 the first gay pride parade in the Chinese region was held in Taipei, with over 1,000 people attending [7], and the mayor of Taipei, Ma Ying-jeou also attended this parade. Still, many

participants wore masks to hide their identities because homosexuality remains a taboo in Taiwan. On January 17, 2004 Taipei police arrested 93 gay people because of their attendance at an orgy party with drugs. Many were shocked that nearly one-third of the attendees were HIV positive. These arrests caused severe condemnation from the tongzhi community. This event is called "HOMEPA (Home Party) Event" by the Taiwanese gay community now.