Homoerotics has not simply been recovered as a legitimate field of academic study. The visibility of homoerotics 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 entirely coincidental that three of the best-known Chinese films of the 1990s, Farewell My Concubine, The Wedding Banquet, and Happy Together, dealt with male homoeroticism. Indeed one is reminded of Chi Ta-tsun’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 Chamness, 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 feminization of Japanese popular culture with male romances, discussed by Mark McLeod, is not paralleled by an equal fascination with female ones. While acknowledging the important role of the PCR media and scholars in informing audiences about homosexuals, Cui Zhi’en also laments a systematic omission of homosexuals in various public discourses, through rhetorical approaches that filter or suppress the voices of homosexuals. Speaking of Taiwan, Shi Tou, one of the main actors on the homophonic tone of much of the media’s ‘buzz’ around homosexuality. As she puts it, 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 counted elsewhere in society. As Rich Smith observes when speaking of Mongolia, although homophobia in Asia does not involve “organised hate groups”, it may often take the form of rejection from one’s family and hostility from friends. In Indonesian society, for instance, both women and men (or (uar) have a traditionally acknowledged place. But as Déodé Otto- ny nyi nyi points out, it is respect for what is held sacred, respect for what is considered the ‘reasons’ for such social and cultural obstacles – that, for being survivors – and people in general don’t mind them ‘as long as they are not their own’. In that sense operate beauty salons and tell fortunes, manage the sacred as shamans or mediums, provide silicon injections, and implant prothetic fake noses, they can be said to be socially accepted as long as they operate within the space traditionally assigned to them. Most importantly, things that refuse to be neatly boxed into categories, those communities are not connected in a political organization. The picture of Asian sexual cultural has been complicated 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 in the US), such as the ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ identities, and some being indigenous developments, like the Chinese tongzhi.

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 cultures. This has meant the writing of whole monographs, such as Tze-lan D. Sang’s One Person’s War (Yige ren de zhanzheng, 1993), 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).

Asian Homosexualities

Introduction > Asia

By Giovanni Vitello

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Restless Longing: Homeroerotic Fiction in China

Since market reform began in China in the early 1980s, the era has brought many tumultuous changes, including dramatic transformations in sex culture. 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. Indeed, the lives and subcultures of lesbians and gays in post-socialist China are now intertextively probed, not only by sociologists and anthropologists, but also by local and foreign journalists. What has perhaps been neglected by this growing sociocultural 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 Tie-Tei 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. Before cosmopolitan queer activists (such as the Beijing-based female painter and film producer Shi Tou) became vocal about lesbian identity in the media, Lin’s fiction had already challenged homophobic discourses. For example, Duomi, the protagonist of Lin’s autobiographical novel, One Person’s War (Yige ren de zhanzheng, 1993), experiences instictual 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’ (nüxie qu), and ‘individualistic writing’ (gengrenhua xiezu). The mid- and late-1990s. Her representations of female homoeroticism in her fiction have frequently included exploration of Lin’s and Chen’s narratives.”