Filtered Voices: Representing Gay People in Today’s China

By Cui Zi’en
(translated by Di Tu weiz)

In 1991, the noted sociologist Li Yinhe and her husband Wang Xiaobo, a famous novelist, published Their World: A Study of the Male Homosexual Community in China. The first academic work on male homosexuality in contempo-

rary China, Their World chiefly explored its sociological and anthropological dimensions. When later the book was revised into The Homosexual Subculture (1998), it became a bestseller. Thanks to this significant work, Chinese readers began to adjust their attitudes towards homosexuality and to understand its culture. In 1994, another scholar, Zhang Beichuan, published Same-Sex Love. Focusing on sexology and sex education, this book also illustrated the research on homosexuality conducted by international scientists. In 1995, Fang Gang, known for his sensational journalism, published Homosexuality in China, which also became a best-

seller. Roughly written, obviously turning the homosexual issue into a commodity, Fang Gang’s book was widely accused of sloppiness and voyeurism. Fang Gang himself admitted that his book was ‘journalistic literature’ and entirely based on hearsay.

The media approaching homosexuals

In 1998, the magazine Hope featured a special issue entitled ‘Understanding Homosexuality’. With its twenty pages and the picture of the rainbow flag, the issue provided a positive and comprehensive report on homosexuality, thus making Hope a pioneer in the media as far as the represen-
tation of homosexuality is concerned. In 2000, China News Weekly published the special issue ‘Blurred Men and Women’, showcasing homosexual culture in literature, the fine arts, fashion, the entertainment business, and in everyday life. In the same year, a television show in Hunan Province, Let’s Talk, broadcast a one-hour panel discussion called ‘Approaching Homosexuals’. Finally, early this year, Modern Civilization Pictorial, edited by the prestigious Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, published a special issue entitled ‘Homosexuals Are among Us’. From then on, up to the present day, this magazine regularly devotes ten pages to the issue of homo-

sexuality.

The AIDS crisis has also triggered increased attention to same-sex sexuality. The AIDS Bulletin, edited by Wan Yehai, a very well-known AIDS activist, began to be circulated in 1994. In 1998, the aforementioned scholar Zhang Beichuan took charge of the Friends’ Bulletin. Both publica-
tions emphasize the perspective of the ‘experts’ and centre on two topics: homosexual culture and AIDS prevention.

Fiction and film

The first novel on homosexuality from today’s China, Scarlet Lips, by the Beijing-based writer Cui Zi’en, was pub-

lished in Hong Kong in 1997; just before Hong Kong was handed over to China. Owing to its manifest homosexual theme, Scarlet Lips is still not allowed to circulate in China.

Worldandon, Hong Kong publishing house specialized in lesbian and gay literature that published Scarlet Lips (and

later other works of fiction by Cui Zi’en), also printed in 1998 the collection of short stories Good Man Roge (‘Roge’ used to be an ice-cream brand name), by the Tianjin-based writer Tang Ge. One of the first films on homosexuality in today’s China, East Palace, West Palace, written and directed by Zhang Yuan, won several awards at international film festivals in 1996. Man Men Woman Woman, written by Cui Zi’en and directed by Liu Binjian, was a winner at the 1999 Locarno International Film Festival and has been invited to more than fifty international film festivals since then. The first film made by gay people in China, Man Man Woman Woman makes a marked effort to avoid posting any dichotomy between homosexual and heterosexual. Also a winner of international awards, Summer This Year, written and directed by Li Yu in 2000, is the first film on lesbian life and love in China. The following year, Yin Wewei made a documentary on lesbianism called The Box. Finally, two films shot early this year, The Old Testament and Enter the Clown, both written and directed by Cui Zi’en, have already been invited to international film festivals.

From the 1990s to the present, every representation of homosexuality in China has necessitated legitimatization by the ‘academic cause’. No lesbian- or gay-themed book or magazine, radio or television show, etc., can ever be allowed unless the ‘academic cause’ is brought in. The academic empire thus becomes a mirror of the political one. Under such circumstances, homosexuals and homosexual culture continue to be systematically objectified and made into ‘oth-

erms’. If homosexuals want to voice their subjectivity, the process must necessarily be filtered by ‘experts’, or alterna-

tively, homosexual people have to disguise themselves as the experts. Still now, any representation of homosexuality (in fiction, film, drama, academic research, magazines, websites, and so forth) carried out by openly homosexual people is reg-

ularly pushed underground. The only promising exception is the already mentioned special issue of Modern Civilization Pictorial early this year, which contained personal stories that homosexuals themselves wrote, and internationally award-

winning fiction by homosexual writers – a most rare chance for homosexuals to exhibit their subjectivities.

References

Cui Zi’en, Scarlet Lips (Diao zaiqu), Hong Kong: Worldson Publication (1997).


Tong Ge, Good Man Roge (Hao man liousi), Hong Kong: Worldson Publication (1998).


Notes

1 ‘Butch’ and ‘femme’ refer to masculine and feminine women respectively, in lesbian relationships that emphasize gender role-playing.


Cui Zi’en, MA is a novelist, playwright, and director. He is currently an associate professor, teaching at the Beijing Film Academy. Out of the closet, he is one of the few advocates for gay people in China. Most of his works are published and win awards outside of China. cuiziren@2911.net