

Filtered Voices: Representing Gay People in Today's China

Research >
China

While 'scientific research' on homosexuality has been legitimized, 'artistic creation' concerning homosexuality still remains illegitimate in today's China. In 2001, the Chinese society of psychiatry published *Categories and Diagnostic Standards of Mental Illness in China* (Third Edition), in which homosexuality was no longer considered an illness. Thus, Chinese homosexuals were 'released' from the asylum. The event attracted much attention in the media and in the scholarly community, but homosexuality had become a topic of discussion in China already in the early 1990s. Below I will provide a chronological overview of discourses and debates about homosexuality in scholarship and the media, fiction, and film that have marked, at different levels, Chinese cultural life during the last decade.

By Cui Zi'en

(translated by Chi Ta-wei)

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 contemporary 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 representation 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 homosexuality.

The AIDS crisis has also triggered increased attention to same-sex sexuality. The *AIDS Bulletin*, edited by Wan Yen-hai, 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 publications 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 published 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. Worldson, the Hong Kong publishing house specialized in lesbian and gay literature that published *Scarlet Lips* (and



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later other works of fiction by Cui Zi'en), also printed in 1998 the collection of short stories *Good Man Rogo* ('Rogo' used to be an ice-cream brand name), by the Tianjin-based writer Tong Ge.

One of the first films on homosexuality in today's China, *East Palace, West Palace*, written by the above-mentioned writer Wang Xiaobo and directed by Zhang Yuan, won several awards at international film festivals in 1996. *Man Man 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 positing 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 Weiwei made a documentary on lesbianism called *The Box*. Finally, two films shot early this year, *The Old Testaments* 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 legitimization 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 'others'. If homosexuals want to voice their subjectivity, the process must necessarily be filtered by 'experts'; or alternatively, 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 regularly 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

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Official film poster of the Stanley Kwan film *Lan Yu* (Hong Kong, 2001). The film is based on one of the earliest and best-known contemporary Chinese gay novels, 'Story from Beijing', which has been circulating on the Internet since 1996. Using actors from the PRC, the film was shot on location in Beijing, but without previous permission by Chinese officials. After the film had won prestigious international awards, it very soon found its way to the market in the PRC.



This is one of the film posters used in Taiwan (<http://lanyu.gstage.com>).

notions of the familial nature of Japanese society intersect across many areas of the social, economic, and political life, as shown by the fact that over the past 20 years the government, business sector, and bureaucracy have attempted to re-invent so-called traditional 'family values' as the basic unit of Japanese society.

Within this political milieu it is not surprising that lesbian sexuality has remained largely invisible in mainstream Japan. The Japanese 'gay boom' of the early 1990s did increase the visibility of homosexuality, but the ways in which both women and men were represented remained fixed in the category of voyeurism. While there was some increase in the number of lesbian magazines, due to the lack of resources and the lower wages that women earn, the opportunities for lesbians to produce, distribute, and buy lesbian-focused magazines remain extremely limited.

Yet, no story is ever that simple. On the one hand, as discussed above,

throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s there have been growing numbers of lesbian women who have become more visible, albeit generally still within the confines of the various lesbian scenes that exist throughout Japan. As a result, there now exists a variety of communities, tastes, and politics that one can access, including loose networks that offer various forms of support such as meeting spaces, the *mini-komi* newsletters, lesbian week-ends (which have taken place for over 17 years), various bars, lesbian businesses, lesbian mothers' groups, exhibitions, workshops, and the annual Japanese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. On the other hand, despite the emergence of these events, for the vast majority of Japanese self-identified lesbians the risks involved in 'stepping out' are still too great, and this is not necessarily a desired goal. Indeed, what would the benefits of 'coming out' be in a society where 'form' holds precedence over 'tolerance' and where knowing

one's place is socially sanctioned?² In some ways and for the moment anyway, the ability of Japanese lesbians to move in and across identities may allow them more space and free them up from an identity politics that tends to demand to know 'who that girl really is'. ◀

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- 1 'Butch' and 'femme' refer to masculine and feminine women respectively, in lesbian relationships that emphasize gender role-playing.
- 2 For a detailed discussion of the specific conditions under which, in Japan, 'form' takes precedence over 'tolerance', see Sharon Chalmers, *Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan*, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon (2002).