

Restless Longing: Homoerotic Fiction in China

Research >
China

Since market reform began in China in the early 1980s, the era has brought many tumultuous changes, including dramatic transformations in sex culture.¹ 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.² Indeed, the lives and subcultures of lesbians and gays in post-socialist China are now intently probed, not only by sociologists and anthropologists, but also by local and foreign journalists.³ What has perhaps been neglected by the growing social sciences 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 Tze-lan 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. Years before cosmopolitan queer activists (such as the Beijing-based female painter and film producer Shi Tou) became vocal about lesbian issues in the media, Lin's fiction had already challenged homophobia as a form of internalized social discrimination.⁴ For

example, Duomi, the protagonist of Lin's autobiographical novel, *One Person's War* (*Yige ren de zhanzheng*, 1993), experiences instinctual 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' (*nüxing xiezu*) and 'individualistic writing' (*gerenhua xiezu*) between the mid- and late 1990s. Her representations of female sexuality, including female-female love, have frequently invited comparison with Lin's despite the fact that the two writers actually have rather different styles. Whereas Lin's language is lyrical, metaphorical, and highly evocative of sensory experiences, Chen's tends to be quirky, eccentric, and parodic. Ideologically, the two writers are also different. Contrary to Lin's morbid fascination with internalized homophobia, Chen adamantly defends the rights of minorities, including sexual minorities. Her opposition to heterosexual hegemony has been articulated most directly in her essay 'Gender-Transcendent Consciousness and My Creative Writing' ('Chao xingbie yishi yu wode chuanguo', 1994), and in her short story 'Breaking Through' ('Pokai', 1995). Her only full-length novel to date, *Private Life* (*Siren shenghuo*, 1994) also explores bisexuality in depth. She is, in addition, a candid sympathizer of a group of lesbian-identified young women in Beijing who started the

underground lesbian newsletter *Sky* (*Tiankong*; chief editor Shi Tou) in March 1999. In Chen's case, then, there is only a thin line between literary experimentation and social activism. Her pursuit of artistic freedom constantly gets translated into a passionate concern about individual freedom, and vice versa.

Despite their differences, one might see that Lin and Chen both champion an aesthetics of the liminal, giving seductive shapes to an existential ambiguity that refuses to be neatly boxed into identity categories. The recurring motifs of Lin's work are irreducible personal difference, self-doubts, and self-denial. Paradoxically, as can be seen in *One Person's War*, a salient performative lesbian identity is called into being precisely by her main character's repeated utterances to negate that identity. By contrast, Chen imagines a restless romantic longing that is unrestrained by conventional gender definitions, that subverts dominant post-socialist ideals of femininity and heterosexual courtship. Her desired fluidity disintegrates both gender and sexual identities.⁵ If one is intent on reading national allegory into these narratives, one might argue that Lin's and Chen's examinations of liminal states of being, aptly articulate the general discomfort with identity in a globalizing China, as the nation moves away from the memories of Mao and yearns to become cosmopolitan, yet resists foregone (i.e. globally dominant) conclusions of what it means to be cosmopolitan.

Significantly, as women writers' fictional representations of female homoeroticism proliferate, there is also in general a broadening social realm in which pluralistic interpretations of such works are becoming possible. The growing pluralism unsettles the dominance of traditional moralism, on the one hand, and the voyeuristic fantasies encouraged by the new consumer economy, on the other. Although thus far literary scholars in the mainland academic establishment have turned out far more feminist analyses than specifically queer readings of women's homoerotic fiction, China may be now poised at a point where specifically lesbian or queer critical analyses will enter the academic establishment from the margins. ◀

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- 1 For social scientists' perspectives, see James Farrer, *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2001); Judith Farquhar, *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press (2002).
- 2 See, for instance, Lisa Rofel, 'Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China', *GLQ* 5, No. 4 (1999), pp. 451-74.
- 3 For an example of local media coverage, see the January 2002 issue of *Modern Civilization Pictorial* (*Xiandai wenming huabao*), a special issue on lesbians and gays in China.
- 4 Shi Tou and the gay film critic and novelist Cui Zi'en came out on Hunan Satellite Television in December 2000. For a transcript of the programme, visit www.aizhi.org.hnws.htm
- 5 A more detailed discussion of Lin Bai and Chen Ran can be found in my monograph, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2002), chapters 7 and 8.