

Asians of the Same Intent

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Asia

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 societies. We have just begun to scrutinize the wealth of historical documents on the subject, and to reconstruct conceptual models buried underneath modern discourses on health and sexuality largely of Western origin (if often appearing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).

By Giovanni Vitiello

Homosexuality has not simply been recovered as a legitimate field of academic study. The visibility of homosexuality 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 just a coincidence that three of the best-known Chinese films of the 1990s, *Farewell My Concubine*, *The Wedding Banquet*, and *Happy Together*, deal with male homoeroticism. Indeed one is reminded of Chi Ta-wei'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 Chalmers, 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 fascination of Japanese popular culture with male romances, discussed by Mark McLelland, is not paralleled by an equal fascination with female ones.

While acknowledging the important role of the PRC media and scholars in informing audiences about homosexual culture, Cui Zi'en also laments a systematic objectification of homosexuals in various public discourses, through rhetorical approaches that filter or suppress the voices of homosexuals. Speaking of Taiwan, Fran Martin also remarks on the homophobic tone of much of the media 'buzz' around homosexuality. As she points out, 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 countered elsewhere in society. As Rick Smith observes when speaking of Mongolia, although homo-

phobia in Asia does not involve 'organized hate groups', it may often take the form of rejection from one's family and hostility from friends. In Indonesian society, for example, transgendered males (or *warias*) have a traditionally acknowledged place. But as Dédé Oetomo wryly points out *warias* are respected precisely for having made it in spite of all the familial and social obstacles – that is, for being survivors – and people in general don't mind them 'as long as they are not their own kin'. In that *warias* operate beauty salons and tell fortunes, manage the sacred as shamans or mediums, provide silicon injections, and implant propitious fake moles, they can be said to be socially accepted – as long as they operate within the space traditionally assigned to them. Most importantly, although *warias* do have communities, those communities are not connected in a political organization.

The picture of Asian sexual culture has been complicated in the 1990s 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 the US), such as the 'gay' and 'queer' identities, and some being indigenous developments, like the Chinese *tongzhi*.



Giovanni Vitiello

Maurice Siermans

Tongzhi (literally, 'people of the same intent') has come to refer to homosexuality in the Chinese language – first in Hong Kong, then in Taiwan, and now even in Mainland China, where it has swiftly displaced its old meaning of '(Communist) comrade'. The phrase, notably transcending gender dichotomies, is inclusive of gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities.

It is tempting to link this conceptual flexibility with the 'existential ambiguity that refuses to be neatly boxed into identity categories', which Tze-lan Sang retrieves in the fiction of two women writers of the 1990s. The rise of the *dee* lesbian identity in Thailand, an identity based on sexuality rather than gender inversion, as Megan Sinnott observes, is another indicator that Asian (homo)sexual culture is changing. Foreign identities such as 'gay' and 'queer', and their lifestyles, have meanwhile made their way into the cultural scene of many Asian urban centres, inevitably coming to terms with local identities

and being renegotiated in the process, as the debate surrounding Qiu Miaojin's fiction, described by Martin, also shows. These new developments in sexual politics appear to trigger anxiety in some governments. The state-sponsored Thai homophobia that Sinnott considers, for example, cannot be explained in terms of continuity with a supposed traditional hostility towards same-sex sexuality.

Rather, it is more likely that this anxiety is related to the fact that the experience of gay and lesbian political activism in the West has become more available to Asian homosexuals. As He Xiaopei's account makes clear, the legacy of Stonewall is transnational, and its message can resonate powerfully in today's Asia, even if it is just whispered. ◀

Professor Giovanni Vitiello is associate professor of Chinese at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. His research focuses on male homoeroticism and the history of pornography in late imperial China. vitiello@hawaii.edu