

Off the Shelf #14: Under an Eastern Moon: Writing LGBT China

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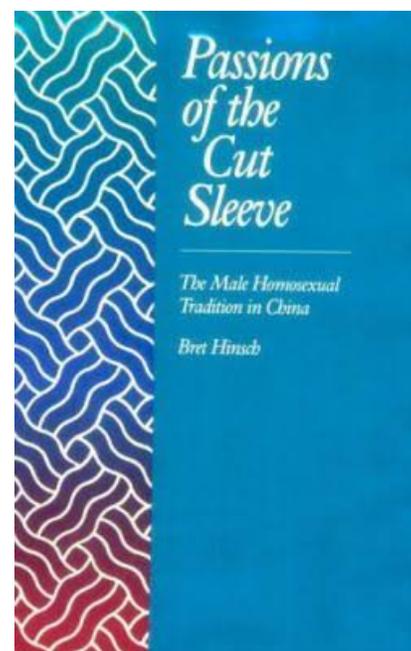
Under an Eastern Moon: Writing LGBT China

by Rob Ridinger

The images of China in the Western mind are possessed of a mixture of colorful antiquity, such as the tales of Cathay told by Marco Polo in the thirteenth century, and immense changes in the most recent two centuries. One of the threads of the Chinese past and present is made up of the lives of men and women who were attracted to their own gender and the unique cultural forms this ancient civilization crafted to house and express this aspect of the people of the Middle Kingdom. A useful brief introduction to the dynamics of homosexuality across the millennia in China can be found in Wim Lunsing's article in the 2009 Berkshire Encyclopedia of China, "Homosexuality (Tongxinglian)," which discusses the traditional views of and contexts for such relationships within court and private life, and cites documentation on male-male relationships within the culture as early as the Zhou dynasty (1045-256 B.C.) and up to the emergence of the contemporary tongzhi identity.

One of the factors affecting the landscape of information on this subject for English speakers who know no Chinese is the traditional areas of interest for academic research on China in American universities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Given that most Americans would have had no opportunity to learn the characters of Chinese to enable them to read works of history, fiction and poetry in their original forms, they would have turned to those scholars who had done so and whose books and articles served to introduce and interpret the richly immense literature of China for them. Poetry from different dynasties, works of fiction such as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, and official chronicles and histories were thus among the first works that would have been accessible. An example of this type of research done prior the publication of Bret Hinsch's groundbreaking *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* in 1990 is M.J. Meijer's 1985 article on "Homosexual Offences in Ch'ing Law" from the international journal of Chinese studies, *T'oung Pao*.

The book-length studies on Chinese homosexuality that comprise the contemporary literature begin with the appearance of *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* in 1990 from the University of California Press. The author, Bret Hinsch, notes in the introduction that his goals are "to present translations of the most important original sources dealing with the homosexual tradition in China, and ...to present an interpretive framework for understanding the Chinese homosexual tradition that is as free as possible from Western preconceptions" (Hinsch 1990: 5). The book is arranged chronologically by dynasty beginning with the era of the Zhou (1122-256 B.C.) and continuing up to the end of the Ch'ing Dynasty with the founding of the Republic of China in 1912. Types of materials included range from poetry to chronicles of the imperial courts and law codes. Readers will also find Hinsch's epilogue of value for bridging the gap between 1912 and the status of homosexuals in the People's Republic of China. The book was reprinted in 1992. After this, it was eleven years until another work in English on same-sex relationships in China appeared, Tze-lan Deborah Sang's *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* from the University of Chicago Press. 2003 also saw the publication of Louis Crompton's *Homosexuality & Civilization* by the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, which includes a chapter on "Imperial China: 500 BCE-1849." The emphasis on court life was maintained in 2004

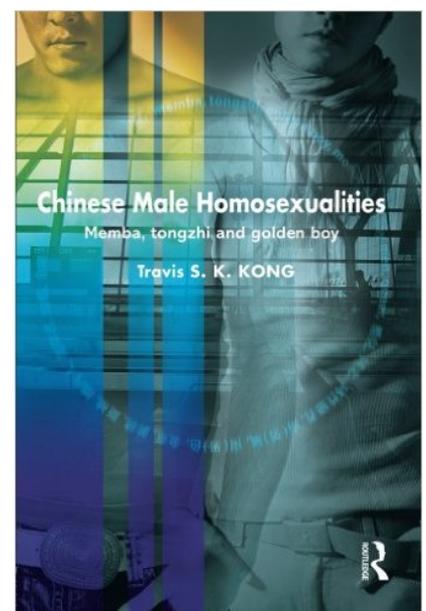
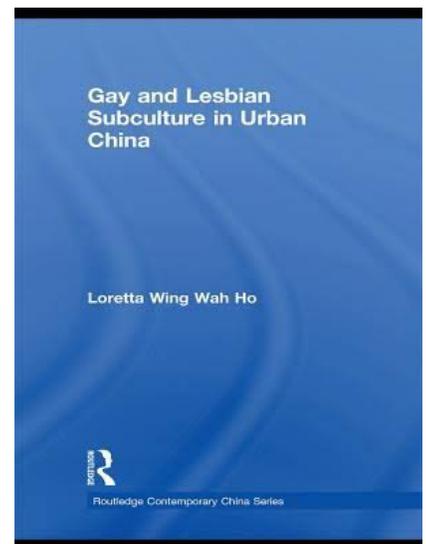
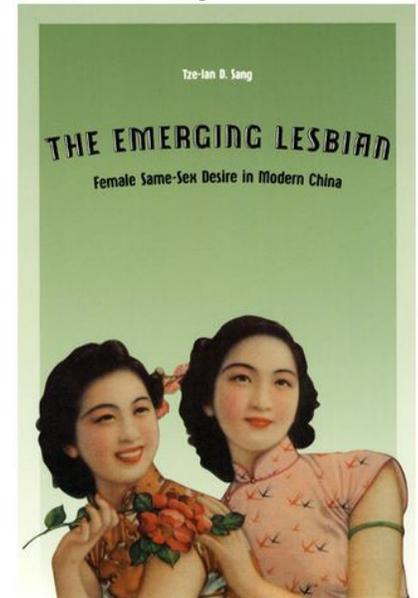


with the appearance of Wu Cuncun's *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China* from Routledge.

The advantages of global information accessibility apply to the next important work on homosexuality in China, done as a Ph.D thesis at the University of Western Australia Graduate School of Education in 2007. In *China's Opening Up: Nationalist and Globalist Conceptions of Same-Sex Identity*, Loretta Wing Wah Ho explores the ways in which same-sex identities are being defined within the massive social and economic changes which have taken place since the 1970s, a phenomenon referred to as kaifang ("opening up"). The author's focus is on urban same-sex communities in Beijing and was published in 2009 in book form by Routledge as *Gay and Lesbian Subculture in Urban China*. The thesis is available online at the digital repository of the University of Western Australia. The other work published in 2009, Wenqing Kang's *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900-1950*, was originally the author's doctoral dissertation from the University of California, Santa Cruz. A notable feature of this dissertation is its use of news publications from the entertainment industry and the tabloid press as sources of information on same-sex relationships during the period of re-emergent Chinese nationalism and the ending of colonialism.

The last seven years have seen a diversification of works on aspects of LGBT China, some continuing the urban focus established with Loretta Ho's fieldwork in Beijing, others extending the view into the scattered Chinese communities across the world. Travis Kong's *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Mema, Tongzhi and Golden Boy*, published in 2010, reports the results of the author's ethnographic and sociological work in China, Hong Kong, and the Chinese community in London illustrating the range of identities crafted by the gay men of each area as they defined themselves drawing on a global discussion of what it means to be queer. The next year, Denise Tse-Shang Tang added a volume that complements Travis Kong's study of men in *Conditional Spaces: Hong Kong Lesbian Desires and Everyday Life*, using as her base life histories of several dozen lesbians living in Hong Kong. A slightly different approach to retrieving China's same-sex past is taken by Giovanni Vitiello in the other 2011 offering *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China*. Taking as his focus the period from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, he draws upon previously unused sources such as works of pornographic fiction to examine not only the legal and social constraints on same-sex activity but also the creation of ideals of male beauty and the existence of males in the prostitution industry.

In 2013, Wu Cuncun joined a colleague from Victoria University in Melbourne to edit a collection which parallels the historical works of Jonathan Katz by making primary sources available in one place. *Homoeroticism in Imperial China: A Sourcebook* provides the reader with English translations of more than sixty important texts from philosophy, history, fiction, drama and popular miscellaneous works, although there is no original Chinese text included for comparison. The work begun in Hong Kong on female same-sex relationships with *Conditional Spaces* was expanded in 2014 through the addition of two new similar works on mainland China: *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* by Lucetta Yip Lo Kam and Elisabeth L. Engebretsen's groundbreaking anthropological study of Beijing, *Queer*



Women in Urban China: An Ethnography which examines ordinary lala lives from the perspectives of pressures from family and society, same-sex marriages, gender roles and activism. In 2015, mainland China and Taiwan served as the landscapes for an investigation of the development of queer Marxist theory as an alternative to Western models of queer theory as a framework of emancipation in *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* by Petrus Liu. The female ethnographic work was also balanced that year by *Tongzhi Living: Men Attracted to Men in Postsocialist China* by Tiantian Zheng issued by the University of Minnesota Press.

The range of works produced thus far on the same-sex worlds crafted by the civilizations of China, both historic and contemporary, serves as a promise that their definitions of LGBT identities will continue to evolve and influence the global discussion of civil rights and cultural creativity.

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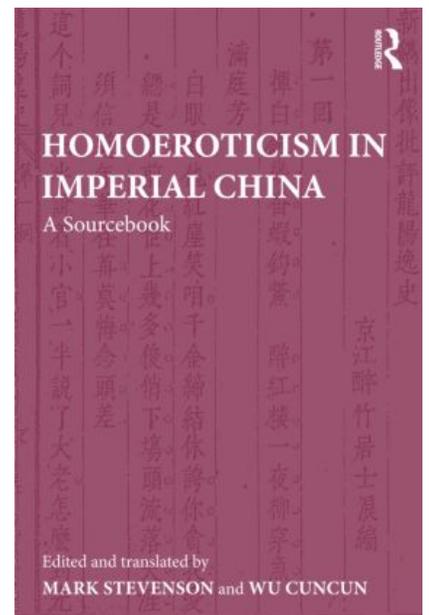
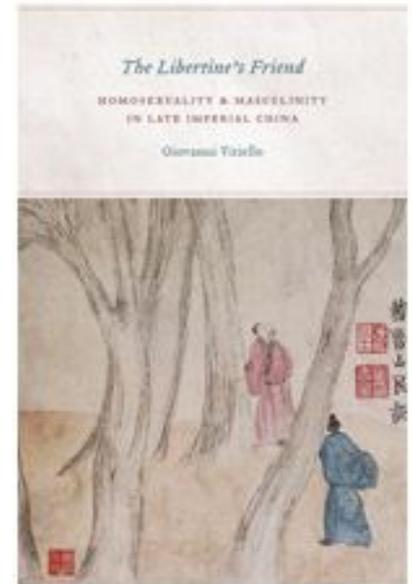
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