

NHH11. Comrades of the Cut Sleeve

Homosexuality in China

WC 3604

The best-known and most romanticized love relationship between two men in all of Chinese history is that of the Emperor Ai of Han and his lover, Dong Xian. The story goes that one afternoon the two men fell asleep, Dong Xian lying on the butterfly sleeve of the Emperor's gown. When attendants came to call the Emperor to attend an audience, rather than awaken the young man beside him, he called for a knife and cut off his sleeve. Ever after, homosexual love was obliquely referred to as "*the passion of the cut sleeve.*"



Young men sipping tea, reading poetry, and making love¹

Unfortunately, as is often the case with romantic traditions, the truth was not so touching. Emperor Ai was born in 27 BC, ascended the throne in 7 BC at the age of 20 and died 8 years later. He had been made heir to the throne by his uncle Cheng who, like the people generally, regarded him as

a capable and intelligent young man. However, in office he proved a bad emperor: not only was he indecisive and vacillatory, but he levied excessively heavy taxes, treated his officials tyrannically and proved totally unable to control the wide-spread corruption. During his reign, Ai was always under the thumb of his grandmother, the Consort Fu, dowager of the Emperor Yuan, who continued to control the political scene even after Ai's death. The young Emperor's true name was Liu Xin, but the name by which he is remembered, "Ai", means "lamentable".

In 4 BC, Emperor Ai began a relationship with a minor palace official, Dong Xian, which was to last for the remainder of his short life. Dong

¹ Individual panel from a hand scroll on homosexual themes, paint on silk; [China, Qing](#) dynasty (18th–19th c.); [Kinsey Institute](#), Bloomington, Indiana. From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Love_play_in_China.jpg (Public domain).

Xian was born probably in 23 BC and like his lover, died in 1 BC, only in his case, forced to commit suicide after the death of Ai.

Dong received many honours and was promoted rapidly through the ranks of the aristocracy while his family received many titles and favours in their turn. Not unexpectedly, this favoritism caused resentment and criticism which the Emperor punished harshly.

In 2 BC, when he was only 22 years old, Dong was made commander of the armed forces, one of the three most important posts in the country, even though it is doubtful he was in any way qualified for the rank. However, he ignored his duties and instead spent his time dallying with Ai. When the Emperor died suddenly, Dong was completely taken by surprise and, while he was seemingly paralysed by the shock, the Grand Empress Dowager Wang seized the opportunity, sped to the palace, seized the Imperial Seal, summoned her nephew Wang Mang to her and transferred Dong's authority to him. Dong was forbidden to enter the palace and that night, he and his wife both committed suicide. Dong's body was buried hurriedly but Wang Mang wanting to make sure he was in fact dead, had him disinterred and then re-buried inside a prison.



The Han Dynasty apparently holds the record for the greatest number of emperors who kept male favourites,² ten (10) of the men who ruled China during that dynasty being on record for having one or more men as their lovers³.

Portrait of Qu Yuan, the central figure of Chu Ci, by Australian Chinese artist Zhang Cuiying

It was not only the emperors of the Han dynasty who took male lovers: according to Chinese historian Professor Li Yinhe⁴, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of

² Taken from Hinsch, Brett, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990, pp 35-36.

³ They were: Emperor Gao r.206-195BCE and Jiru — Emperor Hui r.194-188BCE and Hongru — Emperor Wen r.179-141BCE and Deng Tong, Zhao Tan, and Beigong Bozi — Emperor Jing r.156-141BCE and Zho Ren — Emperor Wu r.140-87BCE and Han Yan, Han Yue, and Li Yannian — Emperor Zhao r.86-74BCE and Jin Shang — Emperor Xuan r.73-49BCE and Zhang Pengzu — Emperor Yuan r.48-33BCE and Hong Gong, Shi Xian — Emperor Cheng r.32-7BCE and Zhang Fang, and Chunyu Zhang — Emperor Ai r.6BCE-1CE and Dong Xian

⁴ *History of Chinese Homosexuality*

Social Sciences, there are records of homosexual relations between men, including emperors and their lovers, which go back to the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th century - 11th century BC).

Homosexual activity seems to have been fairly common among kings during the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods, although the most famous is the alleged relationship between the man known as the “father of Chinese poetry,” Qu Yuan⁵ (340 - 278 B.C.) and Monarch Chu. Qu Yuan was later ostracized by the court when he advised against going to war against the Qin and so returned to his village. When his beloved monarch was defeated in battle in 278 BC, Qu Yuan was so upset he committed ritual suicide by drowning himself in the near-by river. Local villagers, seeing what he was doing, pushed their fishing boats out into the water and rushed to save him but it was too late. To keep fish from his body, they first beat drums and slapped the surface of the water with their paddles, and when this did not work, they threw rice into the water. Some time later, the spirit of Qu Yuan appeared to the villagers in a dream and said that a dragon was intercepting the rice and asked them to wrap it in a three-cornered package.



Modern Dragon Boat and crew

This they did, and continue to do, in a ceremony which has become the Dragon Boat Festival. This is celebrated on the 5th day of the Fifth Month in the Chinese Lunar Calendar.⁶

Another account of a homosexual relationship in Chinese antiquity, this time from the Spring and Fall period, 722–481 BC, is re-told in the history of the duke Ling of Wei and his favourite, Mizi Xia:

⁵ also transliterated as Ch'ü Yüan

⁶ Translations of some of Qu Yuan's poetry can be found at <http://www.chinapage.com/poem/quyuan/quyuan-e.html#Lament>

*Viscount Mizi Xia and the Bitten Peach*⁷

Viscount Mizi, whose given name was Xia, was a favorite, and a Great Master, during the reign of the duke Ling of Wei: he was the lover of the duke. According to the law of the kingdom, the use of the duke's carriage without permission was forbidden to all, upon pain of having one's feet cut off. One time it happened that Mizi's mother took gravely ill, and a breathless messenger came running to the palace in the middle of the night to bring him the news. He, without a second thought, jumped into the duke's carriage and took off. When the duke found out, instead of punishing him he praised him, saying: "What a devoted son! For his mother he risks even losing his own feet!"

Another time, on a warm summer afternoon, he was strolling with the duke through the royal orchard. A beautiful peach on a low-lying branch caught his eye and he plucked it. Biting down on it he found it sweet, so he offered the rest to the duke. The duke, touched by the intimate gesture, said: "He loves me to the point of forgetting his own mouth and giving it to me!"

Later, the beauty of the viscount began to fade, and the duke's love also waned. When the viscount was one time accused of a crime, the duke said: "That one once hijacked my carriage, and he even gave me a half-eaten peach to eat!" Mizi Xia had not done anything unusual. If the ruler was now accusing him of a crime instead of praising him like he used to, that was because the duke's love had now turned to hate.

Ever since those days, when people in China speak of male love, one of the names they give it is "the pleasures of the bitten peach."

By and large, the history of homosexuality in China continued in this *laissez-faire* manner throughout the dynasties which succeeded the Han. At least 9 later emperors also had openly homosexual relationships⁸ including Pu Yi - the last Qing [Manchu] emperor.

Historical records show that most Emperors, even if they themselves did not have male as well as female lovers, at least kept stables of youths for

⁷ Retold after the Italian version of Giovanni Vitiello and the English version of Bret Hinsch.

⁸ Hinsch, *ibid.*

the enjoyment of visiting dignitaries. And of course, what emperors and princes — and perhaps poets — did by way of their sex lives was also copied by courtiers, lesser palace officials, administrators and governors, and for all we know, even peasants although of course, the amorous adventures of more lowly people were not recorded.



*Wang Yangming (1472-1528)*⁹

Homosexuality seems to have been more popular in some periods than in others. For example, such relationships appear to have been more acceptable — perhaps even fashionable — in the Song, Ming and Qing dynasties. Male prostitution, in particular, flourished in the mighty Ming

dynasty (1368-1644 AD), especially during the period 1573-1620 when the economy was booming and lavish living was the order of the day. A fashionable taste for prostitutes (more like call-boys) was partly prompted by the popular argument by the neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming (1472-1528) that giving full rein to sexual desires was to achieve the true expression of one's human nature. However, as the historian Vivien W Ng¹⁰ reports, the late Ming writer Shen Defu (1578-1642) recorded that ironically,

....government officials began to turn to boys and younger men for sexual entertainment after 1429, when the Xuande emperor ordered them to desist from cavorting with courtesans. These male prostitutes came to be known as xiaochang (literally “little singer”), and by the seventeenth century, they had become as much part of the brothel scene as their female counterparts. The attempt of the Xuande emperor to gather his officials into the moral fold, in effect, produced the opposite result.

⁹ <http://history.cultural-china.com/en/49H5994H11844.html>

¹⁰ Ng, Vivien W., “Homosexuality and the State in Late Imperial China”, in Duberman et al, “*Hidden from History*”, 1989 p 78.

Some of the *literati* of this period, who were all well educated in the Classical tradition, also turned their talents to writing erotic and pornographic literature. Because the Classical Chinese in which they had been trained was by now almost an archaic language understood only by fellow scholars, many chose to write in the vernacular, often prefacing their work with traditional Confucian moral homilies the principles of which they then proceeded to ignore in the stories which followed. An excellent example is a heterosexual novel called “*The Carnal Prayer Mat*” by Li Yi (1611-1680). This is a kind of Chinese “*Decameron*” in which, after a lengthy discourse in support of traditional ethics, the author proceeds to regale his readers with the exploits of a hero whose sexual excesses are only moderated towards the end of the novel when he discovers that all the husbands of all the wives he has seduced have also seduced his own.

Another Li, Li Yu, wrote “*The Mother of Mencius*”, in which he first delivers a homily on the advantages of female chastity, and then tells the tale of a scholar, Xu Jifang, whose spends his youth in homosexual excess. Eventually however, he marries but pays little attention to his wife who conveniently dies when giving birth to his son. Some years later, Xu meets a handsome youth, You Ruilang, with whom he falls



instantly in love. After long negotiations with the youth’s father over appropriate bride-price, they eventually marry and live happily ever after.

The Way of the Academicians, from “Hua Ying Chin Chen”, (Variegated Positions of the Flower Battle), China, Ming dynasty (1368-1644)

The author seems to have chosen a homosexual marriage to emphasize the virtue of a wife’s devotion to her husband! Ruilang, the epitome of the virtuous wife, not only begins to cross-dress but also castrates himself in order to preserve his youthful beauty¹¹. When Jifang dies, Ruilang, like a virtuous widow, does not remarry but raises his dead husband’s son as a real widow would have been expected to do.

¹¹ Castration during the Ming dynasty was quite common. It was a prerequisite to entry into the Imperial administration which was run by eunuchs. The great Chinese Admiral Cheng Ho was a eunuch.

Homosexual prostitution, and other forms of homosexual relations, flourished more in some parts of the country than in others and so, in much the same way that Renaissance Florence was known throughout Europe as a city of Sodom, in China the province of Fujian was also well-known for its wide-spread and general acceptance of homosexual ways. The same contemporary scholar quoted above, Shen Defu, wrote:

The Fujianese especially favor male homosexuality. This preference is not limited to any particular social or economic class, but the rich tend to cavort with the rich, and the poor with the poor. They call each other bond brothers..... When the elder bond brother enters the home of the younger brother, he is welcomed and loved by the parents as one would a son-in-law. The younger brother's livelihood, including expenses incurred when he later married a wife, is provided for by the elder brother.¹²

Confucian scholars of the Seventeenth Century considered Chinese morality began to disintegrate during the later decades of the reign of the Ming Emperor Wanli (reigned 1573-1620) who became so self-indulgent that he became too obese to even walk.¹³ Some scholars even blamed his debauchery for the fall of the Ming dynasty itself.

Not only Confucian scholars were disturbed by the wide-spread — as they saw it — moral decline. Some of the early Europeans who lived and worked in China in the late Ming period were horrified by the Chinese tolerant attitude to homosexuality and by its ubiquitous practice. For example, the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci who lived in China from 1583 to 1610, wrote:

"That which most shows the misery of these people is that no less than the natural lusts, they practise unnatural ones that reverse the order of things, and this is neither forbidden by law nor thought to be illicit nor even a cause for shame. It is spoken of in public and practiced everywhere without there being anyone to prevent it."¹⁴

When the Manchus entered Beijing in 1644 and declared the start of a new dynasty, the Qing (1644 – 1911), they set about what was called “rectifying names” which, at a moral level, in practice meant establishing

¹² Quoted in Ng, *ibid* p.85-86.

¹³ “Later decades” because Wanli came to the throne when he was only 9 and the country was ruled during his minority by the Prime Minister, Zhang Juzheng. See Ng, Vivien W., *Homosexuality and the State in Late Imperial China*, in Duberman et al, “Hidden from History”, 1989, p.77.

¹⁴ quoted in A. L. DeSilva: *Homosexuality and Theravada Buddhism*, BuddhaNet, at <http://www.buddhanet.net/homosexu.htm>

Confucian principles as the order of the day: men had to become husbands and fathers, women had to become good wives and mothers. In the attempt to enforce gender roles, in 1740 a law was promulgated which made consensual sodomy a crime. No one knows how effective this law was in reducing homosexual activity, but criminal records of the time show clearly that men convicted of sexual misconduct were treated more severely than were women, indicating the Qing officials took into account that men had the responsibility of continuing their family line by fathering children.

In 1765 a Qing official attempted some moral reform by prohibiting what he called “Licentious Cults”. The cult he found most distasteful was one called Hu Tianbao. Of this he said:

The image is of two men embracing one another; the face of one is somewhat hoary with age, the other tender and pale. [Their temple] is commonly called the small official temple. All those debauched and shameless rascals who on seeing youths or young men desire to have illicit intercourse with them pray for assistance from the plaster idol. Then they make plans to entice and obtain the objects of their desire. This is known as the secret assistance of Hu Tianbao. Afterwards they smear the idol's mouth with pork intestine and sugar in thanks.¹⁵



Young men engaged in erotic play; Hand scroll with homosexual theme, opaque watercolor on paper; Beijing, Qing Dynasty, late 19th Century¹⁶

Zhu Gui (1731-1807), the official in question who prohibited such “licentious cults” was, of course, not alone in his intolerance of the wide-spread homosexuality or other (in his view) moral shortcomings among the people. All the major religions in China throughout history condemned homosexuality when it threatened in any way the universal requirement that people marry and produce children. From the possibly legendary Yellow Emperor who

¹⁵ **Michael Szonyi**, "The Cult of Hu Tianbao and the eighteenth-Century Discourse of Homosexuality." Late Imperial China - Volume 19, Number 1, June 1998, pp. 1-25, quoted in Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_rights_in_China

¹⁶ Private collection (From Wikipedia. Public domain)

founded the first Chinese dynasty down to almost modern times, the Chinese have considered that provided a man marries and produces a son or two, his sex life is his own business.

But, despite this laissez-faire attitude, there were also strong religious and other traditions which limited or regulated the ways in which sexual relationships between men were conducted.

Confucianism, for example, advocated that men and women behave according to rather strict gender roles and so, cross-dressing was considered against natural law. When emperors — as some did — dressed in women's clothing, this was generally regarded as an ill-omen. Clearly too, since it was a man's duty to sire a son, a man who had only male lovers failed in his duty to Heaven and his ancestors. Some kind of bi-sexuality was clearly the solution.

The two other major religions of China, Taoism and Buddhism, regarded homosexuality from different angles. Buddhists apply three tests to assess the moral worth of any action. The first is much like the one we call "The Golden Rule" — and so the question to be asked is "Would I like this if someone did it to me?". The second test is to check out the consequence. The Buddha said: *"The deed which causes remorse afterwards and results in weeping and tears is ill-done. The deed which causes no remorse afterwards and results in joy and happiness is well-done."* And the third, and most pertinent here, is to ask whether or not the action helps us to attain our goal of Nirvana. In applying this Third Precept to homosexual actions, the Buddhist scholar A. L. De Silva¹⁷ writes:

As homosexuality is not explicitly mentioned in any of the Buddha's discourses ... we can only assume that it is meant to be evaluated in the same way that heterosexuality is.In the case of the lay man and woman where there is mutual consent, where adultery is not involved and where the sexual act is an expression of love, respect, loyalty and warmth, it would not be breaking the third Precept. And it is the same when the two people are of the same gender. Likewise promiscuity, license and the disregard for the feelings of others would make a sexual act unskillful whether it be heterosexual or homosexual. All the principles we would use to evaluate a heterosexual relationship we would also use to evaluate a homosexual one. In Buddhism we could say that it is not the

¹⁷ DeSilva, A.L. : *Homosexuality and Theravada Buddhism*, BuddhaNet, at <http://www.buddhanet.net/homosexu.htm>

object of one's sexual desire that determines whether a sexual act is unskillful or not, but rather the quality of the emotions and intentions involved.

Taoism took a different approach. Since Taoism seeks to maintain a balance between **yang** and **yin**, a relationship between two men, both yang, is theoretically imbalanced and destructive. Nonetheless, there were many who argued that every man is made up of both Yin and Yang and some men have much more Yin than others so that for them, homosexual relations are actually natural, serving to preserve their individual balance.¹⁸

China in Modern Times

In an article dated August 27, 2005 and headed *Gay revolution puts red China in the pink*, the Sydney Morning Herald's then special correspondent in Shanghai Hamish McDonald¹⁹ wrote that

The word "tongzhi", or comrade, used to be the unisex, equalising term of address in the socialist world of Mao Zedong's New China.....In one of the more delightful linguistic subversions of this fast-changing country, the term has been appropriated by China's male homosexuals to refer to themselves and has spread widely into the general community with the same meaning.



Trailblazer ... Cuizi'en, the first gay man to come out in China, in 1990, sits under a gay rights poster in his Beijing flat. Photo: Getty Images

This “pink revolution” progresses slowly, aided by the retreat of the puritanism which had marked the

Communist state under Mao. Laws have been repealed, de-criminalising sodomy and the all-purpose crime of "hooliganism" which, like "loitering with intent" prior to Gay Law Reform in NSW, was often used to arrest

¹⁸ This comes close to creating what Foucault called “a species” of men who had exclusively or predominantly male-male sex, although it was not necessarily a permanent cradle-to-grave one such as “homosexual”

¹⁹ <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/gay-revolution-puts-red-china-in-the-pink/2005/08/26/1124563027268.html>

gay men looking for sex in public toilets and parks. Most importantly too, in 2001, "homosexuality" was removed from the official list of mental disorders. And last but not least, the Internet has provided a welcome means of communication and contact among China's "comrades".

On the other side of the ledger, despite the establishment of some gay bars and nightclubs in the big cities such as Guangzhou, Beijing and Shanghai, most Chinese "comrades" who cannot afford to seek partners in the commercial venues are forced to do so in parks and public toilets where, of course, they still attract police harassment, detention and arrest, although it must be said, gay bashing is rare. In October 1999 a court in Beijing ruled that homosexuality was "abnormal and unacceptable to the Chinese public"²⁰ while in 2001 the State Administration of Radio Film and Television banned programs with homosexual content because they were "going against the healthy way of life in China". As late as 2006, there have been several unsuccessful attempts to legalise gay marriage and this year China banned adoption of children by homosexual people, signalling that same-sex marriage is unlikely in the life-times of the gay and lesbian activists agitating for equality before the law. However, AIDS, as elsewhere in the world, has forced the Chinese administration to admit to the prevalence of homosexuality and to enlist the help of homosexual activists.

So, the official view towards same-sex relations in China seems to be rather schizoid: Hamish McDonald in his SMH article²¹ reported well-known sexologist Li Yinhe as saying,

..... Many scholars and gays think the country has moved back to a traditional ambiguity about sexuality.

..... In practice, it was often accepted that young men could have sex with each other as a part of friendship, and that married men could have sex with boys, or female concubines and prostitutes, or both, as long as they married and produced an heir.

China's leading gay novelist, who writes under the nom-de-plume of Tong Ge, says that the Chinese ambivalence about homosexuality seems not so much about sexual preference but about sexual roles and sexual identity:

²⁰ *Washington Post*, 24 January 2000

²¹ McDonald, *ibid.*

... For example, if a man of high status had sexual relations with a man of low status like a barber or a waiter, people would not blame him and just regard him as a playboy. They would assume he was the inserter, rather than the insertee. This role-playing would be how they judge the issue.

..... China is a land covered by the ice of bureaucracy, tradition and ethics," he said, adding with a wry smile: "We comrades can only try to melt the frozen land with our body warmth."
