

Sexual Variance in Asian Cultures

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PASSIONS OF THE CUT SLEEVE: THE MALE HOMOSEXUAL TRADITION IN CHINA by Bret Hinsch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. xvii + 232 pp. softcover \$14.00).

THE LOVE OF THE SAMURAI: A THOUSAND YEARS OF JAPANESE HOMOSEXUALITY by Tsuneo Watanabe and Jun'ichi Iwata, and translated by D.R. Roberts (London: Gay Men's Press, 1989. 158 pp. softcover \$19.95).

NEITHER MAN NOR WOMAN: THE HIJRAS OF INDIA (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1990. xxv + 170 pp. softcover \$19.95).

MALE HOMOSEXUALITY IN THAILAND: AN INTERPRETATION OF CONTEMPORARY THAI SOURCES by Peter A. Jackson (Elmhurst, New York, and Amsterdam, Netherlands: Global Academic Publishers, 1989. x + 284 pp.).

Within the last decade an outpouring of academic studies on homosexuality has occurred. However, most of these studies have been limited to Euro-American society, and have ignored the wide range of same-sex eroticism that has existed in other cultures around the world. Fortunately, that is now beginning to change, with four important new books appearing on homosexuality in China, Japan, India, and Thailand. Unfortunately, little is included in these books on female sexuality, due to the paucity of written documentation on anything relating to private affairs between women. We can only guess what kinds of intimacies might have occurred privately between upper-class women and their female servants, between wives and their in-laws, between female relatives, or among all-female occupational groupings like nuns and prostitutes. We desperately need female researchers (preferably lesbian-identified) to do oral history interviews of elderly Asian women, to gather what can be found about these private traditions, before such knowledge is lost.

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By expanding the boundaries of knowledge of Asian sexuality, we can better understand how different Asian societies have organized sexual variance. Moreover, in understanding sexual variance among immigrant Asian Americans, it is useful to look at practices in their countries of origin.

In the *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, Hinsch inventively analyzes court records, poetry, fiction, jokes, religious tracts, legal cases and treatises, from the ancient Zhou dynasty to the end of the Qing dynasty in the early 1900s. He found that, at least before 1900, most Chinese men were not divided into strict categories of "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals," but evidenced a relaxed bisexuality. Wealthy married men or unmarried scholars often had a young boy as a concubine, or patronized boy prostitutes. Chinese philosophers wrote that it was better for a boy to sell his body, as a favorite or a prostitute, than to languish in poverty. More egalitarian male-male relationships also existed, in terms of fictive "elder brother/younger brother" couples. Certain persons were recognized as being "enthusiasts of male love," and some kept lifelong male partners even if they were also married to a woman. Still other males took on a more androgynous role, becoming like a wife to a masculine man. In the royal courts, many males did not marry, and they fit into court society as artists, servants, administrators, or favorites of the emperors. Famous stories of male lovers of certain emperors were passed down through the generations, giving a legitimacy to same-sex love.

This easy acceptance of same-sex love began to change in China with the coming of the Manchu rulers, who reacted against the opulent libertine lifestyle of traditional Chinese civilization. But what really revolutionized Chinese sexual attitudes, Hinsch argues, was the impact of Europeans. By the early 1900s, Chinese "progressives" had become so impressed with Western science and technology that they slavishly adopted a mystical faith in the superiority of all things Western. Sexual variance was suppressed, in favor of Christian notions that the only purpose of sex was reproduction. Since Western medical and psychological sciences in the early 1900s saw homosexuality as "pathological," China's traditional patterns of acceptance of same-sex love disappeared.

Progressive scholars (employed by Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the People's Republic alike) deleted references to homosexuality in new translations of Chinese classical literature. They simplified the writing style, meaning that most literate Chinese could no longer read the classics in their original uncensored form. Thus, modern

Chinese have been cut off from an important part of their heritage. It is a great irony, Hinsch writes, that some contemporary Chinese claim that homosexuality is “a decadent practice” only brought into China from the West. They are ignorant of the fact that what really was brought into China from the West was an intolerance for same-sex love.

Given China’s current concern for restricting population growth, it would make sense for the government to encourage lesbian and gay couples to pair up and adopt homeless children. Yet, such is the continuing impact of Western prejudice that many contemporary Chinese feel it necessary for everyone to marry heterosexually. They ignore the benefits to society that would occur if same-sex marriages were legalized. This book, together with a history of homosexuality written in Chinese *Zhongguo tongxingai shilu* by Xiao Mingxiong (Hong Kong, 1984), may help to bring about a more accurate awareness among Chinese people that hatred of same-sex eroticism is a prejudice that is alien to their cultural heritage.

One factor in the traditional social acceptance of homosexuality that is common both to China and Japan is Buddhism, which is much more tolerant of sexual variance than Western religions. Male Buddhist monks, who were strictly forbidden even to touch a woman, commonly had sex with their male novices. In fact, Japanese oral traditions contended that homosexuality was first popularized in Japan by Chinese Buddhist missionaries. The history of Japanese homosexuality thus is tied to China, as explained in *The Love of the Samurai: A Thousand Years of Japanese Homosexuality* by Tsuneo Watanabe and Jun’ichi Iwata and translated by D.R. Roberts. The earliest Christian missionaries in Japan reported in horror the widespread social acceptance of male-male sex, especially among Buddhist monks. Demographic factors played a role in this acceptance. Unlike Europe, whose population had been reduced by numerous plagues, witch hunts, wars, and massacres of dissenters, and which encouraged procreation in order to produce soldiers and settlers for its expanding colonial empires, pre-1868 Japan was a non-expansionist island with limited space. As population numbers reached an optimal point for the land available, there was pressure to reduce population growth. Abortion, infanticide, and non-reproductive forms of sexual expression were demographically useful means of keeping the population stable.

By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Japan entered a long period of civil conflicts among samurai warriors. Each samurai took a pubescent boy as a page and assistant, and many of these *wakashu* youths became the lovers of their adult samurai sponsor. Since the

samurai trained his *wakashu* to become a samurai (by about age twenty-three), this homosexual relationship also fulfilled an educative function similar to the teacher-student Buddhist tradition. Under the shoguns new art forms emerged which celebrated male beauty. Kabuki became popular when young men performed while dressed as women. Many of these male actors also cross-dressed in daily life, and took men as lovers. Kabuki grew to represent traditional Japanese culture in the full flower of its civilization.

As male love became more popular among the shoguns and the nobles, it became more common in all classes. The authors conclude that seventeenth-eighteenth century Japan was a "Golden Age of homosexuality" (p. 88). Japan thus deserves to be ranked, along with the cultures of ancient Greece and the American Indians, as one of the world's most important examples showing how a society can incorporate homosexuality into the core of its social organization. As more research is being done, and more examples of such societies are being uncovered, it is not homosexuality that is abnormal, but homophobic prejudices.

This social acceptance changed in Japan after 1868, when the Meiji restoration government embarked upon a strict course of Westernization. Influenced by Christian missionaries and progressive intellectuals, the Meiji government began repressing Buddhism, and also passed a law against sodomy. However, Watanabe argues that capitalism, rather than Christianity per se, exerted the biggest influence against homosexuality. As industrialization revolutionized Japan, and made a need for more population to provide a growing labor force, prejudice emerged against non-reproductive sexuality. Once Japan embarked on an expansionist military policy after 1900, even more people were needed to man the armies and navies, and to staff large bureaucracies. Japan rejected its sexual heritage in favor of pro-procreative and anti-homosexual policies imported from the West. The requirements of being a good citizen in an expansionist state meant the necessity of producing more children to add to the growing work force.

Watanabe offers an interesting argument that men in modern societies have given up "the right to be feminine." In contrast to pre-modern Japan, where males wore makeup and dressed androgynously, twentieth century Japanese men have adopted the Western view that only women are supposed to exhibit beauty. Watanabe sees an unconscious desire of many men to break out of this increasingly restricted masculine role, which explains the

anxiety that “normal” men have about transvestites and gays. Watanabe concludes that homophobia arises from a detest of the notion that a man would offer himself “as a beauty. . . as a passive object of desire” (p. 131). Yet, the impact of gay liberationist ideology is beginning to challenge this. By making androgyny more socially acceptable, he suggests, gay liberation can help all men in reconnecting with their full human potential. Just as lesbians have greatly aided all women through their activist contributions to the feminist movement, “male homosexuality, too, will be an essential catalyst in the development of all men” (p. 135).

In contrast to the historical approach of the previous books, Serena Nanda’s book *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India* is an ethnography of contemporary *hijras*, or androgynous males who occupy an alternative gender role, distinct from either men or women. She draws comparisons with the Two-Spirit American Indians, the *xanith* of Oman, and the *mahu* in Tahiti. In contrast, she points out, the transsexual role in Western culture is not accepted as a fully recognized gender. This non-acceptance, she argues, is due to a lack of religious sanction and an “unyielding Western commitment to a dichotomous gender system” (p. 137), which expects all “normal” persons to conform to one of only two gender roles. Western ideology, uncomfortable with ambiguity, strives to resolve in-between categories.

Hindu ideology not only accommodates the reality of ambiguity and diversity among different personality types, but also conceptualizes androgynous persons as special sacred beings. Hindu mythology makes frequent reference to combined man/woman beings. The cognition of *hijras* as religious figures, as neither men nor women, provides them with social respect and an institutional character. They are seen as representatives of the Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mata, which gives them ritual power.

Hijras were androgynous in character from early childhood and voluntarily joined a *hijra* community during their adolescence. Most of them are sexually active with men, being the insertee in anal intercourse. Some gain their livelihood through prostituting themselves to masculine males, while others marry a man and live together as husband and wife. Indian society traditionally did not see such pairings as “homosexual,” since *hijras* were not considered to be the same gender as their masculine partners. But neither are they seen as “women,” because even though they may engage in women’s occupations, they do not menstruate and cannot give birth. They are thus not-men/not-women.

Due to the Western condemnation of gender variance and homosexuality, the status of *hijras* in modern Indian society has declined. Among Westernized Indians, *hijras'* presence at ceremonials is only barely tolerated. *Hijras'* temples are not given adequate financial support, and many *hijras* suffer employment discrimination. As a result, prostitution is often the only occupation open to them. Nanda's study unfortunately does not address the impact of the spread of the AIDS epidemic. Recent reports indicate that AIDS infection is quite prevalent among both male and female prostitutes in India. The fact that vaginal or anal intercourse is now considered the only proper form of sexual interaction in India is unfortunate, especially considering the popularity of oral sex, *interfemoral* sex, and other less dangerous forms of erotic interaction in pre-colonial Asia. For many, the imposition of Western notions of "normal" sexuality will literally lead to death.

Nanda concludes that alternative gender roles are socially accepted when the religious ideology of that culture offers (1) a specific explanation for such difference, (2) formalized traditions in ritual, (3) a recognition that there are many different paths to personal fulfillment, enlightenment or salvation, and (4) the idea that gender-variant persons cannot resist following their own true nature, and are fated to be the way they are. It is not enough for a religion to be "tolerant" of gender diversity and sexual variation; it must also provide specific recognition for such diversity.

The last book under review here is *Male Homosexuality in Thailand: An Interpretation of Contemporary Thai Sources* by Peter A. Jackson. What is most notable about Thailand is that it has not incorporated much Western anti-gay prejudices. Partly this is because of the continuing strength of Buddhism as the national religion. There are no laws against homosexuality, and the Thai government has not considered it to be an area of political concern to try to repress people's private sexual behavior. Homosexuals seldom experience job discrimination, police harassment, anti-gay violence or any of the manifold evidences of homophobia that are common occurrences in Western nations. Many foreigners, especially tourists who have enjoyed Bangkok's uninhibited gay sex scenes, have looked at Thailand as something of a gay paradise. Both intergenerational man-boy relationships and gender-mixing traditions exist within Thai culture. Thai language has terms for sexual acts between two males, and between two females, yet it does not have an all-encompassing term for "homosexual" as a category of person. Thais do not set off those males who have sex

with another male as any different from most males. As long as he conforms to the heterosexual norm enough to get married and have children, a man may participate in sex with males to his heart's content, without being socially defined as deviant. Thais see sex, at least for males, as a means of releasing a bodily need, and of achieving pleasure. It is not so bound up with the idea of romantic love. Marriage is done more as an economic arrangement, and for the purpose of producing children, than for love or companionship.

Since heterosexual marriage in Thailand is mostly for having children, in order to have someone to provide for oneself in one's old age, perhaps gays should do likewise. Much of the social stigma against gays in Thailand is not based on any idea of sinfulness or sickness, but simply because they are outside the family structure and thus will be left alone and unprovided for in their old age. In many Asian nations without governmental welfare support systems for the infirm and aged, and without adequate economic resources for most individuals to dependably set aside enough money to support themselves in their old age, people survive by their reliance on kin. Asian gays can do this by providing economic and emotional support for siblings' children, and/or by adoption. Given the massive numbers of homeless children in many Asian countries, gays could thus fulfill an important beneficial economic role for their society.

Jackson explains the absence of homophobia in Thailand as being due to childrearing techniques (see especially pp. 149-51 and 167-69.) Starting from Freud's view that most children have a polymorphous sexuality, the fact that boys in traditional Thai families are given great freedom of action after age three, and that "having fun" is given high value in Thai culture, they therefore grow up without much sexual inhibition. While Thais will go to great lengths to keep their sexual activities secret from others, they do not seem to feel guilt for engaging in sex with a male. Jackson sees homophobia as a fearful reaction of a man to his own repressed homosexual feelings. Childhood absorption of anti-homosexual or gender-nonconformist attitudes leads Americans to view their homosexual feelings with alarm and disgust, whereas Thai men are more accepting of these inclinations without feeling guilty. If there is not much sexual repression in one's childhood, there will not be much homophobia.

Jackson also suggests that Thai people are so accepting of homosexual behavior because they have very strong traditional values that people should be able to "follow your own heart," (p. 108), that people should mind their own business, and should avoid

open confrontation. Because of the lack of homophobia as a public issue, whether in the form of "sex scandals" involving public figures or in the form of anti-gay laws, there has been no need for a politicized gay movement in Thailand. But even without a movement, an urban gay subculture has grown dramatically in Bangkok since the 1970s. Prompted first by the establishment of gay bars and hotels for tourists, and by an increasing number of jobs in urban businesses that pay enough money for an individual to survive on their own, larger numbers of homosexually-inclined young people migrated to the city. Today, the community publishes its own gay magazines and has a gay radio show. Openly gay young people, sporting the latest styles and parading themselves in the most fashionable shopping malls, have made gay rather chic.

All this has contributed to a greater public discourse on homosexuality. While this discourse has been moving in the direction of accepting gays, the increasing concern over AIDS reveals the possibility of an anti-gay backlash. But society's recognition that gays are taking leadership roles in AIDS education programs has in fact helped gay acceptance. As more respectable Thais come out to their families and live stable and openly gay lives, their social acceptance seems destined to improve.