

## ESSAY ON HONG, HOMOSEXUAL PRINCIPAL 2008

In 1987 and 1988 I was Fulbright Professor of American Studies at Gadjah Mada University, in Yogyakarta, Central Java. While teaching there, I became fascinated with the life histories of elderly Javanese people who had lived through the Dutch colonial era, the Japanese occupation in World War II, the reoccupation by the British and the Dutch, the Indonesian Revolution, the chaotic early years of independence, the turmoil of the Year of Living Dangerously, and the advancement of Indonesia since then. As I conducted my interviews I felt like I was listening to the story of an American who was born in the British colonial era, grew to adulthood during the American Revolution, fought in the Civil War and both World Wars, and during the course of one lifetime reached the modern era and the age of computers.

Since I have always enjoyed being around old people, and much of my research involves interviewing elderly people to get their long-range perspectives on life, I decided to write a book of biographies of people of Java. I eventually published a book in English and a book in Bahasa Indonesia (Williams 1991; Williams 1995).

### HOMOSEXUAL PRINCIPAL

One of the people whose interview I published in my book was Hong, a 72 year old man of Chinese descent, who was born in Java in 1914. When he was twelve years old, he told me, he realized he was sexually attracted to males when “a friend of mine, a Chinese man about twenty years old, opened his trousers and let me enjoy myself. I felt this was very nice. He appreciated it, and it was enjoyable for me, so I visited him often. One of my uncles, who was divorced from his wife, was attractive to me. I would visit him and cautiously began to touch his body. When he did not object I got bolder; though I was only fourteen I was quite assertive. But

later, he tried to have anal intercourse, and I did not like that, so I stopped visiting him. I wanted to be the active one” (Williams 1991:183).

As an adult Hong became a teacher, and eventually a respected headmaster of a school. He repressed himself for years, worried about his reputation. But eventually he started living more openly as a gay man. He bought a seven bedroom house, and took in boarders to help pay for it. One day after he retired he met a good-looking fifteen year old boy. He said: “We just started talking at the post office, and he asked if he could come visit me. We had sex sometimes and got along well and later he moved into my house. Then another one moved in as well. I felt a need to help these gay boys, so I let them live here for free.” Eventually he took in twelve boys. They each stayed with him until they were in their twenties, and moved out when they got a job and could go out on their own.

Hong has a strong sense of duty to help others, and he felt the need to do more for the boys he was having sex with: “After a while I became worried that I was only helping them in an immediate way, providing free room and board, so I decided to start paying for their schooling as well. This has been difficult sometimes to collect that much money, but it has been worth it.... They usually had some problem in their family background, so many of them are wild and undisciplined. I set firm rules for their benefit in learning. If they break a rule, I scold them and tell them I am very disappointed after all I’ve done for them. They know they can leave any time they want to if they don’t like it, but the discipline is good for them. Those who are older now, and off on their own, tell me that they recognize the rules were for their benefit. I make sure they say that to the young ones here. Some of them have very sad stories in their backgrounds” (ibid. 186-87).

He then related to me the story of Chang, an ethnic Chinese teenager whose mother threw him out of the house when she heard that he was gay. Chang found out about Hong and went to his house. Hong took him in and supported him. Later, after Chang finished high school he wanted to go to hairdressing school. Hong agreed to pay for the tuition even though, Hong said, “it was expensive. However, Chang was a good student, diligent in his work, and so sweet to me.... Now Chang is twenty-five years old, and he has a good job in one of Jakarta’s leading salons. He calls me regularly from Jakarta.... He always brings me a present on my birthday. He calls me Daddy. I don’t insist on that, but that is what he and the other boys want to call me. He and the others cut my hair, do little things for me, give me stylish clothes, and bring me gifts. Last year he and I went on a vacation to Bali together, and as I was getting ready to return home he gave me a large sum of money. I said, ‘What is this for?’ But he just smiled.”

When I was interviewing Hong he introduced me to Tono, one of the boys who had been living there since he was fifteen years old. Hong told me about Tono: “All the gays in the city know about my home, and if they find a homeless gay they send him to me. I never look for these boys; they always come to me. This boy was found wandering on the city square, dressed in rags. They fed him and found out that he had been kicked out of home by his stepfather.” Tono moved in, but later he took some money from Hong’s bedroom. “I cannot tolerate a thief, so I got mad and ordered him to leave. He left, but later I found out that he was suffering with no good place to live. His father had died, and his mother remarried. The stepfather was cruel and did not give money for her children. Tono was very ashamed of his stealing, so I let him come back after his mother begged me to let him come back. The mother badly wants to leave but has no money for a divorce, so she is forced to continue living with that beast of a man. The other kids went to a foster home, but Tono wanted to come back to me. So she begged me and I

let him. I realized that I acted too rashly because since he came back he has been great. Now I am sending him to hairdressing school” (ibid. 188).

Hong continued: “.... I wish I were rich so I could do more. If I have trouble with my finances, I pray to god and I always manage to get some money from the most unexpected places.... I want to try to build among them a sense of responsibility toward the younger ones coming along so they can help others as they themselves were helped. I hope that some of them will continue this tradition after I am gone. I try to imprint into my boys that there is no wrong in being gay, if they are living right and helping other people.... I advise them to study and work hard so as to get a good job and to be very careful with money so they can afford to live well. And then later, when they are mature, if they want a boy they can afford to help him financially also. I always advise them not to be afraid to help people, to help those in need, otherwise they will become very lonely men.... We gays do not automatically have a family to fall back on, so we have to work hard to create our own sense of family” (ibid 189).

A few weeks after my visit, Hong invited me to come back again. It was the birthday of one of his four teenage boyfriends who were living at his house at the time. The house was covered with brightly colored decorations. When I managed to get each of the boys alone, outside of Hong’s hearing, I asked if they had felt jealous of Hong’s attentions to the other boyfriends who were living there at the same time. None of the four expressed any resentment of the others. They told me that they always decided among themselves who would be the one to sleep with Hong on any particular night, and they made sure that one of them was available to snuggle up in bed with him. I asked if they minded having sex with such an old man, and they responded that they liked him because he was such a wonderful person. Hong and his boyfriends always ate their meals together as a family, but they were often joined by some of the boys’

friends. During all four visits that I made to his house, every time I went there it was alive with the animated conversations and laughter of adolescent boys.

Two months later I came back again, this time for Hong's 73<sup>rd</sup> birthday party. The house was packed with people of all ages: relatives, friends, Hong's former students and co-teachers, and about forty gay men. All twelve of Hong's boyfriends were there, and I was able to talk with several of them individually. Each one of them verified what Hong had told me. They told me how grateful they felt for the generosity and love that he had showed to them when they were in need. In addition, what really stood out to them about Hong is that he always got a kick out of life. It was obvious that these boys and young men felt intense feelings of love and respect for him.

From my own interactions with Hong I noticed that as we were talking, whenever a rambunctious teenager ran by, whooping and hollering, it was almost like Hong absorbed their energy. He smiled or chuckled, never letting their antics perturb him. I don't think I have ever met a happier old person. By going his own route in life, and constructing a lifestyle most suited to him rather than to social convention, Hong learned the lesson that by benefiting others he has also benefited himself most of all. He told me: "Helping others, especially the young, gives a reward later on—when, I never know, but I am sure there will be. I have my reward already, and the major reward for me is that I like my life and I like my home. I read my books, watch TV with the boys, advise them with their problems. My boys and my friends and my books are my companions. I don't mind being by myself when they go out, and I don't mind getting old" (ibid 190).