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**CONTESTING HETERONORMALITY:
RECASTING SAME-SEX DESIRE IN CHINA'S
PAST AND PRESENT**

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Recent studies of the globalization of gay and lesbian identities denote a universalizing perspective on same-sex practices. This universalizing perspective has been theorized by Stephen Murray as a neo-evolutionary process toward a universal, egalitarian, Western gayness (Murray 1992). Murray maps out an evolutionary model of homosexuality from unequal relations based on age (Ancient Greece), gender roles (modern Mesoamerica), class (early capitalism), to equal relations (Murray 1992). In Murray's evolutionary model, an increasingly strong gay and lesbian culture, identity, and politics have been diffused little by little throughout the Western World. Eventually, this model of the Western world will be the future trend that other countries and cultures will follow.

Dennis Altman (1996a, 1996b, 1997) also contends that the global trend is toward a transition from gender-based identities to the Western egalitarian sexual identities that are not rigidly tied to a particular gender identity. Altman argues that through the vehicle of global media, entertainment, and tourism, Euro-American experiences and notions of sexuality are becoming increasingly globalized and widespread and a "global queering" process takes place through the influence of Western concepts of sexual identity.

Such universalizing perspective generalizes that same-sex practices exhibit a unified meaning that is independent of culture. This emphasis on sexual acts as the determining factor to identify a

person as homosexual evinces a standpoint that eschews “the cultural contexts that gave rise to particular sexual practices” (Rubin, 2002, p. 80). Their focus on sex acts in the categorization of homosexuality fails to recognize the cultural meanings associated with sexual practices. In Herdt’s study (1994), Sambia boys go through the initiation ritual of ingesting the semen of older men for years to build their masculinity and mature into men. The same-sex acts do not warrant them a label of “homosexual” – a personal and social identity with a particular history within the Western cultural context, but must be understood in Sambia’s cultural context. The same-sex acts are cultural practices that are informed and constituted by gender ideologies of antagonism and cultural beliefs in the finiteness of men’s seminal essence and the role of its ingestion in boys’ maturation into men.

Through elucidating the historic continuities and changes of malleable and fluid sexual imaginations in China, this paper eschews the universalizing perspective of same-sex practices and argues that sexual practices and sexual meanings are shaped by the cultural and political contexts.

In this paper, I will chronicle changing meanings of homoerotic romance in the cultural history of same-sex desires in China. More specifically, I will discuss the ways in which same-sex desires were exhibited and received during the imperial period, Republican era, Maoist times, and the post socialist era. During the imperial period in China, same-sex desires were deemed normal and were enjoyed not only by many emperors, scholars and bureaucrats, but also by common people of all social classes. There was never a fixed or reified sexual identity linked to a certain sexual preference. Sexual fantasies during this vast historic time in China were fluid, diverse, and in constant flux. At the turn of the twentieth century, the onslaught of Western medical knowledge changed this cultural tradition and indoctrinated in society heteronormality and a pathologized and vilified vision of homosexuality. This inaugurated the repression of same-sex

attracted people during the Communist era. The post socialist era continued normalizing heterosexuality and disavowing China's past. This paper contends that recasting the past and linking the past to the present can enrich our understanding of the present and contest the current discourse of heteronormality.

Imperial China

The tradition of homoerotic relationships in China is as ancient as the history of Chinese culture (Van Gulik, 1961; Chou, 1971; Bullough, 1976; Ruan & Tsai, 1987; Ruan, 1991; Ruan, 1997; Hinsch, 1992). Indeed, the condemnation of homosexuality in Western Christian history did not exist in Chinese history. Homoerotic relationships were considered natural. They were common and widely accepted in Chinese society during the imperial period (Vitiello, 2011). To Westerners, this phenomenon constituted evidence of Oriental moral degeneracy (Hinsch, 1992: 4).

Classical Chinese medicine did not view the human body in binary terms as either male or female (Barlow 1994). As represented by the symbol of yin and yang, both female and male gender was contained in every individual to some degree. Hence representations of sex and gender were unfixed and indefinite (Wu, 2010; Mann, 2011). In her essay on gender boundaries and biological aberration in Chinese medical history (1988), Charlotte Furth discusses gender categories of "false males" and "false females" that denote their inability to conceive. Furth points out that a same-sex attracted male or female is not categorized as a kind of "false male" or "false female." Indeed, there was no category of "perversion" in Chinese medicine and medical literature, and as we shall see below, the Chinese tradition viewed homoerotic relationships in a positive light. There was no resonance with the Western concept of "unnatural" sexual acts, perversion, and psychologically deviant personality associated with same-sex acts.

It was important to note that in the classical Chinese language, there was no term to denote a person who engaged in same-sex acts. Equally, there was no identification of a particular sexual identity, sexual essence, or sexual orientation. There was a distinction between same-sex behavior and same-sex identity. Poetic metaphors such as “yu tao” (remainder of peach) and “duan xiu” (passion of cut sleeve), based on ancient same-sex love stories, were used to refer to same-sex actions, tendencies, and preferences rather than an innate sexual essence (Hinsch, 1992, p. 7). “Yu tao” (remainder of peach) depicted a story where Mizi Xia, the love of Duke Ling of Wei (534-493 B.C.), while strolling with the ruler in an orchard, bit into a peach and found it sweet. He stopped eating and gave the remaining half to the ruler to enjoy. “Passion of cut sleeve” recounted a story where Emperor Ai of Han (206 B.C. to A.D. 200) was sleeping with his favorite Dong Xian in the daytime and Dong Xian stretched out across his sleeve. When the emperor wanted to get up, he cut off his own sleeve in order not disturb the sound-asleep Dong Xian. With these two well-known stories, “yu tao” and “duan xiu” came to signify same-sex love. Another category describing same-sex love invoked specific social roles such as “favorites,” rather than sexual essence (Hinsch, 1992).¹

The Zhou dynasty (1122 to 256 B.C.) was the earliest period that recorded homoerotic relationships between emperors and their male favorites. The liberal social environment in early Zhou provided a catalyst for open expressions of same-sex affections (Hinsch, 1992). Men were free to admire other men and engage in homoerotic relationships. In addition, extramarital heterosexual relationships were also accepted.

In the Eastern Zhou, relationships between emperors and their favorites were the first discernible same-sex relationship discussed in China (Hinsch, 1992). The story about Mizi Xia was identified as the hallmark upon which the history of same-sex relationships

unfolded in China.ⁱⁱ In the Western Han (187-180 B.C.), ten of the eleven emperors either had at least one male favorite or had homoerotic relationships with palace eunuchs (Ruan, 1991). Folk songs, poetry, fictions, and art recounted stories of homoerotic relationships in the imperial court and among scholars and officials since the Han dynasty.ⁱⁱⁱ For instance, *History of Han Dynasty* recorded a story where a male favorite Deng Tung used his mouth to drain the liquid in the skin blisters on the Han emperor's body (Han Shu).^{iv} *The Book of Poetry* recorded homoerotic poems for a famous male beauty. *Spring-Autumn Annals* also revealed the jealousy of rival male beauties, homoerotic love in the royal court, favorites' fears to be replaced, and homoerotic seduction that was successfully used as a political and military weapon (Ruan, 1991). These latter two books were both required readings by Confucius.

By the late Ming, we have records that show that (1368-1644) homoerotic relationships have become more widespread as a popular vogue or fashion. With material prosperity, the literati heralded a libertine ideology of following the heart and pursuing homoerotic pleasures as one of the many vehicles to seek adventure and cultural refinement (Wu, 2004).

The late Ming "libertinism" gave rise to male homoerotic sentiments that epitomized the newfound sexual pleasure among men of every social class (Vitiello, 2000; Wu, 2004).^v Indeed, the late Ming period saw a "homoerotic fashion" that was cultivated, pursued, and followed throughout the society (Vitiello, 2000). The libertine period witnessed an emerging and subsequently flourishing literature on homoerotic themes as well as thriving pornographic materials (Vitiello, 2011). The liberal atmosphere in Ming society spawned the public's warm, receptive views of the proliferation of homoerotic literature. A review of the literature suggests that homoerotic relationships influenced society beyond a small circle of elite males, across all social classes (Vitiello, 2000).

Many literati were so swept away by the romantic images of homoerotic love that a vogue developed whereby elite men patronized boy-actors as male prostitutes (catamites) and household entertainers (Wu, 2004). While young men served elite males as entertainers, servants, and male prostitutes, elite men formed long-term romantic, companion relationships with them, which consolidated the elite men's status, power, and cultural taste. Most young catamites were owned by elite men as part of household music troupes (Wu, 2004).^{vi} Young boys became an indispensable spectacle at parties or gatherings in the houses of the elite men entertaining guests, emblematic of the hosts' wealth, prestige, status, and aesthetic taste (Wu, 2004). Scholars bragged about their enjoyment of catamites in their writings, as homoerotic expressions were not only popular, but also served as a center of public admiration, envy, and excitement (Wu, 2004).

In the Qing dynasty (1368-1911), homoerotic sentiments grew into a cultural, aesthetic taste, a status symbol, and "an extreme form of romantic idealism," especially in Beijing (Wu, 2004: 61). It received enormous social importance and remarkable celebrations in both literature and the social realm (Wu 2004: 25). For instance, homoerotic themes were elaborated in classic novels such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* (hong lou meng), *The golden lotus* (Jinping Mei), and *Mirror of Theatrical life* (Pinhus baojian). Historic records also recounted stories of the homoerotic relationships of Qing emperors Chien Lung (1736-1795), Hisen Fong (1851-1861), and Tung Chih (1862-1874) with their male subordinates (Chou, 1971).^{vii}

The flourishing same-sex erotic sentiment was a result of the prevailing social forces and sexual beliefs (2004: 5). The intensely patriarchal quality of the Qing Dynasty produced a flourishing same-sex sentiment. Homoerotic practices received "much more widespread acceptance" and enjoyed "a more central and stable role in cultural life" because homoerotic relationships took place in a larger social environment in the Qing dynasty where men held in

high esteem their relationships with other men (Wu, 2004: 26). Men interacted with each other in social circles, exchanging ideas and appreciation of art and cultural tastes. Such social relationships among men were a fundamental aspect of the social and cultural life in the Qing dynasty.

Same-sex erotic sentiments came to dominate the most influential realms in places such as Beijing not only because of the homo-social environment in the Qing Dynasty, but also because of the sexual beliefs (Wu, 2004). It was apparent that many men upheld a sexual ideal that was embodied by young, often feminine, male bodies. Appreciation of the beauty of young catamites abounded in the literature of the time. The following account is one such example. “Across tens of thousands of miles, through five thousand years of history, nothing and nobody is better than a catamite. Those who do not love a catamite should not be taken seriously. Elegant flowers, beautiful women, the shining moon, rare books, and grand paintings, all those supreme beauties are appreciated by everyone. However, these beauties often are not in one place. Catamites are different. They are like elegant flowers and not grass or trees; they are like beautiful women who do not need make-up; they are like a shining moon or tender cloud, yet they can be touched and played with; they are like rare books and grand paintings, and yet they can talk and converse; they are beautiful and playful and yet they also are full of change and surprise. The loss of a catamite cannot be compensated” (Ruan, 1991: 118).

It was the feminine, delicate appearance of a young boy that was most admired and appreciated by the literati (Wu 2004). The literati expressed their homoerotic sentiments toward the idolized, refined feminine beauty in a young boy and selected the most feminine boys as their favorites. They enjoyed the young boys’ loyalty, beauty, emotions, and also their abilities to perform art, write poetry, and paint. It was implied in some writings that a “male femininity” that was often considered superior to women began to supplant female femininity (Wu 2004).

The Qing dynasty witnessed the predominant kind of same-sex relationship between elite men (literati, officials, merchants) and boy-actors (dan) (Wu, 2004). Its prevalence and social influence was matched by no other forms of same-sex relationships. On stage, boy-actors (dan) played young female roles in traditional theatre such as Beijing opera. Offstage, they usually performed the role as catamites, tantamount to that of female courtesans. The vogue became an aesthetic expression and pursuit. Guidebooks flourished leading patrons to locate famous boy-actor beauties at the entertainment quarters and nightclubs.^{viii} For instance, a previous catalogue on female courtesans was replaced by male beauties exclusively.

In Beijing, obsession with a boy-actor was conceived as romantic, signifying a patron's social status, taste, and connoisseurship of male beauty (Wu, 2004). Obsession with a female prostitute was deemed a lack of taste. In the South, another type of male prostitution took place in a Taoist temple in Nanjing where the temple "Chao Than Gong" was famous for providing young monks to entertain elite men for a high fee (Ruan, 1991). That said, the taste for boy-actors and boy prostitutes did not prevail in the Yangtze delta region, where female courtesans dominated the entertainment quarters (Wu 2004).

Another common form of same-sex relationships throughout Chinese history was between affluent men and boy servants (Wu, 2004). Boy servants and boy-actors sometimes coalesced when affluent men purchased boy-actors from trainers and turned them into boy servants, or when boy servants were sold into the opera business. Although this kind of homoerotic romance was widespread in the Qing dynasty, it was often construed as a crass form of lust and a lack of cultural taste by the literati men (Wu, 2004).

Homoerotic romance between men who shared equal status and similar age was a marginal form. This kind of romance was present across class in late imperial China (Wu, 2004). For instance, in Fujian, male-to-male marriages, called “contract brothers” (qi xiongdi), were endorsed by their parents, relatives and friends (Wu 2004). The marriages last until the age of thirty, when they left their male partners and married female brides. However, this form of relationship was often perceived outside of Fujian as an aberration (Wu, 2004).

Homoerotic romance between equals was usually depicted as strange and incomprehensible. More particularly, relationships among lower-class men were frequently referenced in legal statutes. This suggested that legal actions tended to target homoerotic relationships among equals, but rarely aimed at relationships among different classes where sexual encroachments occurred (Wu, 2004). Although many legal cases did involve men of unequal age and status, legal documents evinced the belief that equal-status same-sex relationship was impossible as power hierarchy was at the core of the relationship between the penetrator and the penetrated (Wu, 2004; Sommer, 2002).

While some scholars (Ng, 1987; Geyer, 2002) assert that the Qing 1740 rape law suppressed same-sex behavior that was popular during the Ming dynasty, others (Wu, 2004; Wang, 1997) reaffirm that the law did not target the nature of same-sex practices, but non-consensual sexual practices between equals. As a hierarchical sexual relationship between two different classes was socially accepted, the 1740 rape law was mainly concerned with sexual violations or transgressions of a person’s will in either same-sex or heterosexual practices between equals (Wu, 2004). Indeed, in spite of this rape law and the ban on officials visiting male or female prostitutes, it was heterosexual eroticism that was under rigorous and strict moral scrutiny (Wu, 2004; Wang, 1997). More specifically, regulations of widow marriage and female chastity were at their height during this time. As a result, same-sex

practices were unlicensed, and continued to flourish and prevail during the Qing dynasty. Some even argue that the male courtesan culture supplanted and surrogated the suppressed female straight courtesan culture (Wang, 1997).

As long as same-sex relationships observed the order of social hierarchy, they were perceived in tandem with the Confucian moral system. It was passion or love in both heterosexual and homoerotic relationships that was construed threatening and transgressive to social hierarchy and social order (Vitiello, 2001). Same-sex relationships were usually structured along gender, age, and status (Hinsch, 1992; Wu, 2004). More specifically, gender, age, and status determined dominant and submissive roles in the hierarchical homoerotic relationships. As we have seen, younger men's age and poor economic status made them take on feminine roles and relegated them to the inferior female role. It also cemented their passive, penetrated sexual roles and made them yield to the grown, elite men who took on active, penetrating sexual roles as a result of their greater wealth, older age, or higher education.

Sexuality was believed to be malleable, and variegated sexual behaviors were accepted as long as family responsibilities were fulfilled. The vast majority of the elite men in the homoerotic relationships was married, completed family responsibilities, and played the penetrating role in the same-sex liaisons. Indeed, Chinese records showed that both heterosexual and homoerotic relationships were equally practiced in society. As we have seen in this section, homoerotic romance not only evinced elite male power and status, but also expressed elite men's aesthetic cultural taste, economic status, and political roles (Wu, 2004).

Republican China (1912-1949)

The national crisis and the determination to modernize China prompted intellectuals to translate and introduce Western

knowledge into China, including Western concepts of homosexuality (Pan, 1946).^{ix} The direct translation of the term “homosexuality” – tongxinglian, emerged in the Chinese language in the 1930s. The Western pathologized view of homosexuality came into China with the translation and spawned a reconfigured interpretation of homoerotic relationships as immoral, deviant, decadent, and ultimately, the cause of a weak nation. This Western view of homosexuality has become the dominant medical discourse about homosexuality in China and continues to shape the current era’s cultural understanding of homosexuality.

At the turn of the twentieth century, what was once an emblem of aesthetic culture and social status was turned into a reprehensible and disgraceful practice that was blamed as one of many causes of a weak nation. Upon the Western intrusion into China, a national crisis resulted in the May Fourth movement, Self-Strengthening movement, and New Culture movement that offered a scathing cultural critique in order to build a modern, strong nation. This cultural critique targeted the debilitating Chinese tradition and attacked male homoeroticism as an epitome of the fundamental flaws of the Chinese culture.

Gender was deployed as an allegory for the nation and Chinese men were attacked as weak and sick, leading to a sick nation. Due to the weak national government and colonizing countries’ treatment of the Chinese as second-class citizens, intellectuals were worried about the survival of the nation and critiqued Chinese men as feminine. Chen Duxiu, for instance, described Chinese men in the following way:

“They lack the strength to tie up a chicken in their hand, and they do not have the courage to be a man in their mind. Their faces are pale, and their bodies are as delicate as women’s. As fragile as sick men, they can endure neither heat nor cold. How could a national group with such a weak body and mind shoulder a heavy burden?” (Kang, 2009: 5).

Chinese intellectuals aspired to emulate what was conceived as the Western modern concept of gender identity, and deployed heterosexual masculinity as a means to empower and strengthen the nation. The critique of Chinese men was intended to be analogous to a critique of the nation and the culture as a whole. Constructions of gender and sexuality were inextricably connected to the construction of a nation. Men, according to them, should represent the strength, domination, and civilization of a nation. Men in homoerotic relationships were relegated to the status of women, weak and feeble. In order to build a strong nation, intellectuals intended to turn the female-role actors from emasculated victims to heterosexual men in order to reclaim their masculinity.

As part of this reconstruction of gender and sexuality to build a strong nation, sexual desires were also strictly regulated (Dikotter, 1995). Individuals were called upon to discipline their sexual desires. Prostitution and pornography were denounced and attacked, along with sexual practices such as premarital and extramarital sex, masturbation, and same-sex practices.

What was once glorified as a romantic relationship between actors and patrons was condemned at this time as a form of exploitation. The critique of homoerotic behaviors was part of Chinese intellectuals' critique of the decadent Chinese tradition. Ba Jin and Lao She's stories about boy-actors depicted sexual and economic exploitations in the opera theaters, rather than romance and love. Indeed, since 1912, many actors staged protests against the master-servant system for its forced prostitution, and the catamite houses were abolished around this time (Kang, 2009). To correct the perceived flaws of the Chinese opera, new roles for older male (lao sheng) and female performers were on the rise during this time (Goldstein, 2007; Jiang, 2009).

From a symbol of status and taste for elite men to a symbol of a weak nation, sexual practices and sexual meanings took on different political and cultural meanings at this time, revealing that

they were shaped and produced by the cultural and political context instead of by biology. During the first half of the twentieth century, the colonizing threat and national crisis led Chinese intellectuals to modernize China with imported Western knowledge. Men in homoerotic relationships were highly vilified and stigmatized as sick, weak, and destructive to the nation's survival.

Maoist Period (1949-1977)

The Maoist era enforced a heterosexual, marital, and reproductive sex model wherein sex was only legitimate for reproductive purposes within marriage (see Zheng, 2009a & 2009b, Honig, 2003, Evans, 1997). Family was emphasized as the basic cell of society, and marriage was highlighted as a social cause and a social responsibility in order to produce children for the communist state. Those who did not marry, did not have children, or divorced were condemned as socially irresponsible and harmful to the socialist state.

Sex for reasons other than reproduction was deemed deviant and abominable, and needed to be policed and regulated. These forms of sex included premarital sex, extramarital sex, prostitution, and same-sex acts. Sexual desires were demonized and criticized as lowly, corrupt, decadent, and incompatible with the state, as sex was believed to weaken, sap, and debilitate people's energy that should be devoted to the state. Sexual desires, according to the Maoist state, should be sublimated to construct socialism and contribute to the state. Self-restraint and self-discipline were emphasized as imperative in marital sex to produce the next generation for society.

Regulations of the "corrupt" forms of sex such as same-sex acts relied on arbitrary administrative punishment. During the Maoist period, administrative and disciplinary sanctions were a vehicle of social control. The Chinese Communist Party replaced the Qing

criminal code with a system of administrative and Party sanctions, which was later overhauled by a new system of criminal laws during the economic reform period (1978 to present). Forced sodomy and sodomy with a minor continued to be handled as a crime (Li, 2006).

In the absence of laws against consensual same-sex acts, same-sex acts were subject to a wide array of administrative and disciplinary sanctions under the charge of “hooliganism” (Li, 2006). Hooliganism was a general term that was intended to encompass myriad forms of offenses, which was often invoked to punish same-sex attracted individuals. It was reported that many men were charged with the crime of hooliganism during the Maoist era (Li, 2006). However, at times, a hospital certificate of a diagnosis of same-sex love illness could potentially lift the criminal charge (Li, 2006).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), same-sex attracted people were classified as “bad elements” under the “five black categories,” with landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, and rightists (Geyer, 2002). Individuals, upon discovery of their same-sex acts, received harsh criticisms, interrogation, and penalties (Li, 2006). Some were beaten to death, and others were driven to commit suicide (Li, 2006). While administrative punishments included harassing, detaining, persecuting, and reforming individuals through education or labor, disciplinary sanctions often meant withholding wages and suspending Party membership (Li, 2006).

Due to the stringent control and regulation of same-sex acts, same-sex attracted people usually dreaded public exposure and arbitrary penalty. They chose to conceal their sexual identity and marry opposite sex partners to fulfill their family obligations.

Post-Socialist Era (1978 – present)

The Maoist era's model of sex for reproduction was superseded by a post-socialist model of sex for pleasure within marriage. The post-socialist era recognizes the importance of sexual pleasure **within** marriage as it maintains marital harmony and thwarts extramarital affairs (Sigley 2001). One of the unintended consequences of the one-child policy implemented in 1980 was to acknowledge sexual pleasure between married couples after the birth of one child (Pan, 2006; Zhang, 2011). This new sexual morality is emphasized to ensure a harmonious conjugal family as it is critical to secure social stability and state control (Sigley, 2001; Zheng, 2009b).

The reconfigured sexual meanings and the state's loosening control spawned a proliferation of self-identified gay men gathering at parks, street corners, bathhouses, bars, and toilets. It was reported that such meetings started as early as 1978 and 1979 at certain places such as Xidan Park in Beijing (Geyer, 2002). In 1992, a Men's World Salon targeting same-sex related topics also emerged in Beijing, but was short-lived and closed by the police (Geyer, 2002).

Under the pressure to marry and produce progeny, over 90 percent of same-sex attracted people in China chose to marry opposite sex partners and form heterosexual families with children (Liu & Lu, 2005; Xuan, 2010). Young people were usually able to engage in same-sex relationships as the market economy provided them with an opportunity to delay marriages until their late twenties and mid thirties. However, these relationships would be difficult to sustain as both parties were aware that one of them would eventually forsake the other to marry an opposite sex partner and bear a child. A novel that reflected the author's lived experience (Mu, 2011) depicted a story where two young men were passionately in love with each other, but their six years' loving relationship was forced to end when their parents coerced them into marriage. Broken

hearted, one of them committed suicide, and the other one followed a year later (Mu, 2011). The secret nature of same-sex relationships that continued outside of a heterosexual marriage usually made it vulnerable and short-lived.

Despite the market reform and rule of law, the Chinese police continued to apprehend, interrogate, and detain people for engaging in same-sex acts (Li, 2006). Crackdown campaigns targeted same sex behaviors and centered on places where same-sex attracted people tended to congregate such as public parks and toilets (Li, 2006). Stories circulated among same-sex attracted people about police brutality, including virulent beating, humiliation, threats of public exposure, and deliberate intimidation. A 1996 film “East Palace, West Palace” (Zhang, 1996) vividly captured police harassment and brutality toward same-sex attracted men who congregated in public toilets. Indeed, the lack of laws and regulations relating to same-sex acts continued to result in arbitrary administrative penalties (Li, 2006).

Scholarly works about homosexuality started emerging during the 1980s and 1990s, but the major concern of many books was to cure and treat homosexuality. For instance, Chinese sexologist and sociologist Liu Dalin and his collaborator published a book in 2005 titled “A Study of Chinese Homosexuals,” which had an entire chapter devoted to the prevention and cure of homosexuality (Liu & Lu, 2005). The chapter dealt with the social causes of homosexuality, the different categories about homosexuality, and prevention and cure of homosexuality. Another sociologist Fang Gang (1995) published his study on homosexuality in China in 1995, which discussed how he posed as a physician and persuaded same-sex attracted men to accept his antidote for homosexuality, in his attempt to procure information from them.

On the one hand, these works broke the taboo on discussing this topic and made the public aware that same-sex attraction existed in Chinese society. On the other hand, they were detrimental in

ascribing attributes of illness and deviance to same-sex attracted people (see also Geyer, 2002).

Indeed, the police, state, popular media, and many academic works continued to pathologize same-sex attracted people and regulate same-sex acts. As Li Yinhe points out, “The continued use of administrative sanctions denies homosexuals equality before the law, including the right to equal employment and opportunities for promotion” (Li, 2006, p. 94). In the current era, same-sex attracted people still struggle to masquerade their sexual identity for fear of social, cultural, and administrative consequences.

Conclusion

Through a critical analysis of the cultural history of homoerotic romance in China, this paper not only refutes and discredits post-socialist naturalization of heteronormality, but also reveals the plasticity and contingency of sexual meanings and sexual practices that are determined and defined by the cultural and political context.

As shown in this paper, prior to Western intrusion, same-sex attracted people in China were not categorized by their sexual essence, but by their particular social roles. Homoerotic romance was an integral part of society and spanned across classes from imperial emperors and government officials to working-class laborers. It was not only widely accepted, but also respected and admired as a cultural capital, indicative of a person’s social status, artistic creation, and economic class.

Homoerotic romance was by no means construed as antithetical to Confucian family ethics. Rather, it was considered adhering to Confucian family ethics, as it did not conflict with heterosexual marriage and child rearing responsibilities. As we have seen, men who were involved in homoerotic romance had already fulfilled their family obligations by marrying wives and producing

progenies. Marriage was envisioned as a social structure with its specific social functions to infuse two lineage groups and consolidate status and class. The social functions of marriage determined that marriage was devoid of romance and love, which could be pursued and obtained outside of marriage. Social ethics did not see any conflict between intra-marital responsibilities and extramarital pleasures from homoerotic romance. Indeed, as long as marriage continued to be viewed as a vehicle to fulfill social functions rather than individual happiness, a convergence of heterosexual marriage and extramarital homoerotic romance would persist.

The onslaught of Western ideas at the turn of the twentieth century overturned the fluid and indeterminate representation of sex and gender in classical Chinese medicine. Sexuality was never central to the notion of gender prior to this time. It was the family structure and social roles that gender was anchored upon. During this time, gender differences, for the first time in history, were defined in biological terms. The biological and unitary category of women - *nuxing* (female sex) was created during the May Fourth Movement in 1919. For the first time in Chinese history, there was a word meaning biological woman (Barlow, 1994). This creation not only facilitated the nationalists' attack on the Confucian family, but also opened a new space to discuss gender and sexuality.^x

Acceptance of Western concepts ended the Chinese cultural context that brewed the acceptance and admiration of homoerotic romance. Chinese intellectuals imported and accepted a scientific discourse of biological determinism that pathologized and demonized non-reproductive sexuality, including same-sex acts. The category of "homosexuality" was created during this time, and homosexuality was vilified and demonized as detrimental to health and the social order. New concepts of "normal" sex deemed homosexuality a deviance, and therefore a crime, and blamed it as the very source of a weak nation in crisis.

This transition from a family-based gender difference to an essentialized, naturalized view of sexual difference with a biological basis (Foucault 1978)^{xi} led to virulent regulations, surveillance, and even punishment of same-sex acts by the state, especially by the Maoist state. The Maoist state's concerns with sexual pleasures prompted the state to "penetrate private bodies" "in an increasingly detailed way" (Foucault 1978, p. 106-7).

The Maoist era restricted sex to reproduction and deemed procreation beneficial for society and state building. Sexual pleasure was castigated as a feature of the decadent and degenerate capitalist lifestyle. The state was intent on policing, disciplining, and penalizing same-sex acts and other non-procreative sexual activities that were perceived as criminal and deviant.

This historical account of same-sex relationships in China's past and present should help contest the naturalization of heteronormality and ascertain the fact that sexual practices and sexual meanings are products of the cultural and political context in which they find expressions.

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Notes

ⁱ Nanfeng (male-mode or male-love) was another most common expression to depict homoerotic relationships.

ⁱⁱ Favorites were often targeted as threatening the political order by profiteering from the emperor's love (Hinsch, 1992).

ⁱⁱⁱ It was recounted that in the Northern Dynasties (386-535 A.D.), a famous scholar Chen Chien, due to his large penis, caused the intercourse to be very painful for his sexual partner - the sixteen-year-old boy Zi Gao (Ruan, 1991). To endure the pain, Zi Gao bit on the bed covers so hard that he destroyed the covers. When asked if he was hurt, Zi Gao responded, "My body is yours. I am loved by your love; even death is worthy."

^{iv} In the story, Wen Di was extremely generous toward his male favorite Deng Tung, who became the richest man of his time. Deng Tong displayed his loyalty toward Wen Di by using his mouth to dry out Wen Di's skin blister. Wen Di dressed down his son for his son's refusal to do it. After his son took over the reign, he retaliated against Deng Tung, who died of starvation.

^v The literati displayed far more interests in homoerotic pleasure than the other social classes (Wu 2004). Throughout Chinese history, it was the literati that exerted an influential impact on the trends of cultural fashion.

^{vi} During late Ming, the life path of young boy-actors and catamites was usually a pitiful one. These young boys were feminized and treated as sexual objects for the enjoyment and fantasies of the elite men (Wu 2004). As the dominating man in the homoerotic relationships enjoyed prestige and higher social status, the dominated one, like women, was relegated to a lower status and social stigma (Sommer 2002). Unlike women who could be taken as concubines, catamites faced rejection as they aged. While a few managed to purchase an official position, the majority during late Ming were abandoned. Stories depicted them as beggars who usually died young (Wu 2004).

^{vii} Chou (1971) showed that the male lover Ho Shen of Emperor Chien Lung was rewarded with the role of prime minister.

^{viii} These guidebooks were called in Chinese “hua pu” (flower book), with the connotation of “prostitute book.” They appeared during the Ming dynasty, became extremely popular during the Qianlong (1735-1796) period, and last throughout the end of the nineteenth century (Wu 2004).

^{ix} Translated Western authors included Magnus Hirschfeld, Havelock Ellis, Iwan Blbch, Richard von Kraffi-Ebing, Sigmund Freud, and Edward Carpenter (Kang 2009). Through citations and translations, the medical framework of normality vs. deviation in Ellis’s theory became the hegemonic view in China since the 1920s (Sang 2003; Kang 2009).

^x Lydia Liu demonstrates that the creation of the feminine third-person pronoun “ta” opened a new space to discuss gender power relationships.

^{xi} Foucault (1978) theorized a transformation from an “alliance” - “a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions” to sexuality that was based on biological difference.