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**HIS 211-001 Gender in Modern China**

**Topic: The change in Chinese perception of homosexuality in China from the traditional contexts of imperial China, the Republic of China, to the modern day the People’s Republic of China.**

**I/ Introduction**

* Homosexuality has become an increasingly popular topic within the contemporary society, including China.
* China has a history of controversy with the topic of gender and sexuality. Homosexuality, in particular, has more or less received a varying treatment and perception over course of history of the country, and . It spans from the imperial periods well up until the modern day. Within each major periods, namely imperial China, the 1900s, or the contemporary society, the subject of same-sex relations seems to have a different connotation attached to it due to a variety of factors.

**II/ Body**

**1. The presence of Chinese homosexuality within imperial Chinese literature and history.**

**Westernization has not necessarily impacted China’s traditional notions of same-sex relationships to a great degree since homosexuality has already been present in Chinese literature for a much longer time. The theme has had its root deeply ingrained in history.**

* One day Mi accompanied the Duke wandering in an orchard. Mi ate half of a peach and found it delicious. He then gave the rest to the Duke, who took it as a demonstration of Mi's deep love for him. The Duke claimed with joy: "You forget your own appetite and think only of giving me good things to eat!" (233 B.C.) (Dong 2)
* One day they took a nap together. The emperor woke up first and found one of his sleeves was underneath Dong, who was still fast asleep. Not willing to disturb Dong, the emperor instead cut his sleeve off when he got up (32-92 A.D.) (Dong 2)
* "duan xiu" (cutting one's sleeve) and "fen tao" (sharing a peach) were used with particular reference in the Chinese language to a gay relationship (Dong 2)
* Remarkably, a calm and dispassionate attitude to the homosexual phenomenon was always prevalent in ancient China. There was neither eulogy, nor criticism. It seemed to do no harm in maintaining traditional family ethics. (History of Homosexuality)
* Specifically, the legislature of China before the Qing dynasty recognized that homosexuality is a norm within the society at that time since it did not infringe upon their social obligations such as marriage and procreation. (Sommer 143)
* “The reason for this tolerance of male same-sex relations may be that cultural expectations of male sexuality were concerned with conformity to power hierarchies.” (Kong 497) → Conformity with social obligations and avoidance of excess such as masturbation or prostitution.
* Female same-sex intimacy remained separate from the male homosexual tradition and was generally seen as negligible and insignificant in the patriarchal familial organization (but celebrated in erotic literature) in ancient China

→ These accounts serve to suggest that throughout almost all of the Imperial China periods, homosexuality was an integral component within the Chinese culture to the point where it was fantasized and novelized within the literature and official documents. The terminologies originated within during these times were lacking in negative connotations. They were mostly associated with the degree of intimacy of the actors engaging in homosexual relationships more than anything rather than the social outright condemnation of the subject in question. And since society at the time did not find any fault with it, the public opinion of the time could be perceived as indifferent and unbiased towards the notion.

**The periods of peace for homosexuals did not last until the Qing dynasty. With the Qing dynasty came one of the most notable signs of incrimination on homosexuals.**

* The emphasis on the image of the penetrated male surfaced around the time of the Qing dynasty, however, sparked a change in the legislature of the government. Particularly, laws against homosexuals were being established in an attempt to protect the perception of masculinity (Sommer 142). The targets of this specific action were the commoner males, or liang men, who were allegedly barred from entering the line of prostitution or cross-dressing, thus making them pariah men. It was also a means of regulating homosexual crime between males.
* With the advent of the Republican China, Western modernity and ideas were increasingly preferred and imported by Chinese intellectuals in an attempt to reject tradition knowledge such as Confucianism. The aggression towards homosexuality was engendered by their endeavors to understand Western medical and sexological books. It was slowly being discussed as a form of medical disease and a social problem. (Kong 498)

→ The Manchu who established the Qing dynasty viewed homosexual men to be a degrading and vulnerable depiction of manhood and masculinity, thus incriminating male homosexuals by creating laws and regulations against them. The following decades did not help the queer community in the slightest with the import of Western knowledge. During these times, as the Republic of China was in its infancy, queerness inevitably reemerges in the minds of the Chinese elites to be a disease and a social problem.

**2. The period of the Republic of China until the mid-1990s**

**The problem still remains despite the presence of Chinese homosexual theme within its literary history. The Chinese society still would not overtly discuss homosexuality as a subject, but rather attribute it to the external westernization and regard it as a pathogen from the western world which should be wrapped in secrecy. The topic of homosexuality began to attract legal persecutions after the 18th century and became severely discriminated against up to the Cultural Revolution**

* During the cultural revolution (1966 - 76), homosexuals faced their worst period of persecution in Chinese history. The government considered homosexuality to be a social disgrace or a form of mental illness. (History of Homosexuality)
* Moreover, that the laws are silent on homosexuality does not necessarily mean that homosexuals are left alone. (Ruskola 2561)
* With the establishment of the Marriage Law in 1950, monogamous heterosexual marriage became the staple upon which the PRC government controlled the people’s social sexual life. (Kong 499)
* “Didn't everyone know there was no homosexuality in Chinese culture? If there was any truth at all to this film set in New York, it was that it represented the corruption of Chinese manhood by Western decadence… Is it really a contagious "disease" transmitted from the "decadent Western culture" to diaspora Asians?” (Dong 2)
* Not only is homosexuality a forbidden topic in most Asian communities, but also more significantly, there is no need to talk about "it" because "it is only a problem for white people: 'it' is a white disease" (Dong 2)

→ Ever since the beginning of westernization occurring during the late Qing dynasty, many foreign values were imported and installed within the Chinese mindset, including the hostility towards same-sex relationships. There was also a tendency of denial among the Chinese by announcing that homosexuality was not of Chinese origin, but rather a product of Westernization. The 1950 Marriage introduced another restriction upon the Chinese sexuality by inhibiting other sexual activities aside from monogamy and heterosexuality.

* **The movie “Farewell My Concubine” (Chen Kaige - 1993) illustrates the point that homosexuality is not considered as an openly discussed topic. It began within the period around 1924 in which the country was still regarded as the Republic of China, and spanned well over 50 years of Chinese history into the era the People’s Republic of China where the Communist Party had been the central political figure to guide the country.**
* To some degree, Farewell My Concubine is two films at once: "an epic spanning a half-century of modern Chinese history, and a melodrama about life backstage at the famed Peking Opera". (Dong 3)
* In Farewell My Concubine, the protagonist Cheng Dieyi never really comes out throughout the decades when China experienced a series of political events and ends his life as well as the film narrative with a testimonial suicide for his homosexual love and his queer identity. (Dong 7)
* When Xiao Douzi finally recites his line correctly -- "I am by nature a girl, not a boy" -- while dressed in a female role (for the first time in the film), his transformation from a biological man to a cultural woman takes place on two levels: in opera performance and in real life. (Dong 4)
* "symbolic castration, corporal punishment, and costuming" (Dong 4)
  + symbolic castration → the cutting of the sixth finger by Cheng's mother at an early age as a form of introduction into the life of the feminine role of Concubine Yu.
  + corporal punishment → “ the process of adopting a female identity is linked with a long-term torment filled with violence” (Dong 4)
  + costuming → donning the costume of Concubine Yu completes the transformation from “biological” masculinity to “cultural” femininity. (Dong 4)
* To date, the homosexual and homosocial relationships represented in this film have not been given enough attention in scholarly discussion, perhaps because if one were to weigh the narrative of the film as a whole, homosexual relationships are not portrayed explicitly” (Dong 4)

→ Over the course of the movie, with the background of the period from the 1920s to 1970s, the struggles and discriminatory actions against Dieyi’s homosexual orientation was nothing short of severe. From physical pain, to psychological abuse that the character suffered from being a homosexual, the period that Dieyi existed in has almost no tolerance for same-sex relationships. Homosexuality was not considered an open discussion, but rather an must-kept secret even within the context of the movie itself.

* **The movie “East Palace, West Palace” (Zhang Yuan - 1996) exemplifies the Chinese sentiments on the subject of homosexuality being a form of non-disclosure and even criminalization.**
* The timeline for the main plot is one night when Xiao Shi captures and then detains Ah Lan, a freelance writer for a "homosexual crime" in a police station (Dong 5)
* The unexpected development of the plot is that Xiao Shi changes his attitude toward homosexuals through his discovery that he himself is gay. (Dong 5)
* Before homosexuality was decriminalized in the PRC in 1997, homosexuals in  
  China could be arrested and charged for “hooliganism.” (Zhao 37)
* The emergence of queerness in late twentieth century China was evidence for the fact that Chinese liberals had taken the initiative to make the general public aware of homosexuality. (Zhao 28)
* “The gay and lesbian community was largely invisible to the general public” (Zhao 31)
* The idea of freedom of expression was increasingly popular in the minds of Chinese filmmakers due to the interaction with the Western world. In this particular case, the movie Lan Yu could be considered as a bold move by director Zhang Yuan to represent queerness in its entirety, one inspired by the concept of Western liberalism. (Zhao 50)
* In their imagination of the foreign Western world, Chinese filmmakers during this time regarded the overt representation of homosexuality as a symbol of power alongside the notion of liberalism (Zhao 28). To them, the movie gave the homosexual community at the time a form of revelation, a period of “coming out” (Zhao 28) and turned it into a prerequisite for homosexual liberty.

→ Homosexuality during the 1980s was not persecuted as severely as it was during the Cultural Revolution. Nonetheless, the negative connotation within the minds of the Chinese society and law persevered. As such, it was still considered inappropriate and abhorred in public, which is one of the factors leading to the concept of the movie. Despite that, the fact that the movie was able to openly represent homosexuality in a more overt fashion serves to highlight a slight shift in the mindset of the masses regarding this sensitive subject during this time. As such, Zhang Yuan’s “East Palace, West Palace”, at the time, was seen as a liberal move, a first of its kind, to clearly disclose one of the most highly censored factors of the Chinese society.

* **The movie “Lan Yu” (Stanley Kwan - 2001) is one of the frontrunners for candor in representing homosexual relationships in cinematography as well as literary and research work. This denotes that the Chinese society during this time is perhaps more tolerant and lenient towards the subject of homosexuality.**
* Completely shedding the uncertainty about one's sexual orientation, this film is essentially a love story between the two characters Lan Yu and Chen Handong and thus can be clearly identified as a gay film. (Dong 7)
* Towards the end of the millennium, more scholarly study and critical works on queer topics appeared in China (Dong 7)
* A number of websites have been established to host news, discussions, and other resources concerning gay relationships (Dong 7)
* Some Internet libraries have gone so far as to set a category for queer literature, where readers may read stories, novels, and memoirs written about and/or by gay men and lesbians free of charge (Dong 7)
* In Lan Yu, the queer space of China does not merely constitute homosexuality as the validation of an emergent sexual identity or the affirmation of a “perverse” sexual practice. Rather, it encompasses a much wider political field concerning the tortured emergence of Chinese modernity itself, as well as the central role that homosexual desire comes to play in this parable of renewed Enlightenment. (Eng 464)

→ The movie “Lan Yu” is another great example of the shift in public opinions on same-sex relationship as well as the audacity of the new generation of filmmakers in representing the subject in an outspoken manner as opposed to the subtlety that Chen Kaige had employed for his character, Dieyi, in “Farewell My Concubine”. It was particularly well-received for a visual representation of such a sensitive topic as homosexuality. This can be contributed to the gap between the period in which same-sex bonds were less restricted and persecuted and the time the movie was released. Moreover, the treatment of queerness may be attached to the development of China’s modernity itself.

**3. 1989 to Present Day China**

**Within the contemporary Chinese social context, same-sex relationships have been enjoying a less strict regulatory set of rules since 1989. (History of Homosexuality)**

* As mentioned in the analysis of the movie “Lan Yu” and “East Palace, West Palace”, perhaps the reason these movies were able to openly express the relations between same-sex individuals is because the increasingly tolerant mindset the public possessed as the new millennium began to unfold.
* Moreover, the introduction of western media and the Internet in 1978 has also exposed the Chinese people to the novelty of western lifestyles, and ideals (Xie 1960). Even though the pace of acceptance for homosexuality did not pick up until close to the 2000s, this means that same-sex relationships as a topic discussion was better facilitated via the use of the Internet. And, there is a higher chance that the people who do not regard the Internet as their main source of information will disapprove of homosexuals as compared to those who do (Xie 1779)
* Modernization factors, such as economic advancement, education, and the continuing introduction of new ideas, has laid the foundation for more accepting generations of Chinese citizens who are more inclined to question the old values, including the discriminatory opinion on homosexuality (Xie 1963).
* More specifically, “cognitive mobilization” is an effect that education has brought to the new generations the critical thinking to rethink traditional notions of same-sex relations (Xie 1964).
* Nonetheless, there are some factors that can still lead to the disapproval of homosexuals such as religion and attachment to traditional values (Xie 1962)
* Nevertheless, since the update and propagation of new knowledge take time to take hold, Chinese society at times still regards LGBTI people as requiring treatment. (Being 37)

→ The Chinese society are now more liberal and open-minded about homosexuality, but the portion of the population who hold a conservative and tradition view on the subject is still the majority, especially the government itself. Queerness, in a sense, has become something that was acceptable, yet unspeakable within the normal boundaries. Nonetheless, thanks to development in various areas of society from the 1990s until now, the tolerance towards this subject has become greater despite the lingering Confucian values.

**III. Conclusion**

* The different periods have dissimilar policies, ideas, thoughts, and opinions on the delicate subject of same-sex relationships. For the imperial China dynasties before the Qing dynasty, it was treated as a form of social norm so long as there was no obstruction of individual familial obligations on the side of male homosexuals such as marriage and procreation. During this time, there were literary records of many male couples who were in the positional dynamics such as ruler and subject, teacher and student. For the female counterparts, same-sex relationships were largely ignored on the premise of the law and society as well, and they were also highly featured within the erotic literary world at the time. Onto the period in which the Qing dynasty came into power and until the mid-1990s, homosexuality became incorporated into the legislative process, treated with contempt and severe incrimination with the peak of discrimination being the Cultural Revolution. This was the product of the incorporation of Western ideals and knowledge into the governance during the late Qing dynasty. A push from intellectuals who were eager to explore the new realm of knowledge engendered a unprecedented overhaul of the concept of queerness at the time, turning it into a disease and social problem. Homosexuality, henceforth, became a topic best discussed behind closed doors or remain a secret at all time since it is fiercely persecuted. Yet, despite the grim outlook, as the 2000s was coming, the public tolerance towards homosexuality began to increase with the introduction of the Internet and western ideals. This was also due to many advancements in education, economic development as well as medicine. However, currently, there is still a considerable portion of Chinese who are still attached to discriminating against homosexuals on the grounds of religion, or traditional values.

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