

A Pornographic Revival in Eastern Lit

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Without permitting any further explanation, [His-men Ch'ing] lifted Yüeh-niang's two fresh white legs onto his shoulders [and] inserted his organ into her vagina...When Hsi-Men Ch'ing's excitement was at its height he softly besought Yüeh-niang to call him "Daddy."

This excerpt is not from some cheap, orientalized paperback romance. Actually, it's from one of the most influential novels in Chinese history: Jin Ping Mei's "The Plum in the Golden Vase." First block-printed in 1610, it's considered the honorary fifth novel of the Four Great Classical Novels, and was named one of the Four Major Novels of Wonder in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties. It also happens to be an example of the thousands of Chinese erotic novels written between 1550 and 1850—and a tame one at that.

Giovanni Vitiello, an Associate Professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Hawai'i, has made his career studying these pornographic texts in the context of homosexuality. He will be presenting his lecture, "Libertine Masculinity: Homosexuality and Homosociality in Late Imperial Pornographic Fiction," tomorrow at noon in Room 1636 of the School of Social Work Building.

Male-male erotic scenes appear throughout Chinese fiction, including in "The Plum in the Golden Vase" as well as the equally acclaimed Cao Xueqin novel "Red Chamber Dream." Other stories with homosexual relations include Li Yu romantic tales, such as "Silent Operas" and "Tower for the Summer Heat."

But homoerotic texts didn't begin with the birth of the novel. Homoerotica in China dates back to the 6th century B.C.E. Just like the ancient Greeks, Chinese emperors traditionally had male "favorites" along with the usual concubines. These favorites tended to be ephebic, androgynous-looking youths, preferably about 16, who would assume the suppliant, receptive role in relations.

Homosexual relations continued openly outside of palace walls as well, thanks to the theatre. As in Shakespearean England, only males were allowed to act on stage, and those who played female roles often dabbled in prostitution. Thus, when patrons came to support the arts, they also had the chance to support the actors. Such exchanges defied all standards of class – performers working anywhere from back-alley houses to the Peking Opera habitually provided sexual services, with clientele ranging from fish sellers to high officials. When Jesuit missionaries arrived in the 17th century, they were shocked and revolted by the blatant homosexual culture.

Yet this sexual freedom became much more restrained in the 18th century, at least on paper. In 1734, the first law prohibiting consensual sodomy in China was instated. During the same period, edicts banning erotic fiction began to appear as well, which threatened to persecute the writing or distribution of pornographic literature, which was previously a highly respected and widely read genre. According to Viteillo, however, judicial events don't accurately reflect the cultural climate.

"We cannot look at the laws. The laws do not tell the whole story," Vitiello warned.

Despite the new doctrine, homosexual exchanges continued to occur. No recorded cases of sodomy being punished have been found, except when juxtaposed with more serious crimes such as homicide or rape. Vitiello makes the modern-day comparison that, until 2003, many states in the US had anti-sodomy laws in their constitutions, but this doesn't necessarily mean we should interpret Americans as more intolerant than modern-day Chinese, who abolished such laws earlier. Nor does it mean the US is more intolerant than countries that have no blatantly homophobic laws, such as North Korea or Saudi Arabia. Nations without explicit laws against homosexuality often punish homosexual behavior more than nations with such laws.

That's why Vitiello focuses his research on literature, which often contradicts politics. He also puts homophobia in China in perspective to the Western world at the time. Homosexual novels may have been banned in China, but in Europe the Catholic Church was burning sodomites alive.

"China has traditionally been a bisexual culture, as far as men are concerned," Vitiello said.

A lot of Chinese erotic fiction has been destroyed or has disappeared from record, but a lot remains. These samples provide insight into mainstream homosexual attitudes, as well as the formate of such sexual relations, which isn't always the unexpected pizza delivery or late night plumber.

"Most are repetitive," admitted Vitiello. "You know, porn is porn. But some of these stories are absolutely extraordinary."