

怪胎

*the strange
& the queer*

AN ANACHRONISM.

This zine is anachronistic for a couple reasons. The first is the standard critique that it's ahistorical to impose modern identities on the past, which was a very different place. That's fine; I've tried to avoid modern taxonomies and instead let the reader understand each example as they see fit.

The second reason is that the picture I show you here is mostly anachronistically rosy. I do not talk much about contemporaneous critics of same-gender sexual activity or gender transformations. I do not delve into the wealth of historical discussion on homosexual rape. I do not contend with the very real power asymmetries that structure many of the relationships detailed in the zine, most prominently age. I acknowledge them here, but these things are not the focus of my project. I hope you can forgive this gentle erasure.

Rather, I wanted to celebrate a very particular dialectic: the tension inherent to a very long tradition of being aberrant. Although, of course, some of these stories I'm sharing with you were very normal to their time. Liang Shi writes:

Same-sex desire and relations take a variety of forms through history. They may be tolerated in

one dynasty but are censored in another, or in a given period they may be accepted by certain social groups but are rejected by others.

Some of these people would consider themselves as foreign to each other as they are to us. But I embrace this anachronism. It enables me to problematize this history by embracing a connection I feel that they would no doubt not recognize. Because that's the tension I often feel when examining my heritage.

But I don't need recognition. I'm instead stealing, smuggling, appropriating, whatever verb you want these strange predecessors. This zine is for the strange and the queer today, after all, and I hope you enjoy it.

folktales

The old farmer and the dragon

An old farmer named Ma was tending his field when suddenly a storm broke out. He fell to the ground, fearing that it was Heaven's wrath.

But the storm was only caused by a dragon descending. Seeing Ma lying on the ground, the dragon fucked him in the ass and came all over him, leaving him covered in stinking semen. When he was done, the dragon flew back into the sky.

The dragon is alone in preferring older men and capturing them for gay sex; most mythological beasts preferred younger men.



roundel with four clawed dragon, from the met

Tu'er shen, the rabbit god

In Fujian during the Qing dynasty, a common soldier fell in love with a high ranked official. He would follow the official around sneakily to watch the man he loved. One day, he followed the official into the toilet so he could observe his body closely. But the official spotted him and, suspicious, investigated him. Under torture, the soldier admitted his love. But this infuriated the official, who had the soldier killed.

One month later, in the form of a rabbit, the soldier appeared in a dream to an elder from his hometown. The soldier-rabbit explained to the elder that he had become the Rabbit God and he governed the affairs of men. He told the elder to build him a temple and worship him, so that he might respond to the prayers of those like him. The elder told the village of the demand, and they complied with the secret request, building the Rabbit Temple for lovers of men.



girdle pendant, rabbit, from the met

Lan Caihe, the immortal

The Eight Immortals are legendary figures in Chinese myth. But one of them, Lan Caihe, is neither man nor woman. Their gender is ambiguous and never universally agreed on.

They live as a singing wanderer, the patron of florists and gardeners. They consort with the lower classes and seem immune to temperatures, wearing winter clothes in summer and summer clothes in winter.



bowl with the eight immortals. from the met

Fenghuang

Known as the phoenix, the fenghuang is the king of birds. It looks like a dazzling golden pheasant, with each part of its body representing one of the five elements. It displays all four virtues.

There used to be both male (feng) and female (huang) entities, but the two are unified in what we know today, the fenghuang.

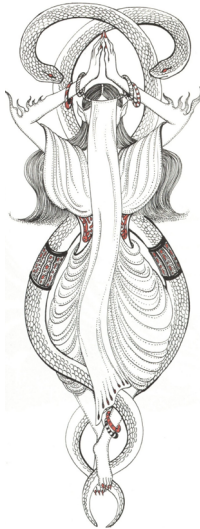


phoenix, by kuang xu. from the met

Yu'er

The god Yu'er, like Guanyin (who over time became portrayed as a woman and is often portrayed androgynously), has the power to change their body into any form they'd like.

While capable of being both man and woman, Yu'er is normally depicted as femininely and intertwined with two fearsome snakes.



by siyu chen, from the shanhaijing

Nu'er guo

Chinese myth has long held the existence of the Land of Women, a land with either no men or with reversed gender roles.

The Shanhai jing describes it as being home to only two women; the Journey to the West has its queen being an enemy; and the Qing dynasty novel *Flowers in the Mirror* describes men in skirts and women in government.

Whatever the case, each appearance suggests exciting inversions of gender.



figure of a standing woman, from the met

strange tales from liao zhai

In the decades leading up to the work's publication in 1766, Pu Songling compiled around 500 short strange stories. This collection became highly influential. Some of those stories fit in this zine. While most don't have a traditional happy ending for their queer characters, they're proof of the strange that has always existed.



huang jiulang, from strange tales from a chinese studio.

Huang Jiulang

He Shican was staying out east of Tiaoxi, when one day he spotted a woman and a young man walking. The woman was in her fifties or so, but the young man was an astoundingly beautiful youth, prettier than a girl. He Shican had always been a man of the cut sleeve, so he couldn't tear his eyes away.

From that day forward, He Shican desperately tried to get the young man to spend time with him. After many failures, one night the boy appeared and agreed. His name, he introduced, was Huang Jiulang, the ninth in the family.

They spent an agreeable evening talking, but the young man coyly rejected all of He Shican's amorous advances. At his final rejection, He Shican was afraid that the young man would never come around again. But not a few days later, Huang Jiulang came by again for conversation.

Once more, He Shican begged him for sex. Huang Jiulang allowed him a single kiss. From that day forward, He Shican was lovesick. When Huang Jiulang stopped by again and saw how drawn and sick He Shican looked, he felt bad.

"I only rejected you because I thought love would harm us both! But now I see that you are harmed anyway, and I might bring you happiness." So Huang Jiulang acquiesced and the two became one, and He Shican improved greatly.

After this, Huang Jiulang asked for a favor: medicine for his sick mother. From that day forward, they made love every day. And every three days, he asked for more medicine. But the prescribing doctor grew suspicious, and took He Shican's pulse. "You're being possessed by a spirit!" he cried.

Huang Jiulang admitted he was a fox spirit. "This is why I feared I would harm you," he said. But He Shican did not believe him, and eventually died from the possession.

He Shican was ultimately reborn, and encountered Huang Jiulang again. Huang Jiulang introduced him to a woman, his cousin, and those two lived happily together. Meanwhile, Huang Jiulang was able to intercede on He Shican's behalf with a governor who had become displeased with him.

Feng Sanniang

Shiyiniang was a very pretty girl, who was also very popular. One day, during the Zhongyuan festival, a woman approached her. That woman explained that she had wanted to meet Shiyiniang for some time, and that her name was Feng Sanniang. Shiyiniang found her beautiful, and the two instantly became friends. They spent the day together, but when Shiyiniang invited her back home, Sanniang demurred. Instead, they traded hairpieces.

Shiyiniang from then on waited for Sanniang to visit her, but Sanniang never did. Shiyiniang grew sick with longing. But on the Double Nine festival, Sanniang snuck in to meet her. She was touched that Shiyiniang missed her just as much as she missed Shiyiniang. But she had been worried because she was poor and Shiyiniang was rich, that her visit would be inappropriate.

Sanniang stayed with her secretly for a few days, and the two grew even closer. Shiyiniang's mother discovered Sanniang one day. The mother insisted that there was no need to hide, but Sanniang disappeared the very next day. A few months later, Sanniang reappeared. This time, she was surprised to learn that Shiyiniang was still not betrothed. Sanniang explains that a rich hus-

band would be too arrogant and that Shiyiniang would be better off with a humble spouse.

Since the next day was the Zhongyuan festival, the two decided to go to the temple so that Sanniang could pick out a good husband for Shiyiniang. Sanniang disappeared mysteriously once more, but she reappeared with a handsome scholar whom she believed would be successful one day. Shiyiniang took a liking to him as well.

The scholar's name was Meng Anren, and he had dignity despite his poverty. Shiyiniang worried that her parents would never agree because of his poverty. But Sanniang explained that she would matchmake them, and get around that. Shiyiniang still was unsure, so Sanniang took the hairpiece Shiyiniang had once given her, and gave it to Meng Anren. The gift convinced him of Shiyiniang's sincerity.

But when Shiyiniang's parents learned of this, they quickly matchmade her with a rich official's son. While Shiyiniang tried to refuse, they ignored her. The night before that wedding, Shiyiniang died by suicide. After she was buried, a brokenhearted Meng Anren visited her grave. There, he met Feng Sanniang, who told him to dig up the body. And Sanniang brought Shiyiniang back to life.

The three hid and made a home in a faraway mountain. Sanniang was about to go, but Shiyiniang begged her to stay. The three lived there for some time happily, but Sanniang eventually discovered that Shiyiniang had been selling off her jewelry to support the three. Saddened by this sacrifice, Sanniang decided to leave.



But Shiyiniang begged her to marry Meng Anren as well, and not to leave her. Sanniang admitted, however, that she was actually a fox spirit. “I like you because you’re beautiful. That’s why I decided to help you get married. It’s not possible for me to marry him.” And like that, she flew away.

In the end, Meng Anren and Shiyiniang came clean to their parents. After the rich man and his son were exposed for corruption, the two were even able to move back to town.

The human prodigy

Ma Wanbao and his wife were an uninhibited couple, but nonetheless devoted to each other. Their neighbor, an old woman, took in a runaway girl. The girl claimed to be talented at various tasks, like sewing, as well as massages, which could cure feminine ailments.

Ma spied on her, and liked her look. He got his wife to request a massage, and switched with her—despite the girl’s explicit request that her husband be gone that night. Disguised as a woman, he groped the girl, and was surprised to learn that the girl was a female impersonator named Wang Erxi. Wang was a member of a crossdressing gang, which committed robberies and assaulted women, taking advantage of their ability to disguise themselves to gain access and escape.

Ma took advantage of the opportunity. He castrated Wang, and took him as his second wife. When eventually the rest of the gang members were caught and killed, Wang escaped the patdown safely due to his castration. He was extremely grateful, and the three lived happily together.

Becoming a boy

In the Mudu township of Suzhou, a commoner's daughter was sitting outside one night when a meteor fell from the sky and hit her in the head. Her elderly parents rushed out to save the fainted girl.

But when she woke up, she announced with a smile, "I am now a man!" Upon examination, this was proved to be true. Her family rejoiced that their family now had a son in it. This happened in the year 1707.

Other spontaneous gender transformations

Interestingly enough, this sort of thing happened a fair bit. Or at least, stories about it happening circulated, and people found them credible. In case you're curious:

- At some point in the sixteenth century, a man developed a vagina at the age of forty and married one of his male friends.

- In 1514, a young woman changed sex. He became known as Gaolei, and he grew a beard and fathered children.

- In 1568, a man named Li Liangyu's testicles shrank and turned into a vagina so she began to live as a woman. She was twenty eight at the time.

- A girl suddenly changed into a boy at age twelve. She was promised in marriage, so she kept it secret, until the marriage revealed it. His name became Zhuang Qisheng, and he eventually worked at a library.

- There are three late Ming accounts of men who gave birth, often from their gay lovers.

literature

There are scenes of same gender sex, love, and advances in many of the classic Chinese novels that you'll recognize. Jin ping mei (The Plum in the Golden Vase), Hong lou meng (The Dream of the Red Chamber), Mudan ting (The Peony Pavilion), and Rou pu tuan (The Carnal Prayer Mat) all contain them.

But we also have several works that are centrally organized around these scenes. There's the 1912 anthology Duanxiu pian (The Cut Sleeve) which is a major source of the historical stories and poetry that will follow in the sections to come.

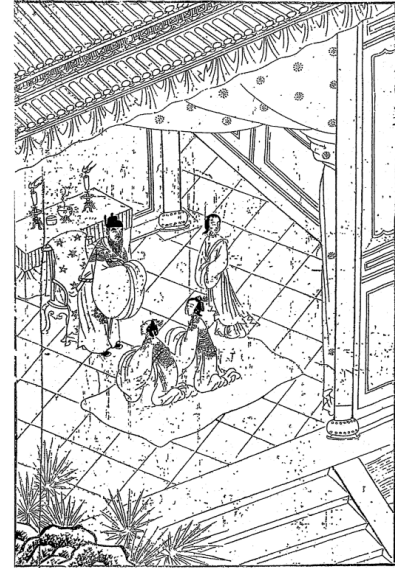
In the meantime, here are some summaries of plays and novels.

A Male Queen Consort

Wang Jide (d. 1632) wrote a play basically entirely about gender confusion. It's about a girl (played by a boy) playing a boy who passes as queen consort who becomes involved with a princess, who marries him and calls him sister-in-law. Yeah!

Excerpt from Act One:

I may have a man's body but my face is just like a woman's. Born naturally pretty I could even be described as delectable, for who among the painters could capture such a tender pink petal. I wonder, perchance, if I am not the Dragon Maiden who scatters petals at the feet of Guanyin and have taken the wrong rebirth, I must then be the perfect newborn Golden Boy who stands by the bureau in the Jade Emperor's palace. Yesterday a physiognomist told me my face is that of a dragon, my neck that of a phoenix, and had I been a woman I was certain to have been selected as an imperial consort. Alas, had my parents indeed given birth to a girl, such looks would see me hailed a beauty second to none and my foxy charms would let me put an emperor under my thumb. And should he be made of steel I would at least soften up a half of him. What a pity I was born a man by mistake.



Excerpt from Act Three:

I am Princess Jade Flower, sister of the Prince of Linchuan. I am just sixteen and yet to marry. Yesterday my brother crowned a new Queen Consort whose good looks are preternaturally fine, whose face puts other beauties to shame. Truly a beauty of heaven and kingdom; peerless throughout the world. Not only has a man like my brother fallen for her, as a girl I would even like to swallow her down with a beaker of water. Who would have guessed that in our world there existed a woman as beautiful as this?

Excerpt from Act Four:

When I was a queen my bound feet were missing,
Now as a prince consort I wear an embroidered stole.
Doesn't this kind of cross-dressing
Make everything a right muddle.
And as for my two marriages,
Both the first and second were just as I'd hoped.

The Fragrant Companion

Lianxiang ban is a long play written by Li Yu (1611 - 1680). It follows two women who meet at a temple and fall in love. One is already married, but she pledges marriage to the other one. Eventually, they decide to marry the second woman to the same spouse so they can live together forever.

Excerpts:

Anyway, in our future lives we don't know who becomes a man and who becomes a woman. If by chance I become the husband and she the wife.

Who will be male and female is unclear,
But fret not,
For it's not certain she will become the husband and I the wife.

Even if she is the man, as long as she is as smart and good-looking as she is now I will be very happy to be her wife.

And so long as she is just as dashing in the next life,
I can accept being the disadvantaged one.

[...]

Although I'm not a real man, dressing up like this and catching sight of your so very delicate face, I cannot suppress the excitement.

It's too lovely,
My heart leaps of its own accord.

Not only am I becoming light-headed, Miss, I think your longings are also beginning to stir.

You're the same as red apricot blossom across the wall,
A spring passion that's impossible to confine.

(Young dan, aside) Look at her dressed up like that, the very image of Pan An in his carriage and Song Yu beside the wall. Could there really be such a perfectly formed and handsome man as this? Should I be married to a man like her, I would be happy to face death.

[...]

I am married already to my husband. If you are willing to marry him too, we can live like sisters, not distinguishing which of us is wife or concubine. We can compose poems all day long and never be further from each other than half a step, closer even than husband and wife. I wonder what you think about it?

A Precious Mirror for Grading Flowers

Pinhua baojian is a 1849 novel by Chen Sen. Its title refers to “flower appreciation,” or the culture of ranking/appreciation/frequenting of male sex workers by literati men. It follows a young scholar, Ziyu, and his search for love, in the mode of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. He falls in love with a single glance at Qinyan, an opera actor who plays female roles (dan). The novel is heavily concerned with and celebrates the proper way for a scholar to love a dan.

Excerpt:

(The character Tian Chunhang defends male entertainers and male beauty from his friend's criticism.)

“What I can't understand above all is people nowadays who consider being fond of female beauty normal and being fond of male beauty strange. But beauty is beauty—what's the need of distinguishing between male and female? To like women and not men amounts finally to being fond of lust—it's not at all being fond of beauty.”

history

Fentao, or “the shared peach”

Duke Ling of Wei (534 – 493 BC) and Mizi Xia.

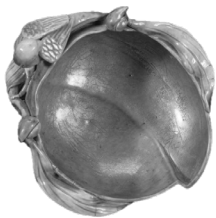
Mizi Xia won the favor of Duke Ling, the ruler of Wei. Now, in that place, anyone who used the ruler's carriage without permission had their feet cut off as punishment. Despite this when Mizi Xia learned one night that his mother had fallen sick, he didn't wait for permission and rode off to see her anyway. But when Duke Ling heard of this, he only said, “How filial! He cares so much for his mother, he forgot about the risk!”

Another time, Mizi Xia and Duke Ling were walking in an orchard. Mizi Xia plucked a peach off a tree and tried it. It was so sweet and ripe he gave the rest to Duke Ling to try as well. Duke Ling was touched by Mizi Xia's care for him. “How sincere! You care so much for me, you forget your own appetite!”

The story of the shared peach would be shared often over the next couple thousand of years, and male lovers over that period would often reference it as a model. However, the story continues with a moral.

Once Mizi Xia's beauty faded, Duke Ling turned on him. “After all, he once stole my carriage and another time only gave me a half-eaten peach!” This goes to

show, Han Fei (who first recorded the story) warned, if you rely on a powerful man, you must beware of his fickleness.



peach bowl, from the asian art museum

Longyang qiyu, or “weeping over fish”

King Jia (reigned 227–225 BC) and the lord of Longyang

King Jia of Wei and his lover the Lord of Longyang shared a boat while fishing. Suddenly, the lord began to cry. The king asked him why he was crying.

The Lord of Longyang responded: “Because I caught a fish.”

The king asked him why he would cry over a fish.

The lord explained: “At first I caught a fish and was happy. But when I caught a second, larger fish, I threw the first one back. With so many beauties in the world, before long, your majesty will also catch a second fish. It breaks my heart to think I will also be tossed back.”

The king was moved by this, and made an official announcement that anyone who presented him with any other beauties beside the Lord of Longyang would be killed, along with their entire family.

Over the years, longyang came to be a word that referred to a man’s boy lover and male prostitutes in general.

The story of Lord E

the Lord of Xiangcheng and the official Zhuang Xin. First recorded during the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 CE).

Zhuang Xin once had an audience with the Lord of Xiangcheng. The Lord of Xiangcheng was beautiful and noble in appearance, dressed magnificently. Despite his lower status, Zhuang Xin worked up the courage to ask, "May I hold your hand?"

The lord was silent.

Zhuang Xin was fearful of the lord's anger. But once more, he worked up the courage to speak. "Has my lord heard of Lord E? He once rode in a beautiful boat down a river. That day, the men who rowed him sung a song that his retainer had taught them:

"What a fine evening is this,
that I've come to this islet midstream!
What a fine day is this,
that I share a boat with you, my prince!
Unworthy that I'd be so desired,
when have I ever felt such shame?
My heart's perplexed to no end,
that I've come to know you, my prince!
There are trees in the mountain, and branches on

trees.

I yearn to please you, and you do not know!"

"Upon hearing this song, Lord E learned of and accepted the advances of his retainer, placing an embroidered quilt on his shoulder."

And upon hearing this story, the lord took Zhuang Xin's hand as well.

The empress and the evil woman

Empress Chen Jiao (reigned 165 - 110 BC) and anonymous lover.

Empress Chen was married to Emperor Wu of the Han. But due to her childlessness and her refusal to let the emperor take other lovers, she soon lost the emperor's favor and his love. So she brought in a woman who dressed in men's clothing and who claimed that she could make the emperor love her again.

The two women practiced rituals together, cursing the empress' rivals. They lived together, spending every day and sleeping every night by each other's side. They loved each other like husband and wife.

When the emperor eventually heard about it, he had the woman and the empress' staff killed, and deposed the empress. More than 300 people died.

Duanxiu, or "the cut sleeve"

Emperor Ai (25 - 1 BC) and Dong Xian (22 - 1 BC).

Emperor Ai and his lover Dong Xian were napping together during the daytime. Emperor Ai, however, woke first and wanted to get up. But rather than disturb his lover, he instead cut off his own sleeve that Dong Xian had been lying on.

This, incidentally, started a fashion trend: his courtiers were so impressed by his devotion that they began to dress in one-sleeved tunics. This was actually the second fashion statement Dong Xian was associated with. He was known for dressing simply, in a single garment of elegant plain silk rather than with fancy ornaments like the rest of the court. The emperor loved him that way.

The two unfortunately met with tragedy. When Emperor Ai died young of illness, he attempted to leave the empire to his beloved. This, however, was ignored by the rest of the court, and Dong Xian was instead forced to die by suicide, following his lover into death.

The concubine and her fake boy

Ali Hu and Shengge. Took place during Emperor Wanyang Liang's reign (1149 - 1161 CE).

Ali Hu was married to Emperor Wanyang Liang. However, before long, she lost his favor. It was common at the time, though, for concubine to dress their maids as men, calling them “fake boys.” Ali Hu’s favorite was named Shengge, and the two lived and slept intimately.

Sanniang, a kitchen maid, reported this to the emperor. The emperor did not care about the matter, but warned Ali Hu not to punish Sanniang for showing loyalty to him. Angry, however, Ali Hu killed Sanniang. Infuriated by this betrayal, the emperor killed Ali Hu.

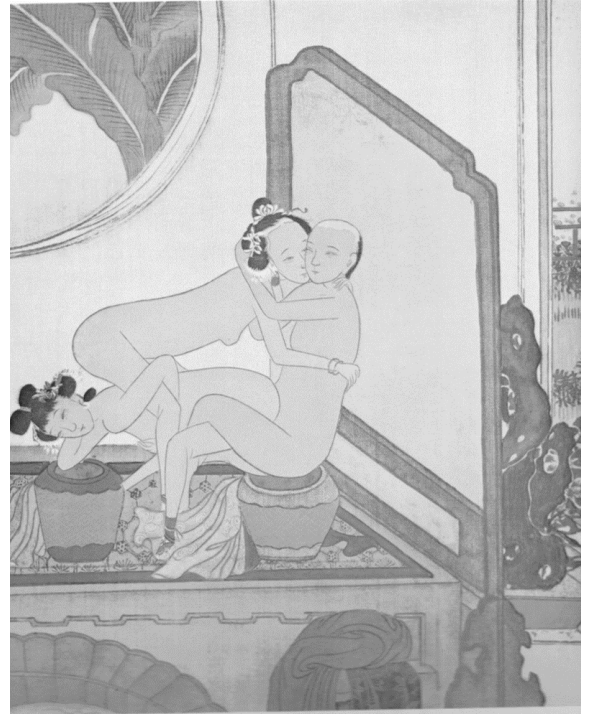
This story circulated widely, and embellished versions exist that are more explicit. For instance, a version from 1627 imagines that Shengge looked quite masculine and fucked Ali Hu with a strap.

Duishi, or “eating in pairs”

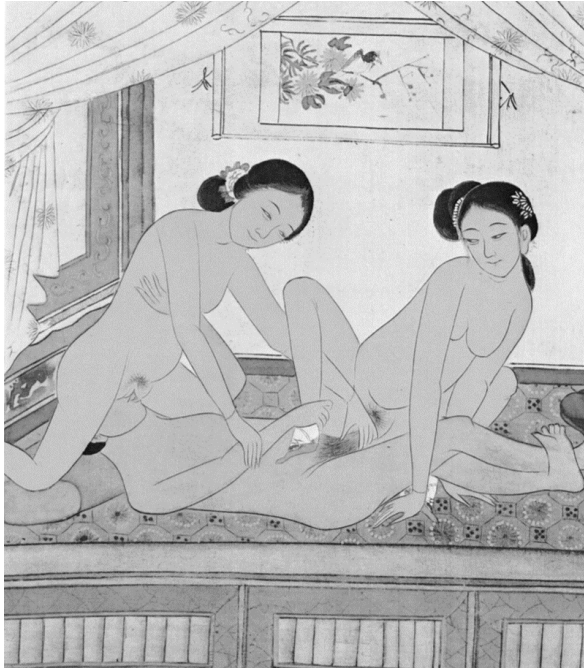
Concubines and empresses didn’t just have sex with maids. They also romanced each other. The practice of duishi or “eating with each other” was common. With emperors keeping huge numbers of wives, many turned to each other for companionship, forming husband and wife pairs.

It was not uncommon for husbands in general to encourage love between their wives, on the belief that it decreased fighting between concubines. On the following pages, I’ve included Ming dynasty art depicting this.





On favorites in general



For many dynasties, these favorites were the norm, not the exception. I've featured the most well-known and interesting stories here, but we have thousands of years of records of lovers. Being a favorite of someone powerful was the easiest and fastest way to rise within government, and the political and economic power that resulted meant that official histories recorded the presence and personalities of these lovers.

In case you're wondering why these people keep on meeting tragic ends, it's a function of how/why these detailed stories were recorded. Stories about emperors' favorites tended to focus on cautionary tales about being too hole-addled to govern or being too reliant on the whims of a powerful man. And those about empresses' favorites tended to ultimately reify patriarchal power.

We instead take solace in silences, absences, and mundanities. We know from how these stories were recorded that the behaviors therein were not unthinkable. Therefore, we know (often explicitly in the case of men, and implicitly in the case of women) that countless lovers existed and lived in obscurity, and that it was considered a normal part of human sexuality.

Hong nainai and the Mirror Rubbing Gang

Hong Nainai, whose real name is unknown, was a sex worker known as one of the “eight anomalies of Shanghai.” This is because she primarily served women.

Some of these women were so taken in by her that they would marry and swindle rich men, stealing all their money for Hong Nainai. These women were known as the Mojingdang, or Mirror Rubbing Gang, mirror rubbing being a euphemism for scissoring.



mirror with floral designs. from the met

Liu Rushi

Liu Rushi was a courtesan and poetess who lived from 1618 - 1664. She was known as one of the Eight Beauties of Qinhuai. But she also regularly crossdressed and was often perceived as an honorary man for her writing prowess.

When she married, it was to a renowned scholar decades her senior, Qian Qianyi. She appeared to him at his door in male disguise, and offered herself. Even after their marriage, she continued to often crossdress and carry out official business in menswear on her husband's behalf.

Her modern biographer Chen Yinke describes her as “a Confucian scholar and a female knight-errant at once.”

Fujian marriages between men

In the province of Fujian, marriages between men occurred. The practice was very similar to how one might marry a woman. Contemporaneous accounts describe how men would seek out a willing youth, ask his parents for permission, pay a bride price (especially for virgin boys), and carry out the usual six wedding rituals.

The pairs were called qixiong and qidi, adoptive older and younger brother respectively. They would live together as spouses in the qixiong's family home until they needed to have biological children. But they often had decades together in which they lived as son and son-in-law, sometimes adopting children. Their sexual relationship also often continued even after they were both married to women.

Guangdong marriages between women

In the province of Guangdong, some women resisted marriage and formed sworn sisterhoods. Due to the silk industry allowing comparative financial independence, in the late 19th and early 20th century, women known as zishi nu or “self-combing women” chose to live with other women.

There was a wide range of alternate marriage practices, many of which were not lesbian in nature, of course. Some women cohabitated while delaying marriage, other women paid their would-be husband's family to take a different wife, and some never married at all. But spinsterhood often had the connotation of lesbianism to outsiders, and for some, it certainly was in reality.

While we'll never know exactly how many women were in relationships with each other, some interviews with the surviving women did find them in lesbian relationships through the present day. And some practices clearly mirrored heterosexual marriage, from courting gifts, a ceremony, living together, and sometimes even adopting daughters. In conclusion, we can probably claim the practice.

poetry

Ruan Ji (210–263), lover of Xi Kang

In days of old there were many blossom boys—
 An Ling and Long Yang
Young peach and plum blossoms,
 Dazzling with glorious brightness.
Joyful as nine springtimes;
 Pliant as if bowed by autumn frost.

Roving glances gave rise to beautiful seductions;
 Speech and laughter expelled fragrance.
Hand in hand they shared love's rapture,
 Sharing coverlets and bedclothes.

Couple of birds in flight,
 Paired wings soaring.
Cinnabar and green pigments record a vow:
 "I'll never forget you for all eternity."

Incidentally a woman, the wife of Shan Tao, once peeped at these two men having sex. She is reported to have told her husband that he could only compare to them on an intellectual level, not a sexual one.

Xiao Gang (503 – 551), to an “Adorable boy”

This adorable boy, ever so dainty,
Leaves Dong Xian and Squire Mi Xia for dead.
How sweet smells the plumed tester each new morn,
All night through curtain beads the water clock.
Mandarin ducks adorn his emerald quilt,
Ivory inlay adorns his sculpted bed.
Just like Little Page at this same ideal age,
His face glows radiant as the new dawn clouds.
His brocade sleeves boast lucky anagram,
His letter sheets are pressed with kapok flowers.
A lift of his pants shows a bit of pink,
Turning around, the buns on his temples slip.
Those dreamy eyes with their come hither smile,
Jade hands as gentle as new picked flowers.
His jealousy is not from new caught fish.
My love is like the chariot driving days.
It's enough to make Yan beauties jealous,
Or reduced the young women of Zheng to sighs.

author unknown

I want to, but do not, send off flower-laden boughs.
I want to, but do not, think about him.
My thoughts of him flow forth quickly.
On spring winds a yellow oriole flies among scattered
trees.

Wu Zao (1799 – 1862) For the Courtesan Qing Lin

On your slender body
Your jade and coral girdle ornaments chime
Like those of a celestial companion
Come from the Green Jade City of Heaven.
One smile from you when we meet,
And I become speechless and forget every word.
For too long you have gathered flowers,
And leaned against the bamboos,
Your green sleeves growing cold,
In your deserted valley:
I can visualize you all alone,
A girl harboring her cryptic thoughts.

You glow like a perfumed lamp
In the gathering shadows.
We play wine games
And recite each other's poems.
Then you sing, "Remembering South of the River"
With its heartbreaking verses. Then
We paint each other's beautiful eyebrows.
I want to possess you completely—
Your jade body
And your promised heart.

It is Spring.
Vast mists cover the Five Lakes.
My dear, let me buy a red painted boat
And carry you away.

Li Giming (1829–1894)

A lotus water-clock adorned with petals,
Simple lattices, winding corridors –
Essence of evening cool.
He descends from the carriage
And as we meet there is a surge of tenderness.
Curse the brightness of the lamps
Lighting up his deep red blush.
Slinking away,
He finds the shadow of a silver screen
So he may be shielded.

Since the tying of our crimson filaments–
So seldom together–
Now my temples have turned white.
Tossed about by our love,
I should regret the day we met.
But when my blue robe is drenched in tears
Nothing in this world would salve our separation.
Behind a silken fan
Our whispers will give others a chance to tease.

jokes

There was a poor couple in which the wife was so beautiful, her husband was constantly shooing off men. But whenever he left all day to find them food, his wife would cheat on him.

One day, he wasn't able to find any food, and returned home hungry. His wife said, "The other day, Mr So-and-so wanted to give me food, but I turned him down out of loyalty to you." The famished husband actually felt bad about this.

It was then that she said, "Go look at the stove." There was plenty of food there, and he fell upon it hungrily. But when he asked where it came from, she said, "This was given to me by Mr. So-and-so after all. I was so hungry, I had to cheat on you."

But her husband just kept eating and asked, "Tell me, is he into men?"

A sheltered rich man's son went out for the lantern festival. Wandering around, he unknowingly entered a brothel. Suddenly, a beautiful young man asked him if he'd like some tea. The rich man's son ignored him as he would any stranger. But the youth invited him again and again, telling him, "I'm a man who does woman's work."

At this, the ignorant rich man's son replied, "Oh! So, you're a tailor!"

The priest seduced the young disciple and sweet feelings arose, but as they had sex, the young disciple's penis got larger and semen oozed out.

The priest grasped it from the rear with his hands and cried out, shocked: "Oh Amida Buddha, I've pierced you through!"

And in case you're wondering, here's a quick summary of Howard Levy's intro to *Ye Olde Gay Jokes*.

They're always about men. They're often about priests, since priests were removed from the rest of society (making them an easy target), and people were suspicious of their ostensible celibacy. There are quite a few jokes about tops getting a comeuppance through experiencing anal pain. There are multiple jokes about sons-in-law having sex with their fathers-in-law when they really mean to fuck their mother-in-law. There are jokes about sex workers, particularly ones that have to do with farting (since they were likely on diets to reduce odor/flatulence). There are jokes about homosexuals who marry women and who insist on anal or who aren't quite sure what to do. There's even a joke about officials sucking each other off.

So that's the kind of gay jokes ordinary people laughed at, which can indicate some of their views.

afterword

Two brief notes. The first: queer Chinese life did not end with imperial China. It continued, and its study is rich and exciting. I have not included recent history or art for reasons of scope, but this is worth an explicit reminder.

And second: this history I have presented to you is deliberately romanticized. It is a factually true but heavily curated view of what has happened. But frankly I think the strange have always been aware that we can not identify too heavily with anyone else. So let this book be a romance, between you and the world that is possible. Let it be a dream, a love story, or a starting point. But whatever it was, I hope you enjoyed it.

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