The long and winding road of homosexuality in China, from tolerance to acceptance and back

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Abstract

The story of homosexuality in China is a long and winding tale. It has gone through tolerance and acceptance to rejection and condemnation over various periods of time. Fairly extensive documentation is available of the role that the elite in Chinese society played in the lives of homosexuals through the ages but less is known of the fate of homosexuals in everyday China.

This chapter in China’s rich and ever changing history has been influenced by outside forces such as western missionaries who adversely affected the level of acceptance that homosexuals had been awarded. With the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949 began a period that in many ways was the Dark Age for Chinese homosexuals as homosexuality was presented as a western decadence. The new China did in many ways present a more cruel reality for homosexuals than westerners had called for previously.

With the opening of China, the attitude has begun to change and modern day Chinese society is slowly moving forward. The emergence of social media has played an important role and China has again come under the influence of the West, but now in a more positive way for homosexuals.

Leading the call for acceptance and a more open society is in the hands of the urban youth. Educated and with access to information they are unlikely to accept old views based on a rhetoric of a bygone era. The key as so many times in history is sustained effort and realistic expectations.
Introduction

The notion of homosexuality was for a long time a taboo in the western world, it was an issue that people avoided to discuss and ignored if possible. Individuals, who were suspected of being homosexual, were subjected to gossip and slander. For the most part this mysterious group of people attempted to blend into the crowd.

The acceptance of homosexuals in the western world has grown gradually in recent decades. Most western European countries have the understanding that those individuals are not only as normal as everybody else, but they have the right to live a life of safety and dignity, and not to be harassed or threatened by those who neither agree nor understand.

In this essay, the map of homosexuality’s travels are traced and attempt is made to cast a light on the attitude of Chinese society and its rulers at any given time in its history. Markers that indicate a change in perception are identified and possibly the forces behind any development in attitude and public treatment of those individuals that were born either gay or lesbian - a minority much misunderstood, much maligned and sometimes even despised.

The perception and understanding of homosexuality in China is in many ways different from the West. It has faced various challenges and phases throughout its long and eventful history. For a long period of time there was a general tolerance towards homosexuality. Then attitudes began to change as China entered into a period of a downward spiral where homosexuality was viewed negatively. This coincided with the arrival of westerners. During the last century, attitudes towards homosexuals hit its lowest point, in particular under Chairman Mao’s rule.

With the opening of China to the world, the situation for Chinese homosexuals has slowly improved but much is yet needed to ensure their basic equal rights. Positive developments have taken place in legal matters that have created a safer environment for homosexuals although there are still no laws specifically protecting them from being discriminated against due to their sexual orientation.
Many of the challenges that Chinese society throws at homosexuals are those of social nature. The value that is put on upholding the traditional model of Chinese family structure, by marrying and having children, places extreme pressure on homosexuals that is in many ways alien to western societies. The acceptance of same-sex marriage is still some time away in China, despite signs of gradual, albeit a very slow change.

The landing of westerners in China elevated the idea that homosexuality was shameful. With China asserting its place in the world’s trade and on the political stage, the call for improvements in human rights has become a constant theme in any dialogue with or about China. The situation of homosexuals is a part of this debate and could serve as a litmus test on the change that many dream of in China.

With the opening of China and continues societal advancements, a question that one needs to contemplate is whether or not rulers of China can regain its former tolerance to homosexuality, and thus create a much sought after harmonious society.
Homosexuality in traditional China

Bronze Age to Qing Dynasty

Homosexuality is one of the most delicate issues within Chinese society and culture. Our understanding of family structure, family obligations and moral obligations changes when viewed through a lens that takes homosexuality into consideration. Any study of homosexuality in China thus demands of the student to approach the subject with an open mind in order for them to interpret Chinese homosexuality in an unbiased manner.

Homosexuality among the elites in Chinese society has traditionally been widely accepted and was a common practice as the literature suggests, but less is known on how it was perceived among the general population. Homosexuality has been documented since the Bronze Age in China, not just in poetry or lyrics, but also in government documents. Historical evidence from earlier dynasties do not entail details of homosexuality but references can be found scattered in short legal documents and biographies. In such texts homosexuality is clearly seen as an integral part of society.¹

There is still a great volume of documents yet to be translated, some of which are accused of being poorly translated.² Analysing such texts and documents from ancient China mandates not only a very precise translation, but also that the historian be particularly sensitive to the prevailing culture or atmosphere. It is an enduring opinion that western scholars are unable to accurately examine Chinese documentation simply because they lack understanding of the Chinese perspective.³ By viewing a foreign culture and customs through a western lens, makes it all but impossible to create an accurate historical picture. This flaw may possibly be most obvious in the attempts of a western scholar to understand the notion of homosexuality in Chinese culture.

One of the first introductions that the Chinese had with westerners were Jesuit missionaries. They began arriving in China during late Ming Dynasty (1368-
1644). They exhibited great admiration for Chinese customs and culture, however they showed great distaste over the Chinese unapologetic acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality, a clear violation of their Christian norms.

Acceptance of homosexuality has a long history in Chinese culture and was, as previously stated, a generally accepted part of the social fabric. Their longstanding tolerance was not about to disappear because westerners viewed their actions as morally wrong. The ideas or notion of homosexuality being reprehensible were however cultivated by westerners, and these ideas influenced and nourished the anti-homosexuality ideas that have endured up until modern day China.

That said, efforts of the Jesuits to convert China, by reaching the elites, was never likely to reap fruit as it was the elite class that was most understanding or accepting of homosexuality. The general understanding is that while the Jesuits did influence the elite through their teachings of mathematics and astronomy, they were unable to fundamentally alter the elite’s view of themselves and their world. The elite chose what was useful to them and incorporated that into their own understanding of the universe.4

Despite efforts by westerners majority of Chinese people continued to accept homosexuality. Western influence through education grew strong in China and many other Asian nations. A constant thread in western policies towards Asian countries was their lack of understanding or acceptance of the local cultures and a forceful approach based on their western moral judgment.5

With the fall of Ming dynasty (1644) the Manchu assumed the role of governing China. The Manchu, and consequently the Qing, were not as susceptible to criticism from the West and western influence suffered. Due to conflict between Pope Clement XI and Kang Xi the Emperor of Qing (1654-1722)6 Jesuits missionaries were forced to leave China.7

5 Hinsch 4
6 Tanner 372-373
7 Tanner 372-373
Literature documenting homosexuality

Examining literature is a crucial part in understanding homosexuality in China. It allows an insight into how it was tolerated, accepted, and at various times even embraced. There is considerably more of documentation on homosexual men than women. Of the same token, there are more documents on homosexuality from traditional China available in English than there are from modern day sources. During the Ming Dynasty this began to change with the first documented evidence of lesbianism.

This included sex manuals describing lesbians, as well as pornographic drawings depicting women that are assumed to have been aimed at men exclusively. The fact that so little of lesbianism has been documented could suggest that women were more hidden or that lesbianism was simply an integral and accepted part of daily life.

The playwright Li Yu (1611-1680) wrote a play called “Pitying the Perfumed Companion”, during Ming dynasty. This play is considered to be a clear indicator of acceptance, as it depicts moments where empathy towards lesbians is shown. Her works involved lesbian marriages; which she idealized, making many imagine that lesbian marriages were perhaps more loving than regular heterosexual marriages. Historical documents from the Ming Dynasty depict a type of male marriage or recognized relationship, where an older man would have a relationship with a younger man. They would be known as the older adoptive brother and the younger adoptive brother. The older man would invite the younger man to live with him and often this union would be recognized by both close and extended families. However Confucian duties such as engaging in heterosexual marriage and reproducing offspring resulted in many of these “marriages” to break up. In some cases the older adoptive brother would financially support the younger brother, in order to help him find a wife. Similarly women also had the ability to form a sort of “marriage” with other women. In the province of Guangdong, same-sex female weddings would take

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place within female only associations. Members of said association would only recognized these so called “marriages”.10

Fortunately from the Bronze Age onwards, the availability of documents increases considerably. Although not much is known about homosexually in China during this period, it is most certainty known that it both existed and was acknowledged,11 providing further proof that homosexuality was very much a part of Chinese life and in fact human nature as well.

China has a wealth of documents where homosexuality is mentioned. There has traditionally been a great appetite within Chinese society and culture for documenting and preserving historical records. Numerous early biographers were known to have homosexual affairs, shamelessly out in the open.12 This indicates that early historians were living and working in an open and tolerant place. Biographers, poets’, playwrights’ and writers of fiction were free to have homosexual affairs without fear of reprisals.13 It is likely that these writers set the standard for many other historians and biographers that followed.

Large portions of historical documents originating from prior to the eighteenth century BCE are considered both untrustworthy and unconfirmed. It was not until periods such as Spring and Autumn Annals (722-481 BCE) and the Warring States period (403-221 BCE) where documents become verifiable and considered to be reliable. It was however during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) where one could find very precise and detailed documents, especially concerning homosexuality. Emperors of the Han Dynasty commissioned historiographers for documentation and it is probable to assume that influenced the content to fit their own purpose. This opened the doors for evidence of homosexuality to be finding its way into legal documents.14

Each of these periods produced stories about male lovers of rulers that have survived until today. These stories became collectively known, as the “Three Canonical Anecdotes”. Often men that would uphold these Confucian values were

10 Pickett 39
11 Hinsch 1-3
12 Crompton 213
13 Crompton 213
14 Crompton 214
praised, as Chinese culture puts greater emphasis on the Confucian values within the story, rather than the homosexual themes within it.

The most famous of these anecdotes are the "Records of the Cut Sleeve" from Han Dynasty. While the anecdotes from Spring and Autumn Annals and the Warring States follow the love affairs of dukes and kings, the story from Han Dynasty is about an emperor. That tale describes an affair between Emperor Ai and his male concubine. His lover Dong Xian fell asleep on his sleeve and instead of waking him up the emperor cuts his sleeve off. By ruining his clothes in order to allow his lover to sleep shows an act of selflessness, love and respect that reflect the much cherished Confucian values. From then on the cut sleeve has been viewed as a symbol for homosexuality.¹⁵

All three stories document relationships where the lovers spend time one-on-one and sacrifice something in order to please their partners as all lovers do. In the first anecdote a court official shares a peach with his duke, by doing so he sacrifices his appetite. In the second anecdote the king sacrifices his reputation and issues an edict in order to show his affection for his lover. All three anecdotes show moments where men in a position of authority perform a selfless act for their lover. These stories became more known as love stories than anything else, as they show and understanding and acceptance over same-sex love. Despite such broadmindedness about homosexuality in traditional China, it was not tolerated unconditionally. Many would undoubtedly gossip, but no action would ever be taken against it due to the strength of the social power within the hierarchy.¹⁶

Discussion of homosexuality in Chinese texts differs greatly from western texts. Stories are first and foremost concentrated on love. Western tales such as fables from ancient Greece are distinctly different as they put emphasis on a warrior’s self-sacrifice, rather then themes of love and tenderness that were prominent in China. The three-abovementioned anecdotes, besides from being love stories, also show a manner of sacrifice. Stories written in ancient Greece focused more on warrior’s sacrifice in battle rather then a sacrifice between two lovers - not to

mention two male lovers. Overall, texts about love in China are by modern standards rather quaint and sentimental.\(^{17}\)

A key difference between China and the West was that China preferred to honour the scholar rather than the warrior. This may also explain why the culture of documentation and preserving historical writings is large in China. In that sense the pen is mightier than the sword. The literati were those in positions of authority. They were trusted with upholding Confucian ethics and law, the very staples in Chinese society. A tale from the Spring and Autumn Annals depicts a story of a duke that was on the brink of making a rash decision that could of resulted in chaos, but due to his advisor's intelligence and knowledge, he was able to prevent great turmoil.\(^{18}\)

Han Dynasty was formed right after the end of Qin dynasty. This period was known for humane emperors. Under their rule culture blossomed, through redistributing of land and revision of traditional learning. This was also a period of general openness towards homosexuality. The emperors encouraged scholars and historians to record all manner of daily life. This emphasis on recording all about daily life is a key to learning that many of Han’s emperors were either bisexual or gay. First ten emperors of Han dynasty had male lovers.\(^{19}\) The acceptance of homosexuality runs parallel with this documentation and there is strong indication that same-sex relationships thrived during the Han dynasty.

Sima Qian is one of the most well-known and respected historians in Chinese history. He lived during the Han dynasty and famously wrote in the “Memoirs of the Historian” about relationships and affairs that emperors and lords indulge in and the effect that male lovers had on rulers. His aim was to write the full truth of everything he observed from his travels and his time in the imperial service.\(^{20}\)

Homosexuality during the Han dynasty was so in the open that histories written about each emperor often had whole sections dedicated to one of their male

\(^{17}\) Crompton 215
\(^{18}\) Crompton 215
\(^{19}\) Pickett 10
\(^{20}\) Hinsch 36
lovers. Sima Qian observed that not only could women and concubines have immense effect on emperors, but so could courtiers and eunuchs.21

Emperor Wen, who was the third emperor of Han dynasty, was one of those Sima Qian wrote about. Emperor Wen became interested in a boatman by the name of Deng Tong. Deng Tong eventually become Emperor Wen's official concubine. He was given immense wealth and promoted to positions of authority where he was able to influence court policies. It is surprising to see that in a society where the only way to gain positions of authority was by being born into it or through scholarly ways, an individual could gain such power by simply being the concubine of an emperor. Sima Qian even admits that he had no distinctive talents or aptitudes other then entertaining the emperor.22

This tale is a prime example of a rags-to-riches story about a lowly individual of limited means who gains the trust of an emperor and consequently ascends to a position of authority. This was a common theme with stories of Chinese emperors during this period. Indulging in a relationship with an emperor would affect one's fortunes and several examples can be found of the families of concubines enjoying wealth for generations, all accumulated because of the position that the lover enjoyed with the emperor. Despite being the emperor's lover, many male concubines had a wife and children on their own. Being the emperor's official concubine was simply their profession.23 It is remarkable to see how homosexuality affected family life in a positive way. With homosexuality bringing wealth to many families, it is probable that the openness and acceptance of these official positions positively influenced the way Chinese society viewed homosexuality.

It is not only interesting to see what Sima Qian reported, but also how he reported. His documentation is without bias and focuses on what has occurred instead of letting his personal opinion interfere. He does not comment on how homosexuality could in any way diminish one's character, but rather how many individuals used homosexuality to advance their career. He highlighted how

21 Hinsch 38
23 Neill 244
multiple emperors were greatly influenced by their male lovers.\textsuperscript{24} His impartial and academic documentation set an example for all other historians to follow, allowing readers today to better understand the events that took place in Han dynasty and to make their own assumptions on these accounts without bias.

**Philosophical influence in China**

China is a country heavily influenced by its main philosophies of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. None of these philosophies condemn homosexuality outright, but they all have referred to in their comments on sexuality in general. All three, in addition to Communism and western ideals, influence modern Chinese sexuality.\textsuperscript{25} A strong knowledge and understanding of these philosophies are essential to grasping the culture and eventually the concept of homosexuality in China.

Taoism’s focuses more on the individual’s relationship with the spiritual and supernatural, rather then moral and ethical principles, like in Confucianism.\textsuperscript{26} A central figure in Taoism is the so-called Yellow Emperor, his biographer Ji Yun claims that the emperor had male lovers. Since the Yellow Emperor is viewed as a leading figure in Taoism, one can assume that his behaviour, sexual or otherwise, sets a precedent for the followers of the faith.

There are two complimentary and forever competing forces of yin and yang, in Taoism. Yin represents earth, positivity and femininity, while yang represents heaven, negativity and masculinity. Sexually, the fundamental aim is to keep yin and yang in balance endorsing a healthy sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{27} When a man and woman engage in sex, the man had to be careful not to lose too much of his yang essence to the woman. Simultaneously he needed to absorb the yin essence from the woman. The woman however did not need to exhibit this carefulness, since she was believed to have an abundance of yin essence. When two men engaged in sex, they exchanged the yang essence. So nothing was lost or gained.\textsuperscript{28} Thus

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{neil242} Neil 242
\bibitem{sullivan100} Sullivan 100
\bibitem{crompton220} Crompton 220
\end{thebibliography}
homosexuality did not result in any issues, as long as balanced is maintained, same-sex intercourse was permissible.

Lesbianism was merely viewed as instances where women were unable to gain sexual pleasure from their husbands or other males, and thus resulted in them embarking on sexual pleasures with one another. Despite the apparent bias of this stance, Taoism generally promote in equality of the sexes.

Buddhism arrived to China from India in the first century A.D. Essentially Buddhism encourages the evacuating of an individual’s desires, in order to achieve personal salvation. It does not especially condemn nor encourage homosexuality. Chinese Buddhism generally discourages sexuality. As one can only find true salvation by giving up lust and personal ambition. Sexual practise were only accepted within a marriage. As homosexuality was not discussed openly in society, when the act took place it was viewed as a pursuit of a sexual desire. This same-sex pursuit was just as frowned upon as any other sexual act outside the context of a marriage. Thus one can conclude that Buddhism does not solely discourage homosexuality, but rather general sexuality. 29

Confucianism for most part speaks little of homosexuality. Confucian ideology enforced closeness of male friendships, which is likely to have helped facilitate romantic male relationships. Some Confucian duties unintentionally promoted homosexuality. The philosophy encouraged the seclusion of women, close male friendships as well as the encouragement of a discipline bond between student and master. 30

Very few works of Confucian literature comment on homosexuality. Despite this, a text of Confucian origin was found stating that by having a concubine or a catamite one might earn demerits. However, if an individual would rape, murder or slander a virtuous woman, they would earn far more demerits then one would by engaging in a homosexual relationship. 31

Confucianism is not anti-sexual, as sexual intercourse comes natural to humans, as in Taoism. Sex was however only accepted for procreation, not recreation.

30 Crompton 221
31 Crompton 221
Public display of affection was seen as immoral. Confucian philosophies have typically viewed sexuality as being harmful to social order and personal well being. These beliefs persisted through the mid 20th century but lost some ground in the 1980s with the opening of China.\textsuperscript{32}

Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism have all at one point in time claimed that homosexuality is in some way undesirable. However, all philosophies put much more emphasis on other aspects such as the importance of maintaining balance in Taoism, the focus on the emptying of ones desires in Buddhism or paying respects to ones elder in Confucianism.

\textsuperscript{32} Crompton 221
Homosexuality in modern day China

The influence of Women's rights

Any documentation of homosexuality is more often than not, likely to include men belonging to the elite in society. Women were rarely discussed or written about in this context. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this began to change with an increasing number of female writers contributing to the literature. The May Forth Movement in 1919 brought about changes in literature as many intellectuals became politicized. In tandem with the introduction of western ideologues within Chinese society came demands for more rights for women. In the 1920s western female missionaries acted as role models for many Chinese women who, maybe for the first time, imagined what life could be like with more freedom. Women were encouraged to join the work force and by doing so, get the opportunity to become economically independent. Increasing independence contributed to women's political and social status growing stronger. In some cases, people began associating this new emergence of feminism with same-sex relations.

This growing freedom seemed to correlate with the increasing amount of women identifying themselves as lesbian. Many of these economically independent women rallied against traditional family structures. This was a turning point for many women; as it was the first time they were able to solely rely on their own skills rather the support of men. Fewer women were interested in pursuing the role of a wife in a traditional household setting. With this newfound freedom many women were exposed to new sexual behaviours. By given the chance to join the labour force and gaining economic independence many women found themselves open to the possibility of same-sex relationships.

The patriarchal family structures were still dominant in Chinese society, thus family oriented Chinese objected to feminists despite increasing participation by women in employment away from home. Women worked in all sorts of

professions and one of the popular ones was silk reeling. Older, wiser women would often teach younger women the skills needed and women's group homes or hostels were established around such work. This led to the development of strong personal relationships between women in these hostels that eventually became a sort of resistance towards marriage. In turn, many same-sex relationships are claimed to have developed in these homes. Among these women, a type of marital proposal started to emerge. This was known as “golden orchid match”, where one woman would give another a present. If the other women accepted it, it would represent a sort of marriage between them. Often the happy couple would celebrate with friends, and might even adopt a daughter. These homes allowed women to live in an environment that had never been possible before.

With lesbianism becoming increasingly open, more writers began to write stories influenced by female romantic relationships. Writers such as Lu Yin (1899-1934) and Ding Ling (1904-1981), who grew out of the May Fourth Movement, were known for their fictional stories about female relationships.

The opening of China also allowed for an influx of westernized influence and the situation of Chinese homosexuals became known to the outside world. The reforms opened the door for features of previously unexplored sexuality to enter and initiated a sexual revolution in China. With western style dating, a growing commercialized sex industry, the emergence of lesbian and gay scenes. Soon this sexual openness became a catalyst for social upheaval.

**Legal framework**

Groups and agencies that worked to improve the rights of gay men and women encouraged China to help improve the lives of Chinese homosexuals. The World Health Organization (WHO) negotiated with the Chinese Ministry of Public Health to introduce sexual education about AIDS aimed at gay men. Another milestone was during the first international Women's Conference in 1995, where several lesbian organizations were welcomed to China.

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contributed to an open and growing discussion of the gay and lesbian community in China.³⁷

Previous norms included the belief that sex was a marital duty, where the woman provided sexual pleasure for her man. Furthermore, any discussion of sex or sexuality in public was frowned upon. With every passing year these norms have started to transform.

Despite the resistance to the changing winds by those who strongly believed homosexuality was a foreign problem, the legal system began to evolve. Until the 1980s people found guilty of homosexual behaviour were known to receive anywhere for ten years to life imprisonment. Those extreme punishments all but ceased after the 1980s.³⁸

In 1997 many important improvements were made to eliminate any ambiguities in the law. One of these was the law that criminalized homosexuality. Guo Xiaofei, author of *Homosexuality the Purview of Chinese Law*,³⁹ disputes that it would be impossible to be criminalized due to homosexuality, because homosexuality was never actually illegal. From 1979 to 1997 it was the act of sodomy itself that was criminalized, but not homosexuality as such. The law used against homosexuality fell under a category known as “hooliganism”.⁴⁰ Thus when the government removed this law against hooliganism by default they made homosexuality legal. What this simply means is that the abolishment of the “decimalization of homosexuality” law was never the incentive of the lawmakers. It was not until the interpretation of these laws afterwards that people realized that sodomy was no longer illegal. The change in the law is now referred to when the government “decriminalized homosexuality”, when in reality this was an unintended by-product.⁴¹

Sex between two women had never been a legal issue; further highlighting that homosexuality was never illegal. In 1991 a father reported his daughter and her girlfriend for being two “hooligans” involved in a same-sex relationship. The

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³⁷ Sullivan 50
³⁸ Sullivan 52
⁴¹ Weston, Timothy and Lionel 238.
National Ministry of Public Security replied to the complaint, by stating that the daughter had not done anything illegal since the Chinese law on homosexuality was rather unclear.

In 1981 the Chinese Society of Psychiatrics began working on formulating the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders (CCMD). It was not until the second draft of CCMD in 1989 that homosexuality was added to the list.\(^\text{42}\) In 2001 the Chinese Society of Psychiatrics intentionally revised the CCMD, resulting in homosexuality no longer being viewed as a mental disorder.\(^\text{43}\) This was a way in which China showed the rest of the world that they wanted to be on par with international norms regarding homosexuality. This did not lead to improvements in the law, as there are still very few laws that protect homosexuals from being discriminated against.\(^\text{44}\)

**Social Factors**

Notwithstanding, Confucianism still plays a role in how Chinese modern society approaches sexual matters. Majority of people feel pressured to conform to a traditional family structure. Those who failed to do so are often shamed by their families and viewed as morally corrupt. This is one of the key challenges that modern day homosexuals face. Thus in order to alleviate pressure from their families, many gay men and women choose to hide their sexual orientation and marry the opposite sex.

In recent years homosexuality has become more and more accepted. Through transcultural practices and change in sexual knowledge, homosexuality is no longer universally considered abnormal and wrong, particularly in urban areas. Although there will always be some percentage of people who do not condone this, those who are accepting are continuously growing. It is estimated that 30 million people are homosexual in China, while there is no way of knowing for certain how large the number really is as in most other societies.\(^\text{45}\) A 2011 study by the Williams Institute of UCLA, California, estimated that 3.5% of Americans

\(^{42}\) Weston, Timothy and Lionel 242.
\(^{44}\) Baumle 111
\(^{45}\) Baumle 111
were homosexual, a total of 9 million people. Taking into account the population growth since then, that percentage today is approximately 11 million people. In September, 2016 the population of China is around 1,383 billion people. Using the same approximation, 3.5% of China amounts to 47.5 million people, significantly higher the early estimate of 30 million. It must be considered unlikely that the study accounted for every homosexual in America, one can expect this number to be significantly higher.

The acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals is more common among the young, unmarried and educated. In 2010, a survey was conducted among Chinese university students, gathering information on their view on homosexuality. The result varied according to age, region and cultural background of the students. It showed that university students living in urban areas were more likely to be open-minded towards homosexuals. It can be argued that the urban landscape contributed to their open-mindedness, since urban areas are more exposed to western culture. Or perhaps living in close proximity with one another entails the need for city dwellers to show tolerance or at least apathy or non-hostility towards homosexuals.

A survey in 2007, conducted by sexologist Li Yinhe estimated that 20% of people in China saw nothing inherently wrong with homosexuality; however, many still believed that homosexuality was an illness that could be cured. Still today there are clinics that offer electro shock therapy and nausea-inducing drugs to help cure homosexuality. The one-child policy has put great pressure on producing a child - an heir. Since the relaxation of the policy in 2015, one might wonder how this will affect coming generations of homosexuals. Given this pressure on not being able to marry, many settle for loveless but acceptable heterosexual marriages. Consequently for homosexuals, marriage has become a form of systematic oppression, replacing the disappointment and
rejection that they would otherwise experience from their family and peers. Many homosexuals have taken to sidestepping the pressure put on them to marry by organizing a marriage between a gay man and lesbian woman. The steps taken in the direction have become a part of the so-called Tongzhi (同志) movement that aims to win acceptance of society through a cultural balance of being gay and being a part of a family.

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52 Steinfeld 143
53 The term Tongzhi is a slang word for a homosexual but literally translates as “same will.” In imperial China the term referred to people with the same ethics or ideals but adopted a political meaning in the 20th century when the Communist Party made “tongzhi” equivalent to the Soviet term “comrade”, evoking the socialist ideal for an equal society.
The Influence of the Tongzhi movement

Cultural differences

The Tongzhi movement originated in Taiwan, where it was associated lesbian women's struggle for equality but today it has morphed into a vaguely defined movement in Mainland China, as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan. Its main focus is on the family aspects of gay life. In 1996, the Tongzhi movement used television and the use of national celebrities to encourage “coming home”, hoping to bring the narrative of the gay community into the public eye. Despite mixed results this can be viewed as a milestone for the Tongzhi movement.54

While there are some similarities between the struggle of homosexuals in the West and in China, there is more that divides them. The main difference being that for majority of Caucasian Anglo-Saxon gay men and women, the primary focus is sexuality. For people of Asian as well as African descent, there is more emphasis put on race, ethnicity, culture, class and family when the topic of homosexuality comes up.55

In western societies sexuality is generally viewed in a straightforward manner, an individual is either homosexual or heterosexual. China's stance on sexuality is not as black and white. Chinese culture has traditionally classified people based on their position within societal hierarchy. It was acceptable for a man of high social class to rule over those of lower class then him, be it his wife, his concubine or a male servant. If a nobleman desired a female or male servant; there would be little difference between the two since in both situations the nobleman was exhibiting his social dominance over those inferior to him. Thus the topic of the servant's gender is irrelevant.56

If only for that reason alone, it is very difficult to view Chinese sexuality purely with a western viewpoint. Still today when homosexuality is discussed the issue of family is of higher importance than the subject of sexuality itself. In traditional China the class gap between the higher class and the lower class prevented anyone from taking action against homosexuals. In modern day China the class

54 Sullivan 43
55 Sullivan 28
56 Sullivan 30
gap is not as large and has possibly encouraged some of the criticism directed at homosexuals. This idea that one has to hide their identity can be viewed as a polar opposite to the behaviours of the West, where the stance on gay and lesbian rights is quite liberal.57

**Coming out vs coming home**

“Coming out” in the western world is for most parts very different compared to China. When an individual comes out in the West (for example in the United States) it signals individuality, discourse of rights and prioritization of one’s sexual orientation. “Coming out” in China is somewhat more complex as it involves considerable cultural significance. The term “coming home” has been an alternative phrase to “coming out”. The Chinese term for home is jia (家). The term can also mean one’s family or the place where one belongs. The phrase “coming out” works in a society where individualism and self-affirmation is securely placed in its culture. This is not the case in China, thus the term “coming home” is much more appropriate but at the same time slightly problematic as one is viewed as leaving his or her family.58

One of the most central values within Chinese society is filial piety. At birth one is assigned a certain role such as a son or a daughter. The goal for all individuals is to fulfil the expected role and then graduate to a role of a husband or wife. In today’s China, these family obligations are still strong in society and there is no realistic indication that this will change fundamentally in the near future despite recent changes in attitude.

**The media**

Most media coverage of homosexuality in the late 1990s and early 2000s, centred on health related issues. This has now begun to change with coverage of more positive aspects in relations to homosexuality.59

An act of defiance to the ban on gay marriage took place recently when two gay men staged a wedding to cast a light on the situation. Their announcement to the

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57 Sullivan 30
59 Steinfeld 140
world that not all homosexuals are unhappy was duly reported in mass media in China.\textsuperscript{60}

In other instances where homosexuals have publically challenged government agencies, the media coverage has been quite thorough.\textsuperscript{61} Despite these positive changes, there are still prejudice stories in the media especially regarding HIV and AIDS.\textsuperscript{62} With ever increasing numbers of bars, saunas, social clubs and tea houses that cater to homosexuals, reports of regular and frequent raids by local law enforcement have been recognized.

The growth of social media has changed society and the way people interact. Homosexuals like others have benefited from this development and are now able to explore and connect with others like them. Parallel to this, many websites have been established that cater to the gay community. An important step was taken in 2013 when government censors allowed online dating aimed at homosexuals.\textsuperscript{63} There has also been an increase in films that target an LGBT audience.\textsuperscript{64} However many television shows and films struggle to get past censors in part, due to an increased cultural clampdown on what is considered to be vulgar, immoral or unhealthy depiction of society's dark side. This has increased since President's Xi Jinping came to power in 2012.\textsuperscript{65}

Fudan University in Shanghai has offered a class in gay and lesbian studies. By allowing these types of classes at university level, shows a slow shift away from viewing homosexuality as a purely negative one. Guangdong University of Foreign Studies on the other hand, denied a woman named Xiaoyu Wang for openly proposing to her girlfriend on her graduation day. This shows us that not all universities are ready to take steps towards full acceptance.\textsuperscript{66} In 2009

\textsuperscript{60} "Rohmer-therapy." The Economist
\textsuperscript{61} "Rohmer-therapy." The Economist
\textsuperscript{62} Steinfeld 141
\textsuperscript{63} "Rohmer-therapy." The Economist
\textsuperscript{64} Gamer 330
Shanghai held its first Gay Pride, a major step in the battle for homosexual acceptance, despite the parade part of the event being banned.\(^{67}\)

**Homosexuality in numbers**

An academic survey known as the Chinese Health and Family Life Survey (CHFLS)\(^{68}\) analysed the behaviour of heterosexuals and homosexuals in contemporary China. The survey claimed that 60% of all lesbians lived in urban areas, whereas only 30% of heterosexual women lived in urban areas. These numbers reflect that lesbians look toward cities for their future happiness. The survey recognized that due to lack of reliable information about income and occupation of homosexuals, it is difficult to determining whether homosexuals have a lower or higher socioeconomic status then their heterosexual counterparts.\(^{69}\)

One can estimate that the socioeconomic status of male and female homosexuals is lower, simply because China is still inherently a heterosexual society. Unsurprisingly the study found that gay men and lesbians were more supportive of gender equality. The survey also aimed to collect information on how men and women viewed extramarital sex. The survey was also able to examine some of the characteristics amongst homosexual men and women, however general they may be. This is useful in providing information about the modern day Chinese homosexual citizens.

Notwithstanding the increasing discussion about sex in society, sexual knowledge is still lacking in China, both among heterosexuals and homosexuals. In a 2000 academic survey, 75% of those participating were unsure if a condom could prevent HIV/AIDS. Gay men and lesbians were generally less informed than their heterosexual counterparts.\(^{70}\) This is likely due to HIV/AIDS education generally only targeting heterosexual people. In 2009 it was estimated that

\(^{67}\) Steinfeld 140
\(^{68}\) CHFLS is a collaborative project between University of Chicago/National Opinion Research Center, Renmin University in Beijing, the Peking Union Medical College in Beijing, and the University of North Carolina. Interviews were conducted between 1999-2000.
\(^{69}\) Baumle 115
\(^{70}\) Baumle 122
around 74,000 people in China had HIV, with approximately a third of those thought to be homosexuals.\textsuperscript{71}

The study concluded that much higher number of gay men and women have sexual relationships and encounters. A comparison was made between unmarried heterosexual women and homosexual men. The survey asked how many of them had engaged in sex that year. Only about 14\% of heterosexual unmarried women admitted to having sex, while 60\% of homosexual men did. This could easily be explained with the fact that risk of pregnancy is non-existent for gay men. It was further estimated that around 90\% of homosexuals were in heterosexual marriages thus it is not surprising that a high percentage of homosexuals had engaged in extramarital sex.\textsuperscript{72}

The study also noted the way in which perception towards sex was beginning to change. Attitudes were becoming more positive and people's knowledge about sex and human sexuality was growing. Premarital sex was becoming widely accepted, whereas majority are still against extramarital sex. Despite growing sexual knowledge, there still is a sizeable portion of the Chinese population who are unaware of sexually transmitted deceases and HIV/AIDS. As a result, gay men and women still face many challenges in their day-to-day life in relations to their sexual behaviour and practices.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{71} Gamer 333
\textsuperscript{72} Baumle 116
\textsuperscript{73} Baumle 122
**China vs. the West**

By the start of the 20th century the longstanding tolerance for homosexuality began to diminish and homophobia began to grow in China as previously mentioned. It has been pointed out that the Chinese themselves invited this change. With elites and intellectuals asking the question why China, with its long and glorious history, felt like a victim and weaker to the West. In its efforts to understand their dilemma, they looked into western texts and laws, trying to grasp what was missing. In so doing, the negative view of homosexuality began to infiltrate Chinese thought. At this time, homosexuality was classified as a psychological disorder but as the 20th century progressed, the negative attitude grew stronger.

In the first decade of the People’s Republic the notion of homosexuality and was hardly mention. News of progress in the West did not reach Chinese homosexuals and on the rare occasion that homosexuality was mentioned in Chinese media, it was in relations to the evils and decadence of western culture. This is a factor that is likely to have contributed to the isolation of homosexuals in China. Homosexuality under Mao’s rule was simply not recognized. That did not thwart Mao from the banning of homosexuality as he viewed it as a sign of western influence. Despite a rich history of toleration towards homosexuality, many were quick to relate homosexuality to western ideals, thus it was heavily looked down upon. Society began to denounce any sexual practices that didn’t result in reproduction. This was the first time that a direct action was taken by authorities against homosexuals in China.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Communist Party aggressively persecuted homosexuals, even without explicit laws or edicts as a basis. Extreme actions were taken to punish those suspected of being homosexual with reform camps and number of executions taking place. In an attempt to rid China of its’

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74 Steinfeld 136
75 Lingiardi, Drescher 124
77 Sullivan 52
homosexual past, and force the nation to forget China's liberal history, many historical documents with references to homosexuals were destroyed.\(^7\)

In the 1950s anti-homosexual works by western sexologists had influenced numerous Chinese scholars. They began viewing homosexuality as a mental disorder and something that was ultimately curable. Coincidentally, parallel to this and into the 1960s, western scholar had begun to shy away the belief that homosexuality was a mental illness. Contemporary China however continued to utilize this out-dated model of thinking into the 21\(^{st}\) century.\(^7\) It was not until 2001, some decades after most of the western world, that Chinese Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses.\(^8\) Coincidentally, the World Health Organization did not strike homosexuality of its list of mental disorders until 1992.

**The debate widens**

It was a welcome development in 1985, when the sexologist Ruan Fangfu wrote about how homosexuality should be decriminalized in the magazine, *To Your Good Health*. Ruan Fangfu further stated that this sexual orientation was in fact evident in all other countries and cultures. With the help of such publications and media the discussion of homosexuality increased and began to erode the belief that it was an illness. However, it was not until Deng Xiaoping’s reforms that China’s homosexuals were able to experience a newfound freedom.\(^8\)

The reforms opened the doors for many to leave their hometowns, migrate for better paying employment, away from family and friends. This opportunity was particularly beneficial to homosexuals, who had felt pressured to conceal their sexual orientation and now got an opportunity to start a new life with a clean slate.

Chinese homosexuals do apparently not face the same kind of persecution or physical violence as is known to take place in the West, in Russia and many

\(^7\) Steinfeld 139
\(^7\) Steinfeld 139
\(^8\) Gamer 330
countries in Africa. In China homophobia and discrimination is far subtler. The main problems stem from the fact that the individual cannot confess their sexual orientation due to intense pressure from their families to marry and have a child. Perhaps this is preferable to being attacked both verbally and physically, like in the West however this situation is still not ideal.

It seems that the sequence of the “coming out” for gay Chinese men is more or less the same as it was for western men. It starts with them becoming aware of same-sex attraction, leading to homosexual sexual behaviours then the commitment to being gay and finally “coming out”. However, lesbians in China are still in the shadows, many of which find it challenging to meet other lesbians. As a result less information is available on their sexual behaviour.

It would be naive to expect homosexuals in the West not to struggle with family acceptance, but the call for a traditional family structure is not as ingrained in most western cultures as it is in China. The whole structure of Chinese society is heterosexual, full acceptance of gay men and women is unlikely to become a reality until the structure of society changes and majority of the population become more aware of homosexuality. China’s unrealistic expectation for its homosexual children to marry and procreate is therefore likely to continue in the coming years. One must though be hopeful that recent changes in the one-child policy will alleviate this pressure. This will however take time that many Chinese homosexuals may feel they do not have.

The way China views premarital sex relates directly to how they view homosexuality. With more and more people accepting the idea of premarital sex, more are also willing to welcome or at least tolerate homosexuality. Chinese college students are understandably among those who welcome the changing ideas about premarital sex.

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84 Sullivan 76
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Conclusion

Homosexuality in China has ravelled a long and winding road towards acceptance with many bumps; the journey has rarely been smooth. Some of the obstacles have been of foreign origin but most of them have been local.

The influx of westerners brought to China negative opinions on homosexuality but ultimately the Chinese did not change their ways in order to fit western ideals. Today however, western views have provided both influence and encouragement for Chinese homosexuals. This western viewpoint has become significantly more influential than they ever were before.

Gradual improvement in the attitude towards homosexuals in China, from the wider population as well as authorities, gives hope that it too could one day rediscover its former tolerance and acceptance. One should however be aware that despite the openness and acceptance of homosexuality among the elite in traditional China, it is still unlikely that there was overall tolerance. Since only the homosexual affairs of the male elites were well documented, one cannot assume that they were accepted. However, this tolerance among the elites is important, as it serves as a reminder that modern China can both learn and grow from.

In China's male dominated society it is naive to expect this to happen quickly. This huge and diverse country will always need a long time for a new issue to be fully accepted. Homosexuality is such an issue.

China has been and is likely to continue to be an extremely family oriented country. There is no indication that Chinese homosexuals do not subscribe to that belief and will continue to place family first. For them, perhaps changing the ways in which parents view them is the next obtainable goal and the most important one. With the expectations that children should take care of their parents and grandparents comes great pressure that homosexuals may find difficult to alleviate, if they want to stay true to themselves. For them to be able to settle into a lifestyle that fits them and their families, society must also advance. Stronger healthcare, education and sustainable pensions will allow
homosexuals to look to the future and not worry about having a child to take care of them in their sunset years.

Right now, the best that homosexuals can hope for is that society will gradually accept them for who they are and not to view them as abnormal and their orientation as something that should be illegal. If this is achieved, other problems they face will be easier to tackle, such as the right to marry one another for love. Allowing same-sex marriage would not only bring great happiness to millions of homosexuals, but also have a very positive effect of China’s image.

What China’s homosexuals will eventually need more than anything, is a real living champion for their cause - a spokesperson that is too popular and too connected to be easily silenced or dismissed. For a male dominated society such as China, this individual must be a man in order to cause any meaningful stir.

The ground may not yet be fertile enough for this to happen but it is unrealistic not to expect this to occur. How far into the future is hard to tell, but we must assume that it will be met with strong opposition but hopefully also an even stronger support.

There is little doubt that China is considered to be an important country in industry and business, but constant charges over the lack of human rights has kept China from the full acceptance that authorities crave from the western world. The allowance of same-sex marriage could bridge this gap and possibly open even more new doors for business, wealth and respect.

Any advancement in the rights of homosexuals that takes place in China must be on Chinese terms in order to be fully sustainable. Overly aggressive or prescriptive demands by outsiders are thus likely to slow the pace of change.

Recent court case in the city of Changsha, Hunan Province, where two men were refused permission to marry signifies a positive development, despite the negative ruling. The court’s decision to accept the case carries with it an

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86 "Rohmer-therapy." The Economist
acknowledgment that this issue needs to be dealt with and that it is deserving of the court’s time.\textsuperscript{87}

Recent news of government actions gives however, pause to any unrealistic optimism. Chinese authorities have taken decisive steps to curtail the ability of foreign NGO’s to operate in China. The law stipulates that in order to operate in China, a foreign NGO must register with the police but also to have an official Chinese partner organization.\textsuperscript{88}

Foreign NGOs have played a vital part in promotion of all human rights in China, including those of homosexuals. It is unlikely that an official organization for homosexual rights will come forth and with the homosexual movement still in its infancy, this decision could be a potential setback.

That said, it must be considered unlikely that the millions of people that define themselves as homosexuals will allow anybody or anything to push them back into the darkness, be it governments or population set on reversing the direction of society. Social media, the internet and growing understanding among the young will play a role in resisting this, with or without foreign catalysts.

Chinese homosexuals are fully aware of the advancements that have been made outside of China and are unlikely to settle for anything less. Given the development of recent decades one must conclude that this trend of increased tolerance will continue as Chinese homosexuals walk step by step towards full acceptance with their western counterparts.

\textsuperscript{87} Phillips The Guardian  


