

Gay Literature from China: In Search of a Happy Ending

Research >
China

Gay literature in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is still 'underground', but it reflects the growing self-awareness of a subculture. What lies ahead? The texts themselves – some have already been made into films – provide no easy answer. Be that as it may, Chinese gay literature is thriving.

By Remy Cristini

In December of 2001, the Film Association at Beijing University organized 'China's First Gay Film Festival'. Posters went up on campus, but most of the advertising for the event was done on the university's homepage. Chinese and foreign gay films were to be shown at different locations on and around the campus for ten days. Students sold tickets in their dormitories. The major attraction was *Lanyu*, by Hong Kong film director Stanley Kwan, recently released in Hong Kong and Taiwan and boasting five Golden Horse Awards (the 'Taiwanese Oscars'). Before long, all tickets for all screenings of *Lanyu* were sold out.

The fact that PRC students were allowed to organize an event like this is remarkable in itself, as none of the other movies on the programme had ever had a public screening before. On top of that, a lot of discussion had been going on about *Lanyu* because the film had been shot in Beijing without first consulting Chinese authorities, which would normally make permission for its distribution or public screening extremely unlikely. The fact that this festival has taken place, with permission of university officials, might be an indication that the official attitude towards homosexuality within

Chinese society is changing. In itself, the plot of *Lanyu* is not shocking. It is the tragic love story of a poor student (Lanyu) and a wealthy businessman (Handong). Lanyu is a country boy who goes to university in Beijing. When he becomes short of money, his only way out is to prostitute himself. Handong is his first customer and also the first person with whom he has sex. Lanyu falls in love with Handong who takes good care of the young student, but although Handong shows affection in a material way, he does not allow himself to get emotionally involved. He hurts Lanyu badly by having sexual relationships with other boys as well, and nearly breaks his heart when he announces that he is to marry a lady from the office. After a lot of dramatic twists and turns, Handong finally acknowledges that he is gay and truly in love with Lanyu. Just when they seem to have overcome all difficulties and can be together at last, Lanyu dies in a car accident.

The movie *Lanyu* is based on a Chinese gay novel, *A Story From Beijing*, which has circulated on the web since 1996. For the film, the plot was not really altered, but the original text is full of explicit lovemaking scenes, pornographic rather than erotic. When the story first appeared on the web, it was truly shocking. Up until the early

1990s, gay men in Beijing had little choice but to hang around in parks to meet other gay men, and when they made love it was often in a public toilet. Though it may have been quite common in pre-modern China, prostitution, especially gay prostitution, has been officially designated as a vice from feudal times by the Communist Party, and in the 1980s (when the story of *Lanyu* and Handong begins) police would occasionally arrest gay men to maintain 'public order'. When in the 1990s people gained access to the Internet, this immediately became an alternative to the parks and toilets, and provided the gay population with a more secure meeting place, mostly beyond the control of law enforcement. *A Story From Beijing* was probably the first of its kind and is the best-known and most influential gay novel to date. Its socially controversial theme aside, *A Story From Beijing* is provocative in other respects as well: it contains pornography, prostitution, and a reference to the violent ending of the student demonstrations around Tiananmen Square in 1989. Protected by relative anonymity, made possible by the Internet, the author of *A Story From Beijing* – his or her identity remains unknown – paved the way to a genre known as 'Tongzhi (Comrade) Literature'. The word 'Comrade', widely used in communist discourse, literally means 'of the same intent' and was adopted in Chinese gay circles as a form of address. Though it was used ironically at first, it has now become a common word for 'gay', without any communist connotation.

Zheping is one of the author's close friends. Usually wearing women's clothes, he runs a small boutique in a Beijing department store.

Voices of comrades

One characteristic of the early Comrade novels is that they all tend to be rather unlikely love stories, very touching (or sentimental) at times, but invariably leading to catastrophic endings: the lovers are either separated by death or struck down by other cruel

tricks of fate. Nevertheless, these stories depict an imaginary and often idealized world, a refuge from harsh reality, which would appeal to gay readers, especially young people with access to the Internet. Some of the early novels have become real Comrade classics. Though not very realistic, the stories do represent the lives of other gay people, and let readers imagine what it might be like to live openly as a gay instead of having to hide one's sexual preference. It is safe to say that the communicative function of Comrade novels has always been more important than their aesthetic aspects. Even an influential piece like *A Story From Beijing* shows little formal sophistication. This is partly explained by the nature of the media through which these stories circulate: the Internet. Anybody can publish anything on the Internet – and that is basically what happens. There are a lot of websites with gay discussion forums (even the homepage of Beijing University has its own!) and chat rooms.¹ Most of the novels start as feuilletons on one of these sites, with new chapters added every day, readers commenting on the story as it is being written. When a story becomes truly popular, it will end up on other sites that collect Comrade novels.²

Over the past few years, the stories have gradually become more realistic. Instead of just telling the story of two people who seem to live entirely in their own world, recent novels describe the lives of gay people in a world that is predominantly shaped by heterosexual vision. Stories about university life on campus are popular, because most of today's readers and authors are either students themselves or belong to the same age group. The stories feature issues such as coming out and the difficulty of finding a partner. In recent Comrade novels there is also room for subplots unrelated to homosexuality, and some authors pay more attention to form and style. As a result, pornography is completely absent in recent novels. Another important development is that the stories no longer necessarily end in misery, although the characters' future often remains uncertain.

Subculture and society

An important reason for these changes is that Chinese society has also changed a lot in the past ten years. After several decades of poverty and frugality, consumerism as a result of economic development now goes hand in hand with rapidly spreading individualism in urban China. Wearing trendy clothes and armed with fancy phones, young city people flamboyantly express their identities. This has led to increased diversification in art and literature, whereas until the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), state-enforced uniformity was the rule. Nowadays, gay people in the cities no longer need to hide in the dark, and

they go out in bars and clubs that are commonly known as gay places. It is not unusual to see elderly people sit down in front of a disco for a rest on their evening stroll, watching the colourful transvestites as they emerge from a taxi and make their way to the entrance. In this respect, the generation gap in China is huge and mutual understanding nearly impossible, but for many young people the 'live and let live' strategy is working well – for the time being.

The main problem that remains for Chinese homosexuals is traditional thinking about marriage and posterity. Young gay people are often forced into heterosexual marriage by their family. However, in recent years they have been getting support from Chinese scholars and scientists. More and more sociologists and psychologists are educating the public by stressing that homosexuality is not a disorder but a natural phenomenon, that forced marriage is harmful to all parties involved, and that denying the existence of a gay population will be harmful to society as a whole at a time when the AIDS epidemic is spreading in China. They advocate greater tolerance for and better understanding of homosexuality, to enable a fruitful debate on public health.

A happy ending?

Whether or not homosexuals will become an acknowledged part of Chinese society in the near future remains to be seen, and the prospects for today's young gay people are as open-ended as their stories. Up until a few years ago, authors of Comrade novels saw no future for gay couples in China and they let their heroes die an early death to spare them a destiny that would perhaps be even more painful. Today, their prospects seem less grim, both in the stories and in real life.

Needless to say, the film festival at Beijing University was a great success. Perhaps it was sheer chauvinism that led to the university officials' decision to allow the festival to go ahead, as *Lanyu* was, after all, shot in Beijing with PRC actors and was based on a Chinese novel. Journalists present at the premiere of *Lanyu* praised the film and the initiative of the students in local newspapers. Although the university officials were also the ones who ordered the students to terminate the festival prematurely, because of this unforeseen media attention, the event was a signal of change. One of the outcomes is that gay films are now for sale in the innumerable VCD shops throughout the country and it is only a matter of time before the first Comrade novel will appear in bookshops. <

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may inhabit at different points in their lives, and an engagement with their own imaginings and narratives of these processes. If this conference did not plot the anthropological futures for twenty-first-century Indonesia (which was hardly its intent) it did bring home the importance of attending to the specificities of particular historical and political junctures imagined and conceived in some sense as 'beginnings.' For scholars of Indonesia, this may be the real challenge of the moment: to track the complex processes through which the wide range of possibilities attendant on 'beginnings' such as national independence or Reformasi are subsequently narrowed down with some options foreclosed while others remain to guide the making of new Indonesian futures, presents, and pasts. <

Reference

- Pemberton, John, *On the Subject of 'Java'*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1994).

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Courtesy of Zheping

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- 1 <http://bbs.beida-online.com/bbsWeb/list.php?board=Homo>
- 2 e.g. www.boysky.net/wencai/jingxuan