

Exploring the Possibility of Same-Sex Love in Late Ming China

Identity categories are constantly being renegotiated. Over time, all things are bound to present themselves in unique and potentially contradictory forms. The tradition of same-sex love has emerged in different places and times and refuses to manifest itself uniformly across those spaces. Its practice has existed in China for more than two thousand years and the treatment of such performances has varied widely. Same-sex love in dynastic China is subject to many perspectives and these views are mediated by legal, social, and literary forces.

DISCURSIVE CHOICES AND THE CHINESE SEXUAL SUBJECT

Modern notions and words used to describe instances of same-sex love differ across space and time and are entirely inadequate to describe such relationships as they existed in past contexts. Words that exist in one culture are not capable of accurately reflecting the cultural nuances that are inevitably different across communities. Unlike Western culture, the dynastic Chinese did not believe in ex-

clusive sexual object choice; people were not forced to make a permanent decision privileging one sex or the other. The Chinese believed that one's object choice could change in accordance with the shifting preferences of an individual.¹ This is an important distinction between many of the modern notions of same-sex love and that of the dynastic Chinese. The idea of gay or homosexual that exists in modern Western culture is not present in dynastic China and a different understanding is necessary when approaching the topic of same-sex love in that period.

The language used to describe the subject also needs clarification. Early references to same-sex love in China are hard to clearly identify, as the earliest forms of the Chinese language contain a built-in indefiniteness and are unmarked sexually, thereby complicating the process of compiling reliable references.² Same-sex love appeared as early as the Zhou dynasty, when the emperor could choose to bestow "favor" upon any individual he deemed worthy. The sex of the individual did not factor into his selection.

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In fact, it is noted in the Records of the Grand Historian that men often became the sexual objects of their superiors in order to gain political favor: "... it was not women alone who can use their looks to attract the eyes of the ruler; courtiers and eunuchs can play at that game as well. Many were the men of ancient times who gained favor this way."⁴ What is worth noting is that individuals were not defined by their sexual object choice but rather by their relationship to another person, in this case the emperor. Same-sex love does not create a primary identity but instead is an activity that is participated in by an individual who is defined by his/her social relationships.

Another example of a reference to same-sex love resides in the term cut-sleeve.⁵ Cut-sleeve was the term for a male who filled the sexual and emotional needs of the emperor. The name has its roots in a story where the Emperor Ai and his lover Dong Xian have fallen asleep and Emperor Ai needs to get up but Dong Xian is lying on his sleeve. Rather than wake Dong, the Emperor cuts off his own sleeve. This term, then, does not represent a primary identity for Dong Xian but rather is descriptive of his relationship to Emperor Ai: he is one for whom the emperor will cut his sleeve.

There is a habit in the Chinese language of using modifiers to describe a person who engages in same-sex love as opposed to labeling him/her with a singular, identity-forming noun. For the Chinese sexual subject, same-sex love was something a person could do; one could play the role of the cut-sleeve, but one was not a cut-sleeve. The Western subject, however, takes same-sex love as a way of being. This paper will use the term "same-sex love" as its reference to the Chinese sexual subject who engages in sexual or emotional relationships with someone of the same sex, as it best avoids creating a primary identity while up-

holding the descriptive nature inherent to the Chinese language.

THE CHINESE JUDICIAL WORLD

Laws emerged as early as the Song dynasty regarding transgender issues and same-sex object choice. The focus of these laws, however, was not on the immorality of the activity but instead on its relationship to an individual's status:

*The apparent purpose of Song lawmakers was to fix boundaries: To prevent persons of commoner status (liang min) from being degraded by occupation to mean status (jian min—which included prostitutes) and to prevent males from being degraded by penetration or cross-dressing into females.*⁶

The problem with sodomy is not related to any sort of deviance associated with the act itself; instead, lawmakers focused on preventing people from engaging in activities that would lower their social status. Even here the law is concerned with how one relates to others and not about an identity or label they may ascribe to the persecuted individual. The concerns expressed in the above section concerning language choice are also espoused by Matthew Sommer. He recognizes that words like homosexual assume that one's social identity is built around his/her sexual object choice, which is not the case in China. In fact, "[i]n many societies, the sex of one's object of desire has yielded in priority to an hierarchical division between penetrant and penetrated."⁷ The reason that penetration was the focus of the Song and later dynasties' legal codes is not because it established some sort of homosexual identity, but because it "profoundly destabilized the gendered social hierarchy by treating some men (the penetrated) like women."⁸ The Song law, therefore, was focused on legally regulating men into activities that would not confuse their place in the social hierarchy. The hier-

archy was important for two reasons. First, it embodied the norm of the time; people had structured their lives around Confucian values for hundreds of years and these values placed people into a very specific social hierarchy. Challenging norms in any society is destined to be met with resistance. It was also important to the government because the destabilization of the system that told people to be obedient to the government could prove threatening to the ruling order. Safe-guarding these societal roles was critical to the maintenance of the regime.

The Song, however, is not the only dynasty to attempt to regulate people's behavior. "...[F]rom the Song dynasty through the Qing, judicial interest in male homosexual [same-sex] acts consistently focused on phallic penetration of the anus, the division of sexual roles thereby implied, and the stigma of the penetrated male."⁹ The social hierarchy they tried to protect was intimately tied to the notion of penetration, as a man was supposed to penetrate and a woman was supposed to be penetrated; to allow a man to be penetrated destroyed the coherent fashion by which society was ordered. It was not until the Ming dynasty, during the Jiajing reign (1522-1567), however, that an actual law was established that prohibited sexual intercourse between men. The law was implemented via a supplementary code that applied statutes by analogy. These laws each cited laws from the original Ming code that, via similar situations, behaviors and contexts, were meant to help guide rulings in a wider range of cases brought before the courts. This statute applied by analogy reads: "Whoever inserts his penis into another man's anus for lascivious play (jiang shenjing fang ru ren fenmen nei yin xi) shall receive 100 blows of the heavy bamboo, in application by analogy of the statue on 'pouring foul material into the mouth of another person...'."¹⁰ The stat-

ute used to create this new, parallel, law-applied-by-analogy is also useful in revealing societal sentiments that surround penetration and help explain why the law went to such lengths to prevent it. While the law is aware of the bodily ramifications that may arise from penetration, those were far from its central concern. Sommer notes that the idea of foul material "suggests pollution and humiliation more than physical danger."¹¹ There is also a directionality associated with the original Ming statute that implied that the sully of the body was only incurred by a single person: the penetrated into whose mouth the foul material was poured. Moreover, it seems to imply that the person who is actively pouring the foul material is not complicit with the social humiliation; it is only the receiver who is shamed. The penetrated suffers because his masculinity had been damaged, while the penetrant, because he played the masculine role, was free from stigma.¹² From this law it is clear that there is no mark of being homosexual in the Western sense; if there were a similar understanding then both parties would be subjected to the shame that, in this law, is only associated with being penetrated.

Same-sex love between women in dynastic legal codes also deserves attention for the very reason that it is not mentioned in the codes themselves. Sex between women was not perceived as threatening, most likely because of the law's fixation on penetration. The phallocentrism built-in to the law made women seem innocent because no degradation of character could be committed and a woman's chastity was not in danger. The pollution of a woman's chastity and the degradation of a man's masculinity, while functionally very different, both threaten the gender hierarchy upon which society rests and are still subject to societal reevaluations in contemporary China.¹³

EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL AND LITERARY ATTITUDES

While the law makes clear its views about same-sex love, or more particularly male love, these opinions are rooted in a deeper ideology that permeated all of Chinese society. The late Ming saw the rise of a new way of looking at the world, one in which things were not required to be positioned in dichotomous opposition to one another but could be conveyed as hybrids, exhibiting characteristics of multiple personae. This new movement, that created reality as an amalgam of perspectives, is referred to as syncretism. Giovanni Vitiello is quick to distinguish between the syncretism of dynastic China and the kind associated with the Western tradition. While the West's view of this hybridity is characterized by irrationality and as "random eclecticism," the Chinese form was one of inclusivity, without requiring a reconciliation as is preferred by the rational Western order.¹⁴ Vitiello best describes the effect of syncretism on Chinese culture, saying:

... syncretism may be viewed as the constructive counterpart of that erosion (if not erasure) of boundaries that many scholars (already in the Ming) have recognized as a mark of that culture. The special density of processes of negotiation and translation featured by the late Ming culture corresponds to a blurring of boundaries at a variety of levels—of philosophical and religious boundaries, surely, but also social (most notably, between literati and merchants), and of literary boundaries, both in terms of languages and genre (classical and vernacular/elite and popular literature).¹⁵

This philosophical move towards hybrid spaces helped to collapse many of the social barriers that had existed for centuries in the Chinese culture. The founder of neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi, had created a world where the spiritual was separated from the material and created an ontology that

forced the subject to use reason to regulate his/her feelings and desires. The late Ming philosophical tradition, however, as treated by Wang Yang-ming, breaks from this distinction between spirit and matter, believing that people had innate knowledge and that they did not have to rationally determine and police their behaviors. This erasure of boundaries allowed for the emergence of new world views, ones that were previously denied description and repressed due to their inability to fit neatly into predetermined categories. This blurring of what were once distinct categories fundamentally reoriented Chinese thought and broke with the neo-Confucian tradition that had previously gained prominence.¹⁶

This disruption in traditional thought was not only what the law was trying to prevent through the creation of fixed categories, but was also what gave rise to new forms of literature. This did not simply mean reworking old categories in new ways, but entirely breaking free from the conventions that had bound authors and their writings. No longer was it necessary to write in strict classical Chinese, and people instead began to write in the vernacular, which made literature accessible to a wider range of readers. This broadening in audience, from the literatus to include the commoner, also justified writing in new styles and genres that appealed to the newfound, wider readership.

As a result of the increased freedom in writing, there was an increase in literature concerning same-sex issues. This is not to say that same-sex love was the primary topic of a vast number of works, but that it became an integral point of debate among the writers of the time. Many people take this increase in writings about same-sex love to indicate an increasing tolerance of homosexuality within late Ming culture, but this argument is

problematic on several levels. First, this increase in discussion does not directly correlate with an increase in the practice of same-sex activities but, rather, that debating about it had become popular at that time. There may have been a vogue for male love as well, but that is not proven solely by an increase in literary discussion. In fact, "Michel Foucault famously contended that the 'steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex' in the eighteenth century in Europe marked the onset of a degree of repression previously unknown, so that speaking of the sexual had in fact become a way of policing it."¹⁷ And while this was the case in Europe, there is nothing exclusively European about the phenomenon precluding its application to dynastic China. Secondly, the notion of tolerance is also problematic. Tolerance is a trait that reflects a society that is centered around protecting diversity and individual rights; this is a far cry from the collectivist politics and social mentality to which the majority of the Chinese population subscribed.¹⁸ It is a very Western leap to assume that the end goal of all politics and theory is based on securing an individual right to expression.

THE POWER OF QING AND LITERARY MANIFESTATIONS OF SAME-SEX LOVE

One extant work from the 17th century treats same-sex love directly, as its protagonists are perceived as exceptional precisely because they are able to blur traditional gender and sex boundaries.¹⁹ This work, *Bian er chai*, translated by Keith McMahon as *Hairpins Beneath His Cap*, goes so far as to depict love between men and women as less than the love between two men. The caveat being that love between two men is fleeting and that they must eventually separate to fill their prescribed societal roles.²⁰

What force allowed those men to engage in same-sex relationships and reshape social boundaries is an important aspect of late Ming and early Qing writings. The boundary-breaking activities the protagonists engage in are mediated by the power of qing. While there is no appropriate translation for qing, it, at the very least, embodies the emotional, sentimental and loving feelings and actions that two individuals can share.

The idea that qing could shatter identity categories was not reserved for *Hairpins* alone and, in fact, the use of qing in *Hairpins* was merely an extension of the use of qing from another famous play by Tang Xianzu called "Peony Pavilion." In Xianzu's "Peony Pavilion," the female protagonists, Du Liniang, meets the love of her life in a dream and dies after she awakens due to her pining for him. When the man that was in her dreams finds her grave she is resurrected and they are wed. In this work, the power of qing defies death "and as such overrides distinctions between dream and reality or youthful volition and parental authority..."²¹ The author of *Hairpins* simply expands this barrier-breaking notion of qing and applies it to the destruction of socially constructed gender roles.

Hairpins contains four novellas that each pair qing with one of its supposed counterparts (chastity, chivalry, self-sacrifice and the supernatural) in order to highlight the potential for both to coexist.²² The first of these novellas, "A Chronicle of True Love," tells the story of a scholar who pretends to be a student in order to seduce a fellow classmate. After successfully sexually engaging with the boy, the academic assuages the boy's fears by propounding the following philosophy:

If we go by the logic of Reason, then what we have done today is wrong; but if we use the logic of Love, then we are right. For a man can become a woman and a woman can

*become a man. It is possible to go from life to death as well as from death to life. Those who are bound by the differences between man and woman or life and death don't know what real love is about. I have often said, 'The sea may become dry, the mountains may erode, but Love alone cannot surrender to Reason!'*²³

The academician embodies the new Ming mentality of syncretism wherein artificial distinctions, such as man and woman or life and death, no longer have any reality. He also indicates that the power of love is something that is beyond the ability of Reason to understand and regulate and, therefore, those so-called reasonable categories that the boy is accustomed to living his life by can legitimately be forsaken in the name of love.

The second story of Hairpins, "Chronicle of Chivalric Love," concerns the man Zhang Ji. The protagonist, Zhang Ji, has proven himself a complete talent as a Confucian-educated man and is now confronted with the love of a man, Zhong Tunan (whose name can be read as "Intensely Desiring the South" or with the play on words which it conceals, as "Desiring/Pursuing Men"). Zhong Tunan drugs Zhang Ji and penetrates Zhang Ji in his sleep. Despite the expected reaction to the event, Zhang Ji actually enjoys himself:

*'In his drunken dream state Zhang felt he was no longer in control of his body. Inside it felt as if some insect were trying to bore out of his anus. It felt like a sting but didn't sting. He wanted to take it into himself but wasn't able... So buried in sleep he was that he didn't seem to know whether his body was a man's or a woman's.'*²⁴

When Zhang Ji awakens to realize what has happened he moves to behead the offender (Zhong Tunan) but refrains when confronted with Zhong Tunan's complete lack of fear in the face of death; Zhong Tunan was willing to sacrifice his life to achieve his ul-

itimate desire. Here, qing demonstrates its transformative power. In a situation that should have required the life of the offender, the expression of true love denied Reason's natural response. Zhang Ji even concedes that Zhong is a more true romantic "and declares, although a man, he will be his woman."²⁵ Zhang Ji's concession continues to use heterosexual terminologies to refer to his same-sex relationship thereby destabilizing the idea of normalcy and also makes his new world view quite clear: he no longer feels constrained by the social barriers that had previously bounded his existence.

While the novella could have ended at this point and still have communicated its message, the author proceeds to resolve the story of two educated women warriors that Zhang Ji met earlier in the storyline. In society at that time, a woman of such a nature would be considered, for all practical societal purposes, a man. He ends up marrying the two daughters he had met earlier who are trained in the ways of the military and literary arts; typically those traits are considered too masculine for women. His wives are gender hybrids and adopt male personae that make them appealing. Zhang Ji's consummation of the marriage makes clear his heteroerotic desires and reinforces the fact that sexual object choice was not static and exclusive but could change with the dynamic desires of the subject. At the end of the novella, Zhang Ji sacrifices his heteroerotic relationship in favor of his relationship with Zhong Tunan; this sends a strong message: the same-sex bond is more desirable than the heteroerotic one.²⁶

Of the third novella, "Chronicle of Sacrificing Love," very little remains. McMahon pieces together what remains of the story to determine that a theater boy becomes a concubine for a man named Yun Han. "At one point Yun Han has the boy dress as a

The Way of the Academicians
From *Hua Ying Chin Chen* (*Variiegated*
Positions of the Flower Battle) China, Ming
dynasty (1368–1644)

These are two men engaging in same-sex behavior. It can be stated with confidence that the person on top is a man because his bare foot can be seen. A woman at this time would have her feet bound and even without her shoes on one would not be able to see her bare foot because it would be deformed.



woman, makes love to him, and then says: “There might be women as beautiful as you, but none could be as passionate or as talented or as sensuous.”²⁷ This shows how the emotional bond that was supposedly reserved for men and women could actually be felt between two men; it proves, as well, that their attraction goes beyond the physical. At another juncture in the story, the boy, Wen Yun, must convince Yun Han to get married. Yun Han was going to reject a marriage proposal in order to stay faithful to the boy. Just as in a heterosexual relationship, the idea exists that both partners need to remain loyal to each other. This creates a greater air of legitimacy around same-sex love because it begins to be represented more in terms that reflect what is considered to be part of so-called normal relationships.

The final novella, “Chronicle of Strange Love,” concerns a boy from a male brothel, Li Youxian, and the man who buys him out of that life, Kuang Shi. Kuang brings Li into his house by disguising him as a female concubine and even “softens his feet by means of a special liquid which allows perfect bound feet within a month.”²⁸ This directly reflects the desire to create a hy-

brid person, where the man physically is transformed into a woman by having his feet bound. When disaster befalls the family, Li flees with Kuang’s son and raises him, living the rest of his life as a nun.

Something that makes this relationship even more ground-breaking than the others is that it is explicitly noted that, the first time they have sexual contact, “the sexual encounter between him [Youxian] and Kuang is described as one of mutual pleasure.”²⁹ Pleasure, as seen by Shen, Xie and others, was only to be had by the penetrant. This seems to indicate that both men participated in the penetration of the other in order to avoid a power differential between them and fully express their love for one another. It erases the power differential because, legally, both men are guilty of having “foul material poured into one’s mouth,” while socially both men’s masculinity is equally tarnished and elevated by being penetrated and by participating in the act of penetration.

Li, while a man, fills all the social roles appropriated for a woman and also undergoes the binding of his feet to physically resemble a woman. This is a case of a man wanting to become

a woman, and as such embodies an early account of what might now be labeled as a transsexual and/or transgendered existence. He is willing to forsake the privileges given to men by society and is willing to accept the suffering that is associated with living the life of a woman. This is not without purpose, however, as "...the one who is willing to forego [sic] both the better lot of being a man and the comforts of heaven is the one who enjoys the most pleasure, suffers the most pain, and, in doing so, live the most valuable life."³⁰ By being willing to live under all conditions that life has to offer Li has the most valuable life possible. Li's hybrid existence, therefore, is superior to that of either a man's or a woman's.

The heroes of *Hairpins* are men and women who actively synthesize characteristics of both genders and sexes and attempt to articulate new ways of living their lives beyond their prescribed social roles. "The protagonists of the novellas are constructed through a transplanting of gendered moral values; they are moral hybrids whose romantic originality is produced by setting, like a gemstone, the ultimate female virtue in an equally virtuous male body and intelligence."³¹ *Hairpins*' stories of moral negotiations are mediated by the power of qing and its ability to allow for play with the stable categories that society and Reason try to maintain.

Another work that pays attention to same-sex love is *The Anatomy of Passion*. This work embodies the emerging literary tradition of the time and uses heterosexual terminologies to refer to events of same-sex love. The contexts in which same-sex love occur, however, are described as a deviant variant of the norm that, due to its bizarre nature, recreates a desire for the normal. The "Way of Male Love" is like an image from a mirror in a fun-house, it is so distorted that it creates a desire for the normal or so-called original

image. In this way, "[m]ale love is the frontier, the boundary that defines the center. But it is also immanent within the center."³² Same-sex love is pushed to the periphery, from the center of society, allowing the center to exist without it. As a result of having originated in the center and been pushed aside, same-sex love, however distorted, contains traits that are inherent to the center itself.

Qing, in the same fashion, is typically described in opposition to se, which occurs when a qing-style attraction is based too much on physical attraction. Volpp contends to the contrary, that rather than being in opposition, these two forces are intertwined, with se emerging from qing. Se is immanent within Qing, for Volpp, because se is a variation of the ultimate attraction and feeling between two individuals.

The organization of *Anatomy* has a number of implications for same-sex love. It appears to take the level of qing possessed by each chapter as its organizing principle, placing male love as the 22nd of 24 chapters, after degenerate and ghost qing but before qing with animals. The title of the chapter on male love, qingwai, also presumes that there is a quality of male love that is outside of normal qing, separating those who experience same-sex love from the rest of society. Comparison of that chapter's internal structure to that of the meta-level structure also creates male love as a miniature replica of heteroerotic qing. The chapter on same-sex love begins with chaste love and ends with male love with ghosts; the first chapter of *Anatomy* is heterosexual chastity, and heterosexual love with ghosts precedes the chapter on same-sex love in the overall structure of *Anatomy*. The internal structure is analogous to the larger structure (read: universe) with one exception: it does not contain heterosexual love. This indicates that same-sex qing exists only

in a heteroerotic universe and not the other way around. This problematically places same-sex qing at the center of heteroeroticism (due to its place in the meta-structure) and outside of it by not including it with in the chapter proper.³³ This placement of same-sex love as both inside and outside normal boundaries parallels the tension and confusion that are expressed in both late Ming literature and society.

The language within the chapter also omits the positive categories of qing included in the other chapters of the anthology, instead replacing them with negative categories, highlighting the cautionary nature that surrounds the discussion of same-sex love. Interestingly though, despite the binary that qing and se are supposed to create, the terms are used interchangeably throughout the chapter giving credence to the argument that perhaps qing and se are more related than first thought. The commentator on the chapter, however, tries to reestablish this clear boundary between the two by stating that qing between men is not possible, and that what is taken as qing is, in fact, a debased form of qing comparable to se. The reasoning behind this argument, according to the commentator, was that qing between men can only reflect a physical attraction, not emotional, and that is se by definition.³⁴

The 14th chapter of *Anatomy* comes to the rescue of Volpp's argument though, as it presents a situation in which two men experience qing in the absence of physical attraction. In this chapter, a man, Wan, nurses back to health an actor, Zheng, who has lost his looks and, consequently, his se appeal. This demonstrates that qing can exist in same-sex relationships independent of se and not be debased by carnal desires. Se, therefore, exists as a manifestation of qing and is inherently a part of qing. Wan later arranges a marriage for the actor, Zheng, and

has Zheng and Zheng's parents move into his own home. It was in this way that Zheng is able to fulfill his filial duties as a son and also maintain his relationship with Wan. "The narrative implies that if filial piety is the primary expression of male love, no one will question same-sex unions."³⁵ The object of one's desires, therefore, did not offend society but it was the neglecting of filial duties that is often associated with same-sex object choice that leads to controversy. Wan and Zheng were able to circumvent this obstacle by moving Zheng's family into Wan's home.

For the great amount of discussion same-sex love is given within *Anatomy*, it is odd that the chapter directly concerning same-sex love is not to be found in the index. Without reading the book one would never know that the chapter existed. More importantly, even if one were to open the book to the chapter pertaining to same-sex love he/she would not actually be able to describe the author's actual feelings towards same-sex love. To just read that chapter would lead the reader to believe that the author had a negative image of same-sex love, whereas the positive descriptions it is given earlier in the anthology would be necessary to temper those negative conclusions. The mixed opinions expressed in *Anatomy* are yet another expression of the syncretism that characterized late Ming culture.³⁶

The erotic discourse that developed in the late Ming culture did more than give rise to works like *Hairpins* and *Anatomy*, as that language of erotic description allowed for the invention of an entirely new genre, pornography. And while pornography's era was short-lived, the number of works produced were many.³⁷ Pornography often meets with disdain in modern culture, but it actually represents a critical component for the history of sexuality, as well as gender roles,

across the empire. The government was quick to begin censoring pornography as it was perceived as a threat to the normal function of literature, and any breakdown in the traditional structure of society was perceived as a threat to the government's legitimacy. It also for this reason that references to pornographic works are not contained within many governmental works except in the form of reprimand and criticism. Because of this, Li Yu notes in the sixth story of his *Silent Operas* that "the homoerotic [same-sex] case he is about to report is one that 'official history doesn't need to record, but that unofficial history cannot fail to record.' Sexuality, we are told, deserves its history, and it is thus the charge of fiction, as 'unofficial history,' to record it."³⁸ This is why, with a determined body of literati working to record same-sex love, the body of works produced was prolific, even if the age of pornography was not long-lived. Master Moon-Heart, the author of *Hairpins*, also authored another work entitled *Fragrant Essences of Spring*. The work opens with a poem by which the focus of the work can be determined:

*... If in the world there were no passion,
I would want it to exist; but, if the whole
world sank into passion, then I would be
anxious about dissipation because when
passion reaches dissipation, it is a harm for
the world. Dissipation belongs to passion
and at the same time is what harms it.*³⁹

The work thus focuses on the dangers inherent in passion becoming the singular focus of one's existence while simultaneously praising its necessity for human happiness. Passion was something to be performed in moderation because the destructive force of dissipation exists only in cases of over-indulgence in passion.

The last story contained in *Fragrant Essences* is called Niu Jun, "A Dreamy Ugly Boy," and represents passion in both its forms, destruction and

pleasure. The story is rooted in Buddhist traditions that focus on liberation from desire, and the protagonist, Niu Jun, is confronted by the "unrestrainable resurgence of desire itself... In this sense, it is the story of a revelation that must be seen as double: the revelation of desire is as crucial as the revelation of desire's vacuity."⁴⁰ The vehicle used to help Niu Jun achieve these revelations is the dream, a common choice of Daoists and Buddhists who wished to help the non-enlightened find the Way. The difference between dream sequences of traditional literature and those of the 17th century, was that dreams were now used to delve into a person's unconscious and carry out a personal interrogation of that individual's desires as opposed to having a religious figure reveal things external to that person.⁴¹

Niu Jun's dream-journey occurs after his classmates at school have excluded him from learning about the rites of spring, the equivalent of a Chinese sex education, because he is too ugly. He returns home, begins to dream, and is taken into another world where he is wildly attractive and experiences sex of all kinds. He enters a kingdom of all men (The Kingdom of All-Sons), where half of the men cross-dress as women, and he has sex with the king and falls in love. He is then shifted to a world of all women (The Kingdom of Holy-Yin) where he impregnates the queen with her magic dildo and is forced to flee to the original all-male kingdom. He returns and, as happens with all great loves and last rulers of China, the king becomes overly infatuated with Niu Jun and the people separate the king and his queen (Niu Jun), who is left alone. He is then confronted by a monk who asks him to repent. While in the process of cleansing his body he is awakened by his servant bringing him tea, only to find he has become handsome in reality as well. After having been the constant

object of desire in this dream world he immediately pursues his religious cultivation to avoid further struggle with desire and passion.⁴²

Same-sex overtones are present throughout Niu Jun's entire journey. One of the most obvious examples is his falling in love with only one person, a man, the King of All-Sons. In the Kingdom of All-Sons, reproduction occurs by praying at a temple. Niu Jun went to pray for his King to have a son and at the temple, in a dream-within-a-dream, Niu Jun fails to become aroused by the sight of the temple's female goddess and a special device is necessary to complete the sexual encounter. While in the Kingdom of Holy-Yin, the King (a woman) is thrilled at actually getting the chance to experience sex with a man (as opposed to using her magic dildo) but is disappointed to find that "Queen Niu" is, yet again, unable to become aroused by her and she thus decides to sodomize him instead.⁴³ These experiences openly display same-sex love and make it the most desirable outcome, running counter to traditional behaviors of the late Ming. Not only, however, did Niu Jun choose to have a same-sex relationship, but he was entirely unable to have a heterosexual encounter. His inability to participate in a heterosexual relationship further demonstrates literature's ability to create scenarios that the then-modern mind would not have imagined to exist, thus giving visibility to previously unrecognized and ignored members of society.

All three works, *Hairpins*, *Anatomy*, and *Fragrant Essences* challenge contemporary Ming ideas about gender, sex and sexuality. While *Hairpins* focuses on the potential for mixing and matching the gendered characteristics of the sexes, *Anatomy* socially contextualizes the environment in which same-sex love is being written about and *Fragrant Essences* imagines a world in which the norm is not even a possibility. Whether influenced by the power of *qing* to reshape the world or motivated by a need to police sexual conduct by making it visible, the discursive explosion over same-sex love in the late Ming produced a wealth of literature critical to the reconstruction of the late Ming mentality.

CONCLUSION

Instances of same-sex love have existed across cultures and time but have manifested themselves in ways that may not be recognizable by modern standards and categories. It is important, therefore, to contextualize one's investigation into the existence of any same-sex tradition and to be open to ways of thinking that are seem different or strange. The same-sex tradition in late Ming China defies conclusion and perhaps that is the point. The syncretism that informed the thought of the time prevents one from making a broad-sweeping statement with which to summarize the period, and in that state of indefiniteness is how it should remain.

END NOTES

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