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Male Same-Sex Relations in Socialist China

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My current research, *Male Same-Sex Relations in the People's Republic of China*, aims at solving some mysteries in the history of socialist China since 1949. The questions I am asking are the following: What was the government position on homosexuality? Did homosexuals and homosexual activities exist in Mao's China? Were homosexuals killed by the government during the Cultural Revolution? Did the Chinese government simply arrest all homosexuals during the Mao era? Was homosexuality legally criminalized in the People's Republic? Since when was homosexuality pathologized by the medical profession? How and when did the topics of homosexuality and people identified as homosexuals emerge in public discourse? What happened during the process of the decriminalization and depathologization of homosexuality at the turn of the century? What happened later? The answers of those questions will contribute to our understanding of the history of socialist China, and its transition to the postsocialist era.

Historical and literary writings tend to depict the Mao era (1949-1976) as sexually repressive. The only legitimate sexual intercourse was that between a man and a woman within government-sanctioned marriage. Public discussions of homosexuality in the official media were few and far between from the 1950s to the 1970s, and it seemed impossible for sex between men to exist. Since government archives are not open to academic research on homosexuality during the Mao era, personal narratives are a crucially important source for studying this part of Chinese history.

Beginning in 2009, I have traveled to various cities in China to meet men in their sixties and seventies who were willing to tell me stories about their queer past. I have heard stories that confirm the sexual repressiveness of the period. For example, in Chengdu, during the Cultural Revolution, a famous Sichuan opera singer committed suicide after being accused of having same-sex relations. In Shanghai, a man in his sixties told me that he was too scared to act on his sexual desire for men until the 1990s. But I also heard stories of men who enjoyed having sex with other men during the Mao era. What I found is that even in the prohibitive environment of socialist China, queer men were still pursuing their sexual desire. Therefore, my argument is that the conventional understanding of socialist China as period of sexually repression is too simplistic. We might get an impression that the Maoist state was omnipresent in every single instance of people's daily experience, but the state clearly did not have absolute control over all aspects of their lives, including sex and the fulfillment of sexual desire. I also want to dispute the argument that the "reform and opening" policies after the end of the Mao era brought sexual liberation to China. Rather, evidence shows that the mass police arrests of queer men who

were accused of disrupting the social order actually began in late 1970s in the Chinese urban areas.

In this study, I use the term "queer" to describe the men who were involved in same-sex relations. But "queer" here denotes neither an identity nor a subjectivity; instead, it refers to the social relations in which these men were situated and which identity-based vocabulary fails to describe. First, the English terms "homosexual" "gay," and even the contemporary use of "queer" and its Chinese translations and neologisms such as *tongxinglian* (同性恋), "gay," "ku'er" (酷儿) or *tongzhi* (同志), which have a strong identity tone, did not begin to reappear (in the case of "*tongxinglian*") or appear ex novo in China until the early 1980s. Until then in socialist China, most "queer men" themselves, let alone the general public, did not have a formal language to describe themselves or their behavior, although derogatory terms, such as "rabbit" (*tuzi*, 兔子) and "ass devil" (*pijing*, 屁精) were still lingering around in various local slang. The identity terms based on medical understandings and gay politics are very much an afterthought, although the queer men I interviewed have used them retrospectively and anachronistically. Secondly, the sexual experience of these "queer men" went much beyond what these identity-based terms could describe. They usually married women; they could form various social and sexual relations, and perform sex with men and women. Some of them were not conscious of their sexual desire for other men, or did not act on their same-sex desire until a very late stage of their lives. In his study of the Chinese queer Marxist thinker Cui Zi'en, Petrus Liu points out, "For Cui, queerness rests on a capacity to recognize the distance between received categories and the diversity of erotic desires and modes of intimacy in human cultures."¹ This understanding of "queer" expresses perfectly the meaning of the term as I use it here.

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, several drafts of the criminal code were written as policies and guidelines for tackling criminal activities, but no formal laws regarding homosexuality were promulgated until 1979. Except for a 1950 draft law that included forced sodomy (*jijian*, 鸡奸) between male adults under the category of rape, the issue of sex between men did not appear in the legal documents of the central government. But it was constantly raised by local law enforcement personnel anxious for clarification and direction from the central state apparatus. A 1957 case shows that the National Supreme People's Court made explicit that the current law carried no clear stipulation on consensual sodomy (*jijian*) between men and suggested that the local government should not criminalize this kind of act. The state law also remained silent on the issue of forced sodomy between adult men.²

In the following pages, I use one queer man's life story to illustrate the insight that personal narratives can provide into male same-sex relations in the Mao era. It is important to note that my observations are not based solely on this one particular case, but on the large number of interviews that I have conducted so far.

I met Mr. Bai in Chengdu in the summer of 2009 when he was seventy-six years old—placing his birth date in 1933. As a child, Bai lived with his widowed mother near a hospital in the city of Chengdu. A male nurse in his twenties from the hospital initiated him into male-male sex (including anal intercourse) at the age of ten. The two later became sworn brothers (*jiebai xiongdi*, 结拜兄弟) along with several other young men, and, as Bai remembers, the brothers treated him very well. He was good-looking and popular in his junior high school days, and some high school students were eager to make friends and play (*shua*, 耍) with him. It seems that the 1949 communist "liberation" did not have much impact on his life. When he was telling his life story, he did not mention the event particularly. Instead, he simply told me that he later joined the Army. Only after my inquiry did he make clear that he joined the communist People's Liberation Army in 1951.

According to Bai, the communist army did not have explicit rules forbidding sex between men in the early 1950s. Soldiers did not hesitate to show affection to other fellows, and they treated intimacy between men more as part of their homosocial camaraderie. Having sexual relations with men did not hurt one's career advancement. As Bai remembers, during the four years in the army, "this kind of thing never stopped" (我在部队上, 根本这种事情就没断过). "Back then I was young and beautiful. Everybody liked me, including literacy instructors, cadres, soldiers, and platoon leaders. People in the Army all understood and joked about it sometimes" (当时文化教员, 干部, 战士, 排长, 都对我喜欢。因为那个时候年轻, 人有点儿漂亮。部队上都晓得, 有时候开玩笑...)³ In 1954, being a junior high school graduate and considered better educated than most, Bai was sent by the Army to study meteorology.

Like most queer men I interviewed, Bai did not consider same-sex relations with men and heterosexual marriage mutually exclusive back in his younger days. Marriage was a rite of passage for every man. He married a woman in 1959, at the age of twenty-six, which was considered quite late at that time. But his career came to an abrupt end in the following year. His first son was born in 1960, and he asked for a few days off to stay at home, but was later fired for unapproved absence. Bai insisted that his homosexuality was not the reason he lost his job. Rather, he was criticized for his bourgeois lifestyle, for the time he spent on eating, clothing, and playing. He refused to admit his mistakes and talked back to his superior. The consequences of losing his job would show later in his life, but at that time, he did not seem to care as much. His attitude seems to suggest that the system that was later called the "iron bowl" was still not fully established in the early 1960s, and jobs were therefore not yet as stable as in later years.

Being in a heterosexual marriage and having lost his job did not stop Bai from pursuing his sexual desire. His memory

of this period of his life is full of fun, fondness and adventure. To make ends meet, he began to knit, an activity considered a women's sideline. To meet men, he brought his knitting to the street. He was cruising while knitting, spending the whole day outside until late at night. He was knitting even when he was watching a movie or going to a local opera, and acquired the nickname of "knitting lady" (*maoxian poniang*, 毛线婆娘), yet the feminine association did not seem to bother him. For Bai, knitting was simply a means to making a living while having fun. He reminisced about this period of his life. "Once, I brought my knitting to the public toilet in the Cultural Palace. A *piaopiao* (飘飘, wanderer, a current local slang term for queer men) stole it away, and I had to run to catch up with him. After I got hold of him, he wouldn't admit that he took my knitting work, and in the end, I found it after searching his body" (有次不是, 我带起毛衣。在文化宫那个厕所, 有个飘飘给我把它偷了的嘛。我在后头跟到撵的嘛。他还不承认。结果我在他身上把毛衣逮到了)。"It was so much fun back then; (we) were so busy every day, and there was never enough time" (那个时候好耍得很。每天时间不够。不够安排)。

The Cultural Revolution was a dark time for those queer men who were found having sexual relations with other men, yet not for everyone. During the period of violent fight (*wudou*, 武斗), Bai was the leader of a group of rebel workers.⁴ When another workers' group from Chongqing came to join them in Chengdu, Bai formed a sexual/romantic relationship with the leader (我们两个就在一起)。

I interviewed Bai with two other queer men so that they could help each other remember. When I asked them if they felt repressed during the Cultural Revolution, their answer was unanimously negative. According to them, the Cultural Revolution period was a good time for sexual adventures (*haoshua*, 好耍)。"Everybody was busy with politics, nobody cared about this" (都去忙政治去了, 哪有管这个的), one of them said. What that I found was if a man was found to have engaged in same-sex relations during this period, how he was treated greatly depended on the particular work unit he belonged to, and most importantly on the person who happened to be in charge at that time.

Ironically, the most repressive moment that they remembered was actually the year of 1978, which marks the end of the Mao era and the beginning of the reform period. In 1978, a massive arrest of queer men took place in Chengdu. Bai was part of that mass arrest and was sentenced to three years of reform through education (*laojiao*, 劳教); he continued to pursue his sexual desire by clandestinely engaging in sex with his fellow prisoners.

Bai's story is one example that demonstrates that men who desired men did not stop pursuing sexual fulfillment in the presumably sexually repressive Mao era. Similarly, my research also found that clandestine cruising places for queer men existed in many cities throughout the socialist era, even during the Cultural Revolution, and some of them could be traced back to the pre-1949 period. Tong Ge, a writer and an LGBT activist who conducted pioneer research on queer men's life in socialist China, suggests that these places did not

appear until the mid-1970s—that is, toward the end of the Mao era. He posits that in the period before the Cultural Revolution, men met other men for sex in familiar places: schools where they studied, in the workplace, and around the neighborhood where they lived. But the experience of the Cultural Revolution taught them that it was too dangerous to have same-sex relations with men you know in everyday life, so they began to look for anonymous sexual encounters in public.⁵ This explanation, however, tells us more about the damage that Cultural Revolution did to queer men and how it altered their practices than about the provenance of cruising spots. Of course, this is also not to say that one cruising place would last for several decades. Rather, cruising spots changed their locations around the city over time, which was at least the case in Shanghai and Chengdu.

Some scholars emphasize the importance of bathhouses and public toilets as cruising places for gay men to meet, implying that since the main concern of homosexual men is the penis, these kinds of places were natural fits. While not totally untrue, this suggestion perpetuates the pseudo-scientific assumptions that were used to pathologize homosexual men as sex addicts. During the Mao era, as I found in many interviews, another important venue for men to meet was the theatre. In the 1950s, popular theatres in big cities where local opera was performed had standing rooms along the aisles on each side or in the rear. Men put their hands behind their back and their hand could "accidentally" touch another man's sensitive area. If this man did not move, it meant that he was the right person. The two men could go on from there. This way of meeting was used not only in local opera theatres, but also in exercise ground where revolutionary movies were often shown in the open air. Newspaper reading boards on the street could serve the same function. Despite the stern environment in the Mao era, men did not cease to search for venues and opportunities to have sex with each other.

Earlier studies on PRC have been focusing on the political activities at the state level. More recent scholarship, however, has shifted the focus away from the politics of the state to the lives of ordinary people by utilizing the personal narratives generated by oral history interviews, and discovered quite a discrepancy between the government's declared intention in official propaganda and its uneven effects on the local and personal levels.⁶ By showing the persistence of male same-sex activities, and thus making visible a group of people who we otherwise do not even know existed during the Mao era, my study also reveals the disconnects between "high political history" and people's everyday lives in socialist China. More importantly, this part of the PRC history asks us to reevaluate our assumptions about the communist state and its power over the populace. Beginning with a few pioneer works, the field of LGBT history has engaged with the relationship between capitalism and homosexual identity, but does not have much to say about the connection or lack thereof between socialism and same-sex relations. By attending to male same-sex relations in socialist China and revealing the instability of compulsory heterosexuality, my work also further extends the scope of the field of queer history.

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¹ Petrus Liu, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 55.

² Kang Wenqing, "The Decriminalization and Depathologization of Homosexuality in China," in *China in and beyond Headlines*, edited by Timothy B. Weston and Lionel M. Jensen (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012): 234-6.

³ Interview conducted in Chengdu on 08/03/2009.

⁴ Bai lost his job, yet became the leader of a workers' rebel group. He did not elaborate on the connection between the two events, but very possibly, the Cultural Revolution provided a good opportunity for people such as Bai to redress their past grievance. For similar examples, See Wu Yiching, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁵ Interview conducted in Tianjin on 06/26/2011.

⁶ Focusing on women in one rural area, for instance, Gail Hershatter's *The Gender of Memory* greatly improved and complicated our understanding of Mao's China by demonstrating that the period cannot be simply viewed as the rise and fall of one political campaign after another, because life in socialist China was also clearly a gendered experience and one varied by location. See, Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Turning attention to the everyday life of ordinary people, including women, youth, counterrevolutionaries, ethnic minorities, and religious groups the collection of essays in *Maoism at the Grassroots* presents a kaleidoscopic view of what the authors called "China's era of high socialism" (mid-1950s to 1980). In place of the image perpetuated under the influence of a Cold War mentality—uniform actions of the Chinese masses under Communist control, the volume presents various aspects of people's lives under the socialist regime: hope, despair, resistance, rebellion, as well as surrender. See Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, eds., *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).