

Thoughts on Lesbian Genders in Contemporary Chinese Cultures

Helen Hok-Sze Leung

SUMMARY. This article introduces readers to the debates on lesbian genders in Chinese cultures. Through an analysis of the dynamics of the *tongzhi* movement, as well as ethnographic and literary works not currently available in English translation, the article hopes to instigate dialogues between lesbian studies in diverse cultural contexts. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Lesbian, gender, China, culture

TONGZHI POLITICS AND THE BUTCH/FEMME QUESTION

I used to believe that an "originary" image of a woman inhabits the heart of every man's life, and he would end up loving a woman who comes closest to this image. Even though I am a woman, the "originary" image deep inside me is also that of a woman. Like a beautiful fantasy arising at the moment of cold death, it permeates and then disappears

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[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "Thoughts on Lesbian Genders in Contemporary Chinese Cultures." Leung, Helen Hok-Sze. Co-published simultaneously in *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 6, No. 2, 2002, pp. 123-133; and: *Femme/Butch: New Considerations of the Way We Want to Go* (ed: Michelle Gibson, and Deborah T. Meem) Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc., 2002, pp. 123-133. Single or multiple copies of this article are available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service [1-800-HAWORTH, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST). E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com].

from my reality. I believed that this image is life's utmost perfection. I believed in it for four years. I spent all of my university years, all of my honesty and courage towards life, believing in this image.

Thus begins *Crocodile's Journal*, the first novel by the late Taiwanese author Chiu Miao-chin that was instrumental in launching a distinctly new lesbian culture and community in Taiwan during the 1990s. Chiu's tragic suicide in 1995 further reinforced the legendary status of her works and practically crowned Chiu as the martyr-saint of Taiwan's fledgling lesbian community (*Babylon* 141-2). Not only are these famous opening lines already evocative of Chiu's signature aesthetic, but their implicit comparison of the desiring lesbian subject to a heterosexual male lover also foreshadows some of the most contentious debates around lesbian genders in the *tongzhi* movement today. *Tongzhi*, literally "comrade," is now the most common identity label around which sexual minorities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mainland China, as well as some overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and North America, are organized. The term is not without its critics and detractors, many of whom, like Taiwan's Lin Xianshou and Hong Kong's Anson Mak, have made compelling arguments against its usage (Lin 38-42; Mak 21-33). The very strength of *tongzhi*—its ability to instill a sense of *esprit du corps* amongst a diverse constituency—often also becomes an obstacle, as the (some will argue, false) sense of unity threatens to erase differences which are not easily reconcilable. One of the most divisive of these differences is the issue of queer gender identification. The recent publication of the proceedings of the 1998 *Tongzhi* Conference—an annual or biannual gathering of sexual minorities from Chinese communities—documents a deep tension that has always been felt, even when it may not have found explicit articulation, in the *tongzhi* community. The 1998 conference, organized around the theme of "unity," was beset with disagreements between different groups, most notably—though not exclusively—between gay men on the one hand, and lesbian and bisexual women on the other. While many of the gay male organizers felt that they went out of their way to accommodate panels on women's issues, their presumably good intentions completely misfired and were perceived by many queer women as acts of tokenism or even ghettoization. One panel in particular, entitled "The Gender Roles of *Tongzhi* Women," which addressed the issues of butch/femme roles and their local inflections in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China (Loo 153-162), drew severe criticism from some prominent lesbian activists who argued that the organizers favored a panel that perpetuates received stereotypes about lesbian role-playing while the question of 1/0 roles (roughly equivalent to top/bottom distinction) amongst gay men was "exempt" from such limelight (Loo 371). Others, however, felt that the panel

was worthwhile precisely because it provided an opportunity to examine the complex relationship between queer gender identification and dominant ideologies as well as the nuanced local variations of queer gender categories (Loo 254-258).

Some of the differences that erupted at the 1998 conference had led to productive self-reflection in the *tongzhi* movement. The 1999 conference, for instance, focused on “diversity” in an attempt to critically reexamine the romanticized politics of “unity.” The contention over the butch-femme panel, however, points to a more complicated set of dynamics. First of all, as most of the *tongzhi* movement organizers and participants are very well-versed in debates on queer issues in North America, their arguments are informed, willy-nilly and simultaneously, by almost half a century’s debates on butch/femme, from the 70s feminists’ critique, to Joan Nestle’s famous reclaiming of butch/femme relationships in the 50s as a historically important and sexually courageous practice, to more recent works such as that of Judith Halberstam on female masculinity and Lesléa Newman on femme subjectivity that seek to theorize gender diversity amongst queer subjects. Furthermore, while these debates often take place within lesbian and/or feminist circles in North America, they are complicated here by the context of a movement which purportedly represents all sexual minorities. At the same time that it is deeply influenced by these debates, the *tongzhi* movement also retains a certain distance from them as it seeks to define itself in culturally specific terms. One of the most productive interventions by *tongzhi* politics into butch/femme debates is the exploration of local categories of lesbian gender identification that are not reducible to the category of butch-femme. Finally, since there has been very little systematic and comparative documentation of same-sex relations between women in historical or contemporary Chinese communities, many of the disagreements within the movement arise out of different lived experiences that are unanchored in their specific social and historical contexts.

Given these complex dynamics, it would indeed be an enormous and difficult task—one which would demand sustained and collaborative efforts—to explore the question of lesbian genders in Chinese cultures and communities. In this article, I would like to attempt a very modest beginning to such efforts by identifying a range of relevant material and pointing to various possible entries into the question.

SCATTERED ETHNOGRAPHIES

One important entry into the question of lesbian genders in Chinese communities is an investigation into the process of subject formation. Much of the

contention surrounding the discussion of butch/femme roles, as evidenced by the incident at the 1998 *Tongzhi* Conference, arises out of different interpretations of the relation between queer subject formation and the dominant ideology of heterosexual genders. Petula Sik-Ying Ho's nuanced study of gay male subject formation in Hong Kong since the 1980s provides a valuable theoretical model of queer subject formation. Ho traces a genealogy of multiple and intersecting discourses on homosexuality in Hong Kong and shows that gay male subjectivity is continually being constituted by discursive practices that are constantly in negotiation with each other. According to this logic, it would be missing the point to argue whether lesbian gender identification such as that of butch/femme is a "mystified" (in ideological terms) reproduction of heterosexual gender roles or a matter of autonomous lesbian agency. A much more productive model of inquiry would explore how different discursive processes, including that of the dominant gender system as well as that of queer appropriations, are in negotiation with each other in specific contexts. Unfortunately, as is the case in so many other cultural contexts such as those documented by Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia E. Wieringa (39-66), the study of female same-sex relations in Chinese communities are far overshadowed by, if not made completely subservient to, the study of male homosexuality. While a number of theoretically engaged studies have recently emerged in Taiwan (Cheng; Tsang; Zhang; Zhao), there have only been sporadic and scattered ethnographic efforts to study lesbian communities in Hong Kong (Chou; Lam) and Mainland China (Li). The data from these studies provide some interesting points of departure for further studies.

In a brief and schematic discussion, Wang Qingning compares the dynamics of gender identification in three different Chinese lesbian cultures:

The gender role-playing amongst *tongzhi* women refers to the roles of T [tomboy] or *po* [wife] (or butch and femme). In Hong Kong, the T/*po* roles are very prominent. In Taiwan, some make such distinctions, some don't. In Mainland China, one rarely hears of such role-playing. The Hong Kong scene resembles the T-bar scene in Taiwan during the 1980s . . . In Taiwan, *tongzhi* women who went through their university years during the 90s, and who were influenced by feminism, either don't engage in gender role-playing at all or they make minute distinctions in gender categories (such as little T, more prone to T, more prone to *po*, etc.). In Mainland China, due to the influence of the Cultural Revolution, women are already under pressure to look androgynous. In addition, they live in a social context where most people are ignorant of homosexuality, so they tend to relate to each other without specific gender role-playing. (Loo 256)

Wang's characterization generally corresponds to the conclusions of the few ethnographic studies available. However, there is also an interesting contradiction between the ethnographers' professed beliefs and the ethnographic material they present. Wang's characterization of the Hong Kong scene—where gender role-playing is most salient—as a mirror of Taiwan's past implicitly constructs a narrative of progress according to which butch/femme role-playing is perceived to be old-fashioned or even pre-feminist. Such a sentiment is also echoed in Chou Wah-Shan's work on *tongzhi* women in Hong Kong:

Mainstream (heterosexual) media always interpret homosexual love from a heterosexual perspective. Whenever they encounter a *tongzhi* woman, they never forget to ask if she plays the male role (Tomboy/TB) or female role (Tomboy girl/TBG), as though *tongzhi* women must fit into one or the other. Amongst local lesbian couples, a very high percentage distinguishes between TB and TBG. I interviewed five *tongzhi* women from different walks of life and they all claim that over 70% of the lesbians they know clearly distinguish between TB and TBG (*Hong Kong Tongzhi* 106).

For Chou, the distinction between TB and TBG is both a stereotype (a “heterosexual perspective”) and a salient self-identification amongst *tongzhi* women in Hong Kong. Yet, Chou does not theorize the relation between the two. Is such lesbian self-identification a reproduction of the “heterosexual perspective”? Why is TB/TBG role-playing a “stereotype” if over 70% of lesbian couples actually practice such role-playing? Even more suggestively, out of the case studies presented by Chou, only *one* affirms her TB identity, though more as a sexual (i.e., an indication of what one enjoys in bed) rather than gender identity (113). All the others are extremely critical of TB/TBG roles. One claims that she is “misidentified” as a TB because she enjoys wearing her hair short. She claims that many *tongzhi* women “lack confidence and play the masculine role to reject their femininity” (109). One dismisses her TB identification as a sign of her past “immaturity” which she finds “horrifying, absurd, and a little tragic” (111). One simply attributes TB/TBG roles to Hong Kong's “backwardness” in comparison to the lesbian scene in the U.S. (115). This attitude is documented again in Chou's subsequent study of interracial relationships amongst *tongzhi* women where one interviewee suggests that TB/TBG distinction is only popular amongst the younger crowd and is almost entirely absent amongst those who are more Westernized and educated (*Postcolonial Tongzhi* 151). In another book project where *tongzhi* women are invited to write their own stories, the words TB/TBG are not even mentioned once in the five narratives that are eventually published (Lee 2-53)!

I am not disputing the validity of these ethnographic data, but it is interesting to note that in a community that has been characterized by the researchers themselves as heavily invested in gender role-playing, over 90% of the data collected reflect critical or dismissive attitudes towards the putative “reality.” Where are the 70% who purportedly identify unproblematically as TB/TBG? Why is the discrepancy between this majority and the interviewed minority not explained or theorized? In a response to C. Jacob Hale’s work on gender in the leather-dyke community, Eve Sedgwick notes a striking departure in Hale’s account from most other theoretical accounts of cross-gender embodiment. By the latter accounts, “the critique and exposure of dominant ideologies, which are the sole yardsticks by which gender practices are nowadays thought to be measured,” are also ascribed to be the motives of the subjects under study (237). Hale’s account is valuable to Sedgwick because it pays attention to the affective and the relational, where subjects’ motives behind gender identification involve “spiritual exercise and self-development, excitement and fun . . . self-construction, self-legibility, and self-recognition” (237). Indeed, these affective and relational motives are often overshadowed to the point of invisibility by a zealous impulse to critique and expose dominant ideology, as is the case with the ethnographic work on Hong Kong lesbians’ gender identification. Researchers like Chou seem much more interested in proving his own point about the conservative nature of TB/TBG roles than in analyzing the complicated motives behind his subjects’ identification. Paying attention to such motives does not necessarily lead to an endorsement of the gender practices in question. It would, however, result in a far more nuanced account of subject formation and the relation between dominant ideology and queer gender identification.

Comparative study of cross-cultural data can also enrich our interpretive methodology. One of the most interesting theoretical resonances to come out of ethnographies on Taiwan’s *tongzhi* women is the proliferation of local gender categories that are irreducible to binary categories like butch/femme, T/*po*, or TB/TBG. Wang gives a wonderful description of some of these playful and inventive categories:

Now one speaks of little T, and camp T—that is to say a very gentle and soft-spoken kind of T. There are also different kinds of *po* and they don’t necessarily wear long hair. For example, a tragic *po* [*ku po*] is a very strong, able woman who is so devoted to her girlfriend that she gives off a tragic air. Most brilliant of all are those who become “*po* when encountering a T, and T when encountering a *po*.” They can switch between the two roles depending on whom they are with. (Loo 153)

These categories reflect both a sense of humor and an active attempt to negotiate between the limits of available gender categories and lived experience. Is such negotiation simply absent in Hong Kong, or is it invisible to researchers like Chou because it does not support a critique of TB/TBG as dominant ideology? The theoretical implications of data collected on Taiwan could benefit and enrich the methodology of research on other Chinese communities.

Research on lesbian lives in Mainland China (PRC) is very scant (Li; Evans), partly due to the extremely difficult research environment. Yet there is a very rich body of work on women and feminism in the PRC that barely mentions lesbian practices. Wang's speculation on the "androgynising" influence of the Cultural Revolution has actually been discussed in some detail in these (predominantly heterosexual) feminist contexts. For instance, Lydia Liu argues that the construction of an "official feminism" in the PRC depends on a process of gendering:

The category of women, like that of class, has long been exploited by the hegemonic discourse of the state of China, one that posits the equality between men and women by depriving the latter of *their* difference (and not the other way around!) . . . The image of the liberated daughter and the figure of strong female party leader celebrated, among others, in the literature of socialist realism are invented for the purpose of abolishing the patriarchal discriminatory construction of gender, but they end up denying difference to women . . . Post-Mao Chinese women are therefore dealing with an order of reality vastly different from that which feminists in the West face within their own patriarchal society, where the female gender is exploited more on the grounds of her difference than the lack thereof. (24)

Liu goes on to suggest that the resurgence of a "female tradition" in Chinese literature, which insists on constructing the "difference" of femininity, can be explained as acts of defiance against such a revolutionary tradition (31-40). Liu's observation that gender equality in the PRC is achieved by depriving women, rather than men, of their difference (in other words, women are encouraged to become more like men but not vice versa) can have immense significance for the study of lesbian gender identification. What Wang identifies as PRC women's "androgyny" is more appropriately a version of masculinity. Thus, while the butch or T or TB in Hong Kong and Taiwan most visibly marks lesbian presence because of their *difference* from the heterosexual gender of straight femininity, she would be relatively invisible in the PRC because she resembles the masculine gender of the revolutionary image of women. How does such a context inflect lesbian gender identification? How might ver-

sions of femme gender be constructed against the masculinity of the straight woman? How might the “difference” of femme gender generate erotic appeal? Furthermore, as the PRC becomes more entrenched in the movement of global capital and as the younger generation of women becomes more distant to the revolutionary tradition of gendering, is there a generational gap between older and younger lesbians, especially in their gender identification? The very established tradition of feminist work on gender in the PRC is actually very poised to answer such questions if it starts paying attention to its heterocentric blind spot.

LITERARY MODULATIONS

In a discussion of the genealogy of contemporary lesbian fiction in Taiwan, Hung Ling postulates a narrative of progress that situates the desexualized and melodramatic representation of lesbian relations in Ling Yan’s and Cao Lijun’s fiction at one end of the spectrum, and Chen Xue’s and Hung’s own consciously queer, avant-garde fiction at the other. Poised uneasily in the middle is Chiu Miao-chin’s *Crocodile’s Journal*, which Hung recognizes as the “first time Taiwan’s lesbian voice asserts its power in the arena of fiction” (99). Despite its importance as a watershed work, Hung identifies the limits of the novel’s subversive power in this way:

We suddenly discover that in *Crocodile’s Journal*, the central question for Lazi [the lesbian protagonist] is whether or not she could successfully transform herself into a masculine “man” who can legitimately love women. . . . Thus, the subversive potential of *Crocodile* has been considerably weakened by this construction of a subject/object relation. . . . To put it simply, the danger lies in the recuperation of the heterosexual institution and the formation of T/*po* (butch/femme) roles. (101)

Once again, butch/femme identification—here characterized as the possible corollary of a literary expression of desire—is unproblematically equated to heterosexual gendering. Hung’s critical strategy is characteristic of Taiwan’s new generation of queer theorists and authors who identify as *ku’er*. *Ku’er*, literally “cool child,” was first used by Chi Ta-wei, Hung Ling, and Tan Tang-mo as a transliteration of “queer” in a special issue of the avant-garde literary journal *Island’s Edge* in 1994. Even though *kuer* was originally inspired by *queer*, the term has since, as Chi suggests, cross-bred with local meanings (*Carnival* 11). It has also spawned several variations. For instance, Hung Ling sometimes rewrites *kuer* as *kuyi*, which reinscribes an element of queerness (*yi*

means “strange”) in the term. In a similar spirit, the critic Chang Hsiao-hung prefers the term *guai’ tai* (literally “weirdo”) in her queer rereadings of canonical works. Despite these variations, writers and critics who are associated with the *kuer* movement share a contempt for fixed categories and a preference for works that celebrate fluidity and ambivalence. Such a critical environment has produced many important challenges to received notions of homosexual identity. It also offers much-needed theoretical resources to rethink many of the assumptions inherent in the *tongzhi* movement. However, the too-ready dismissal of any kind of stable categories sometimes also runs the risk of erasing difference. Hung’s reading of *Crocodile Journal*, for instance, only interprets Lazi’s gender identification as an approximation of heterosexual masculinity. However, as Judith Halberstam’s genealogy of female masculinity embodied in and by (representations of) queer women has shown, the apparent “naturalness” of male masculinity is absolutely dependent on a rejection or marginalization of alternative forms of masculinity. By exposing and challenging the “complex social structures that wed masculinity to maleness and to power and domination,” Halberstam is calling for a more nuanced understanding of gender variance, especially in queer lives and queer representations (2). Similarly, the figure of Lazi does not have to be linked exclusively to heterosexual figures of the male lover. How might she be situated within the Chinese literary tradition of female same-sex eroticism? Is it possible to trace a genealogy of alternative forms of gender such as female masculinity or lesbian femininity?

Much like the imbalance found in ethnographic studies, the study of same-sex eroticism in Chinese literature has also disproportionately focused on male homoerotic desire (Xiaomingxiong; Hinsch). The scattered references discussed by Xiaomingxiong (306-320), however, show ample instances of gender role-playing. Whether it is the two Beijing opera singers Qiang Guan and Wei Guan who live as “husband and wife” in Cao Xueqin’s (1715-1763) *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Xiaomingxiong 310-312); or Chen Yun who cross-dresses as a man to seduce a courtesan for her husband but ends up falling in love herself in Shen Fu’s (1763-?) *Six Chapters in a Floating Life* (Xiaomingxiong 309-310); or Cui Jianyun who becomes so mesmerized by a fifteen-year-old girl at a temple that she cross-dresses as a man and vows to become the girl’s husband in the next life in Li Yu’s (1611-app. 1680) *Intimate Companions* (Xiaomingxiong 307-308), erotic gender role-playing is being practiced, though its significance needs to be analyzed in their proper social, historical, and literary contexts. There are also literary and artistic icons whose lives and aesthetics certainly contribute to a tradition of “female masculinity” that is not reducible to heterosexual imitation: the late Qing patriotic poet-martyr Qiu Jin, who likes to dress in men’s clothes and writes in a distinctly mascu-

line style; or “Brother Xia,” the filmmaker Wu Jinxia who made the first all-female cast film in Hong Kong during the late 30s; or Yam Kim-Fai, the Cantonese opera diva who specializes in roles of handsome, literary heroes and was wildly popular amongst both straight and lesbian women in Hong Kong throughout the 1950s and 1960s (Xiaomingxiong 316-8; 305-6; 303). How might these scattered data be rethought in the study of queer genders? How might we use this material to construct a queer genealogy that would shed new light on the masculine identification found in lesbian works such as *Crocodile's Journal*?

The questions raised in this article are meant to instigate projects that trace a queer past as well as explore current queer expressions *not* in order to “prove” that categories like butch/femme also exist in Chinese cultures. Rather, they are meant to provoke efforts to explore ways in which we can productively bring categories that arguably originate from the West into crisis. Such efforts are of paramount importance to the *tongzhi* movement in its continuous quest to define, on its own terms, the histories, theories, aesthetics, and politics of sexual minorities in Chinese communities.

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