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Impersonating China: The Trade of Boys and Chinese Discourse of Sex

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Comparative Literature

by

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DEDICATION

To

my parents and friends

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VITA

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Global Asia with a special focus on China, Japan, and Korea, Gender/Sexualities Studies, Affect Theories, Cultural Studies, Theories of Modernism, Postcolonial Studies, History of Ideas

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Distinguished Professor Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, Chair

My dissertation seeks to challenge conventional assumptions about gender, sexuality, and modernization in Chinese history. First, I argue that men are commodified or trafficked as sexual objects, because of their sexual value as men, contradicting some second-wave feminist claims that primarily focus on women's sexual exploitation. Second, I contend that the modernization of Chinese sexual discourse did not align with Foucault's concepts of *scientia sexualis* or *ars erotica*. Third, I question the universal applicability of modernization theories, which often presume a singular path toward modernity. Finally, I propose a critical re-evaluation of the prevailing epistemological frameworks for studying China's sexual history. Drawing from archival materials on male prostitution in late imperial China, I argue that the emergence of the market of *Nanse* (男色) boys provides a distinct lens through which to examine the modernization of Chinese sexual discourse.

Chapter 1: Introduction On Methods of Studying Chinese Discourse of Sex

Introduction

This study interrogates the epistemological foundations of area studies and postcolonial scholarship through a critical engagement with Mizoguchi Yuzo's methodological intervention, *China as method*. Challenging the persistent centering of Western paradigms in knowledge production, I argue that even ostensibly critical frameworks such as postcolonial studies often inadvertently reproduce the very Eurocentric universalism they seek to dismantle by positioning non-Western thought as particular exceptions rather than autonomous theoretical systems. Drawing on Mizoguchi's historicization of Chinese concepts, I demonstrate how his approach not only provincializes Western modernity but also opens space for "contending modernities" that reorient global knowledge production. Through comparative analysis of gender/sexuality discourses in early 20th-century China, I further reveal the limitations of Western categories while highlighting alternative epistemological traditions. This research ultimately proposes a decolonial methodology that centers non-Western thought not as ethnographic data but as generative theoretical frameworks. In doing so, it calls for a fundamental rethinking of area studies—one that moves beyond both cultural essentialism and the false universalism of Western social theory.

A Genealogy of Method

My research methodology and theoretical framework are deeply influenced by Chen Kuan-hsing's (陳光興) *Asia as Method: Towards Deimperialization* (1994/2006)[1], Mizoguchi Yuzo's (溝口雄三) *China as Method* (1989/2011)[2], and Laura Hyun-yi Kang's *Traffic in Asian Women* (2020). All of them addressed the epistemological challenge of producing decolonial, anti-imperialist knowledge while situated within the global and intellectual hegemony of the United States. Chen argued that the multi-layered structures of imperialism established before World War II remained largely unchallenged in East Asia due to the U.S. Cold War deployment which still

[1] The Chinese version was first published in 1993, and it was only translated into English after 2006.

[2] Mizoguchi has been a leading figure in Japan's Chinese studies circles since the 80s, but his works were not translated and introduced into Chinese until the 2010s. I included both the publish dates of the Japanese version and Chinese version to record the moment of inter-asia engagement effort took place between different time/space. Mizoguchi Yuzo passed away in 2010, so that the Chinese version of his works were only published posthumously.

remained today. Following the collapse of the USSR and the relative economic prosperity of the 1990s, U.S. client states such as Taiwan (R.O.C.) and South Korea developed what he terms a "sub-imperial desire." Aligning with capitalist imperatives under U.S.-led unipolar expansion, Taiwan participated in imperial competition, extracting natural resources and exploiting labor in less developed regions during this period. Within this context, the Taiwanese government's promotion of a "southward advance" (*nánxiàng* 南向) discourse echoed the rhetoric of Japan's wartime Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (大東亜共栄圏). Notably, this discourse was met with enthusiasm in Taiwanese academic circles, encountering little resistance or critique[3]. Chen observes that Taiwan's sub-imperial discourse was reinforced by the U.S. epistemological order, which obstructed inter-Asian knowledge exchange and comparative analysis. Consequently, many Asian scholars became confined within the ideological framework of U.S. imperialism, losing the capacity to think beyond its epistemological boundaries. To overcome this impasse, Chen proposes "Asia as method"—a framework in which Asia serves as an imaginary anchoring point for mutual reference. By engaging in inter-referential dialogue, scholars can delineate alternative perspectives and envision decolonial horizons beyond the dominant imperial paradigm.

Chen's endeavor has generally been well-received, though not without criticism. Scholars argued that "Asia" was already a discursive formation shaped by multiple imperialisms, and the method of inter-Asia engagement he proposed demanded considerable linguistic proficiency. In practice, this requirement often compels scholars to rely on English as the primary medium of knowledge production, thereby reinforcing the very epistemological structure Chen sought to challenge. In response to these critiques, Laura Kang offers an alternative perspective. She suggests that such engagement could instead serve as a method to interrogate the *non-unity* of Asia as a discursive formation, revealing how the constructed boundaries of "Asian-ness" expose the conditions of *non-knowing* among various U.S. actors and institutions[4]. By examining the category of "Asian women" and its discrepancies with "women in Asia," Kang demonstrates that women in Asia have been systematically excluded from recognition as victims of crimes against humanity. Furthermore, she highlights how, after the 1990s, earlier inter-Asian feminist

[3] Chen, Kuan-Hsing. *Asia as Method: Towards Deimperialization*. Duke University Press, 2010. p.17-64

[4] Kang, Laura Hyun Yi. *Traffic in Asian Women*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2020. P. 20-21

critiques—particularly those addressing the simultaneity and entanglement of Japanese and U.S. sexual violence—were erased from the transpacific redress movements within U.S. second-wave feminism. Kang observes that the Japanese Empire's system of enforced sexual slavery, euphemistically termed "comfort women" (慰安婦), was framed by prominent U.S. second-wave feminists—including Susan Brownmiller, Kathleen Barry, and Cynthia Enloe—as a distinctly *Asian* problem[5]. This persistent neglect of intra-Asian violence, embedded within the structures of U.S. imperialism, not only facilitated a new power/knowledge regime that naturalized the bounded category of "Asian sexual violence" but also reinforced colonial and anthropological distinctions between the West and the Rest. Drawing on Ann Laura Stoler's insight that the ostensibly self-contained racial boundaries of European identity were contingent upon gendered and sexualized differences in the colonies[6], Kang further argues that the discourse of Asian women as *a priori* "existential" victims could only be memorialized and represented through the perspectives of marginalized American subjects. Yet, Kang's primary focus lies in exposing the epistemological limitations imposed by the English language and the institutional-geographical constraints of U.S. academia, rather than proposing "Asian women" as a generative and expansive methodological framework[7].

Mizoguchi Yuzo's (1932–2010) methodological approach was more polemical and ambitious than Chen Kuan-Hsing's, despite the fact that *China as Method* predated the other two scholars' key works. Unlike Chen and Laura Kang, whose frameworks operated within U.S.-inflected academic institutions and predominantly English-speaking environments, Mizoguchi was a scholar of *Chugokugaku* (中国学, Chinese Studies) based in Japan from the 1980s until his death in 2010. A widespread misconception—often compounded by mistranslation—is the conflation of *Chugokugaku* (中國学, Chinese Studies) with *Shinagaku* (支那学, Sinology) and *Kangaku* (漢学, Scholarship on China) in the Japanese context[8]. In reality, these terms each

[5] Ibid., P. 31-44

[6] Stoler, Ann Laura. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Duke University Press, 1995.

[7] Kang, Laura Hyun Yi. *Traffic in Asian Women*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2020. p. 50

[8] The English translations of the three different yet often conflated disciplines in Japan, were borrowed from Naoki Sakai. See: Sakai, Naoki, Jon Solomon, and Peter Button. *Area Studies and Civilizational Transference: Knowledge*

represent distinct intellectual traditions with different institutional positions. Scholarship on China (漢学) was historically situated within Japanese studies or Japanese cultural studies, whereas Sinology (支那学) and Chinese studies (中国学) were classified as foreign language and area studies, akin to English studies in Japan.

While scholarly consensus on the precise boundaries remains elusive, it is generally accepted that Scholarship on China (漢学) originated in sixth-century Japan and subsequently institutionalized as "national science" and tool of governance for the Japanese ruling class until the nineteenth century. Mizoguchi's long-time interlocutor and translator Sun Ge (孫歌) characterizes Scholarship on China (漢学) by the following key features: (1) Japan adopted China's writing system wholesale but adapted its pronunciation to conform to Japanese linguistic conventions; (2) the Japanese elite imported Chinese classical texts (particularly Confucian works) but interpreted them through the ideological lens of the Japanese ruling class, deliberately eschewing engagement with their original Chinese intellectual contexts [9]. Consequently, Mizoguchi argues, Scholarship on China (漢学) was fundamentally a mode of *Japanese* self-study—a "Chinese studies without China"—that neither recognized nor could recognize its own subjective positioning vis-à-vis China[10].

Mizoguchi further draws a provocative parallel between Scholarship on China (漢学) and nineteenth-century European Sinology. Both traditions, he contends, constructed their epistemological authority through the negation of China's intellectual autonomy: just as Scholarship on China (漢学) produced a Japan-centric simulacrum of "China," European Sinology also affirmed its civilizational "whiteness" by relegating China to the status of a static, backward "Orient." In both cases, the result was a failure to generate genuine knowledge about China as a

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Production and Epistemic Decolonization at the End of Pax Americana. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 2023. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003036661.

[9] For a more detailed discussion on the founding of Scholarship on China, Sinology in Japan, and Chinese studies in Japan, please see: Sun, Ge. "Critical Point on Sinology: Thinking through Japan's Scholarship on China 漢學的"臨界點"：日本漢學引發的思考." *World Sinology* 1, no. 1 (1998): 46–63.

[10] Mizoguchi, Yuzo. *China as Method 作為方法的中國.* Translated by Jun-yue Sun. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2011. P. 130-31

historical and discursive subject in its own right. For Mizoguchi, Scholarship on China (漢学), while distinct from nineteenth-century European Sinology, similarly precluded any genuine comparative engagement. This was because it operated from an epistemological standpoint that fundamentally rejected heterogeneity—or the very existence of an autonomous Other[11]. Mizoguchi identified Fukuzawa Yukichi's (福澤諭吉, 1835-1901) seminal 1885 essay *Datsu-A-Ron* (脱亜論, "Exiting Asia, Joining Europe") as emblematic of this epistemological paradigm. Published during the Meiji era (1868-1912) as one of Japan's most influential intellectuals, Fukuzawa articulated a vision in which "the West" (or Europe) supplanted China as the teleological endpoint for Japan's cultural and civilizational alignment. Crucially, Fukuzawa's formulation either willfully ignored or actively denied the "otherness" of Europe's subjective position—reproducing, in Mizoguchi's analysis, Scholarship on China's (漢学) characteristic denial of epistemological difference[12]. While pre-Meiji Scholarship on China (漢学) had constructed a Japan-centric simulacrum of "China," Fukuzawa's *Datsu-A-Ron* projected an equally monological fantasy of "the West."

When Japan was compelled to open its markets to Western powers in the nineteenth century, it simultaneously adopted Western educational systems—including the disciplines of Sinology and other Oriental studies—which gradually supplanted traditional Scholarship on China (漢学) in Japanese academia. Many Japanese intellectuals of this period found little difficulty in aligning themselves with European colonial perspectives through these newly imported frameworks. Indeed, the colonial gaze embedded in Sinology and Oriental studies was so thoroughly internalized that it came to shape even Japanese scholars' studies of their own society. A telling example of this epistemological assimilation can be found in Watsuji Tetsuro's (和辻哲郎, 1889–1960) work. As Sakai Naoki (酒井直樹) has demonstrated, Watsuji—celebrated in the West during the early twentieth century as a philosopher of Japanese uniqueness, particularly through

[11] Mizoguchi mentioned that in the 17th century French Sinology there was still genuine research interest in China, but after the 19th century, China has become an object of contempt to justify European colonialism/imperialism. Please see: Mizoguchi, Yuzo. *China as Method 作為方法的中國*. Translated by Jun-yue Sun. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2011. P. 149-154

[12] Sun, Ge. "Critical Point on Sinology: Thinking through Japan's Scholarship on China 漢學的"臨界點"：日本漢學引發的思考." *World Sinology* 1, no. 1 (1998): 46–63. p. 56

his influential *Climate and Culture* (1935/1979)[13]—exemplifies what Sakai terms "civilizational transference." This phenomenon describes how a subject's positionality becomes defined through its paradigmatic relationship with the Other within predetermined civilizational hierarchies[14]. While Watsuji vehemently insisted on Japan's civilizational distinctiveness from the West, Sakai reveals that this very insistence on Japanese particularism ultimately reinforced the West/Rest binary. Paradoxically, Watsuji's discourse—though ostensibly asserting Japanese difference—was in fact articulated from within the Western epistemological position it sought to challenge. Sakai's analysis thus illuminates a crucial dimension of Sinology and Oriental studies: they function not merely as tools for exoticizing or fetishizing the "Orient," but more fundamentally as mechanisms in what he calls the co-figuration of the West and the Rest and defines the Western identity by transferal constitution. These disciplines, even when practiced by non-Western scholars, participate in demarcating and reinforcing the civilizational boundaries that define the West's self-conception.

The epistemological legacy of Scholarship on China (漢学) persisted even as it became absorbed into Sinology during Japan's nineteenth-century modernization process. Mizoguchi's analysis reveals how Scholarship on China (漢学) systematically refused to acknowledge—much less critically examine—the fundamental differences between Japan and China. This failure to register difference had profound consequences: by making universal claims without genuine comparative engagement or recognition of difference or heterogeneity, Scholarship on China (漢学) produced not objective knowledge but rather self-referential assertions that ultimately precluded Japan itself from becoming a legitimate object of study, by claiming itself as part of "the West"[15]. This epistemological stance reached its historical apotheosis in the rhetoric of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which provided ideological justification for Japan's imperial expansion during World War II. The significance of Naoki Sakai's analysis on Watsuji Tetsuro (和

[13] The Japanese version was published in 1935. Not until 1979 was the book translated into English. Yet the book first caught the attention of English-speaking academic circles in the 1960s.

[14] *oduction and Epistemic Decolonization at the End of Pax Americana*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 2023. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003036661.

[15] Mizoguchi, Yuzo. *China as Method 作為方法的中國*. Translated by Jun-yue Sun. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2011. P. 152-54

辻哲郎, 1889-1960) was that it revealed that even though Watsuji himself was a critic of Japan's expansionist doctrine, his opposition to the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, did not represent a true alternative. As Naoki Sakai's work demonstrates, while Watsuji ostensibly wrote from a "Japanese" perspective, his scholarship remained fundamentally structured by the West/Rest binary. Therefore, by identifying Japan as the "opposite" of "the West," Watsuji's epistemological framework also inherently denied the potential of a different epistemological position.

In response to shifting intellectual currents in prewar Japan, Takeuchi Yoshimi (竹内好, 1910-1977) and Takeda Taijun (武田泰淳, 1912-1976) established the Chinese Literature Research Society in 1934, marking the emergence of Chinese studies as a distinct discipline separate from both traditional Scholarship on China (漢学) and Western-style Sinology (支那学). Takeuchi observed that Meiji-era's studies on China—whether the Scholarship on China (漢学) tradition or the newly imported Sinology (支那学)—consistently treated China as a historical relic akin to Greco-Roman antiquity, deliberately excluding contemporary China as a legitimate object of intellectual inquiry. This epistemological framework, Takeuchi argued, served an implicitly political function: by consigning China to the past, both Japanese and Western scholars could affirm their own positions as representatives of civilization and modernity while denying China's coeval existence in the modern world order.

Takeuchi extended this critique in his postwar reflections on Japan's defeat, positing that these scholarly traditions had provided the intellectual foundation for Japan's fascist turn and subsequent collapse[16]. His analysis centered on what he saw as the disciplines' uncritical

[16] Takeuchi's position could hardly be categorized into either right or left. It should be noted that most Japanese saw the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Asia Pacific War (1941-1945) as two different, separated, and unrelated wars. While Takeuchi had mixed feelings about the Sino-Japanese War, he issued one of the strongest support for the Asia Pacific War by his "The Asia-pacific War and Our Determination" (大東亜戦争と我らの決意, 1942) after Japan declared war against the U.S in 1941. In this writing, Takeuchi saw the U.S. as the true culprit who sparked the seeds for world wars, and Japan's Asia Pacific War was justified as a resistance movement against U.S. colonialism/imperialism. Even after WWII, Takeuchi expressed no signs of regret for writing this article, and the article was also included into the collections of his works by himself. While it may seem logically inconsistent from readers like us, for Takeuchi and his contemporaries, "The Asia-pacific War and Our Determination" have little internal contradictions with his other works which criticizes how Japan simulates Western colonialism/imperialism in the name of modernization. On the other hand, even Watsuji Tetsuro who opposed both wars could hardly be categorized into either right or left. Watsuji opposed these wars because he didn't support the

acceptance of modernity's basic premises—premises that Takeuchi understood as fundamentally entwined with European colonial expansion. Modernity, in this reading, constituted not a universal historical stage but rather a particular ideological formation that derived its self-conception as "civilized" precisely through its imperial domination of non-Western societies.

Through his comparative study of Japanese and Chinese modernization, Takeuchi developed a provocative distinction: where Japan's modernization represented a process of *tenko* (転向, ideological conversion)—a top-down imitation of Western imperial models that required little authentic Japanese subjectivity—China's 1911 Revolution, despite its ultimate failure, emerged from genuine popular forces that simultaneously rejected both feudal tradition (its Chinese past) and Western imperial modernity (the future). This interpretation stood in stark contrast to postwar Japan's triumphant narrative of economic recovery during the 1950s-60s, when China remained mired in poverty, struggling to recover from the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Yet Takeuchi's insistence on reading China's revolutionary potential against the grain of conventional historiography offered what remains one of the most penetrating critiques of modern East Asian intellectual history.

In his seminal 1948 essay "What is Modernity? The Case of Japan and China"—written three years after Japan's surrender—Takeuchi Yoshimi employs a poignant parable from Lu Xun's "The Wise Man, the Fool and the Slave" (聰明人和傻子和奴才, 1925) to illuminate the fundamental contrast between Chinese revolutionary consciousness and Japan's Meiji Restoration (明治維新, 1868). The parable presents three archetypes: a suffering slave who voices complaints about his oppressive conditions; a wise man who offers empty consolation; and a fool who takes radical action by attempting to tear down the slave's wall to create a window.

> There is a parable by Lu Xun called "The Wise Man, the Fool and the Slave" (聰明人和傻子和奴才, 1925). The slave's work is hard and he constantly complains. The wise man consoles him, "Your luck will surely improve before

multi-ethnic empire envisioned by the Japanese government, and was appalled at the possibilities that pure Japanese blood would be contaminated by foreigners.

For a more detailed discussion on Takeuchi's stance during WWII please see: Sun, Ge. *The Paradox: Takeuchi Yoshimi 竹内好という問い*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten 岩波書店, 2005. P. 117-136.

long." But the slave's life is hard, and he next complains to the fool, "The room given to me doesn't even have a window." "Tell your master to have a window made," says the fool. "What an absurd idea!" answers the slave. With this, the fool goes to the slave's house and begins tearing down a wall. "What are you doing, sir?" "I am making a window for you." The slave tries to stop him but the fool does not listen. The slave then shouts for help, and other slaves appear and drive the fool off. Finally, the master appears and the slave informs him what has happened, "A bandit began destroying the walls of my house. I was the first to discover this and together we drove him off." "Well done," says the master. The wise man visits the master after this incident and the slave thanks him: "Indeed, sir, you are very prescient. My master praised me, so my luck has improved." The wise man seems pleased. "That's right!" he replies[17].

Takeuchi's unconventional interpretation diverges from mainstream readings that identify Lu Xun with the fool. Instead, he argues that the slave constitutes the parable's true subject—the figure through whom Lu Xun explores the agonizing process of awakening. The wise man clearly represents a flawed humanist approach, content to placate the slave with false hopes rather than spur genuine consciousness. More strikingly, Takeuchi contends that the fool—often romanticized as the revolutionary hero—remains equally trapped within humanist ideology. By violently imposing his solution (the destroyed wall) without the slave's participation or comprehension, the fool merely substitutes one form of domination for another, creating the illusion of liberation while leaving the fundamental power structure intact. Takeuchi pointed out that the fool could not improve the living conditions of the slave nor liberate the slave from slavery because precisely by tearing down the wall of the slave's house, the fool would reveal that there was no path to follow behind the walls—a painful reality that made him realized that he was a slave[18]. This reading leads Takeuchi to his crucial insight: both the wise man and the fool represent complementary facets of the same humanist paradigm. To interpret Lu Xun as endorsing either position, Takeuchi warns,

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[17] I borrowed the translation from Richard Calichman.

Takeuchi, Yoshimi. *What Is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*. Translated by Richard F. Calichman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. P. 70

[18] Ibid., 71

would be to reduce his complex critique to simplistic humanist platitudes. The parable's true brilliance lies in its exposure of how both approaches—gradualist consolation and violent intervention—fail to address the slave's fundamental condition of oppression and his recognition of his oppression. Through this analysis, Takeuchi frames Lu Xun's work as articulating what he called "the most painful thing in life": the realization that awakening cannot be gifted from without, but must emerge through the slave's own agonizing confrontation that he is a slave, and there is no path to follow if he wants to liberate himself from slavery.

Takeuchi's analysis posits that true awakening emerges from the slave's own pursuit of salvation—a pursuit that paradoxically reveals the impossibility of external deliverance. Only through recognizing that there exists "no path to follow" behind the walls[19] (that is, no ready-made solution to his oppression, and the slave must realize that he can neither become the master, nor the wise man and the fool) can the slave achieve genuine consciousness of his enslaved condition. For Takeuchi, Lu Xun suggests that authentic liberation must follow this moment of awakening and subsequent despair, wherein the slave rejects both his current enslaved status and the false alternatives represented by the fool's violent intervention. Takeuchi identifies this dual negation—refusing both what one is and what one is offered to become—as the philosophical foundation of the Chinese revolution. In other words, for Takeuchi, the foundation of the Chinese revolution lay in the slave's resistance, which *rejected being himself and, at the same time, also rejected being anything other than himself*. This contrasts sharply with the Japanese humanist tradition emerging from the Meiji Restoration, which maintained faith in salvation from external force, whether through the wise man's consolation or the fool's radical action. Takeuchi argues that this very faith constitutes the deepest form of enslavement, as evidenced when he cites Lu Xun's "Random Thoughts 65" (隨感錄六十五, 1919): "The slave and the master are identical... The tyrant's subject is more violent than the tyrant himself... [for] he who enslaves all others as a master would himself be content as a slave." This analysis leads Takeuchi to his provocative conclusion about postwar Japan: despite its remarkable economic achievements during the 1970s-80s, Japan

[19] Takeuchi borrowed the phrase "no path to follow"(無路可走), from Lu Xun's other writing in "What Happened after Nora Left?" (娜拉走後怎樣, 1924). The article was originally from Lu Xun's speech addressed to the students of Beijing Normal High School of Girls (北京高等師範女子學校) in 1923, discussing women's liberation and the possible struggles of the awakened Nora from *A Doll's House*. Lu Xun commented that "the most painful thing in life is to be awakened from dreams but find out that there are no paths to follow after awakening."

remained fundamentally lacking in the revolutionary subjectivity that could genuinely resist and overcome the colonial/imperial frameworks that had structured the prewar world order. Japan's modernization, in Takeuchi's view, represented not liberation but rather a more sophisticated form of enslavement—one that maintained the essential power structures while creating the illusion of assuming the position of the master.

In his 1960 essay "Asia as Method" (方法としてのアジア)[20], Takeuchi Yoshimi expanded on his critique of Japan's modernization process, urging Japanese scholars to move beyond comparative frameworks that measured Japan against supposedly "advanced" Western nations. He advocated instead for serious scholarly engagement with less developed countries like China as equally valid points of comparison[21]. This conceptual framework would later inspire Chen Kuan-hsing's development of the "Asia as Method" paradigm discussed earlier.

However, Mizoguchi Yuzo, while deeply influenced by Takeuchi's work, offered a significant critique of this approach. He argued that the alternative subjectivity Takeuchi sought to establish through his method also ultimately relied on circular logic and self-referential assertions. Mizoguchi maintained that Takeuchi's intellectual project—fundamentally shaped by Japan's wartime defeat—led him to romanticize the Chinese Revolution as Japan's dialectical opposite. Consequently, while Takeuchi ostensibly wrote about China, Mizoguchi contended that his work demonstrated little genuine interest in China's historical or social realities. For Mizoguchi, Takeuchi's "China" functioned primarily as a rhetorical construct—an idealized projection of what Japan might have been, rather than a substantive engagement with China's actual historical experience[22].

Mizoguchi proposed a fundamental reorientation for Chinese studies scholarship. Rather

[20] The article was originally delivered as a speech in 1960. For a complete translation of the article please see: Takeuchi, Yoshimi. *What Is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*. Translated by Richard F. Calichman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. P. 149-165

[21] Ibid., p. 160

[22] Mizoguchi, Yuzo. *China as Method 作為方法的中國*. Translated by Jun-yue Sun. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2011. P. 5-8

than engaging with the problematic frameworks of "modernity" or its purported "overcoming,"[23] he advocated for a return to China's concrete historical and social realities by examining the internal patterns and logic of China's historical development. His approach rejected comparative valuations, as exemplified in his assertion: "China was neither more advanced nor more backward than the West—it was simply following a different path of modernization."[24] Mizoguchi challenged two prevalent but equally flawed positions: the view that China was backward due to its lack of Western-style individual freedom discourse, and the opposing claim that China was more advanced because of its revolutionary tradition. Both perspectives, he argued, relied on inappropriate Western-centric standards of comparison. He particularly emphasized that concepts like human rights and freedom in China could not be understood through the Western framework of private property and individualism. Instead, these notions were fundamentally shaped by the Confucian ideal of Great Unity (大同)[25], which privileged collective welfare and national sovereignty over individual liberties. This analytical framework led Mizoguchi to interpret China's revolutionary movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries not as ruptures with tradition, but as dialectical continuations and transformations of the Great Unity discourse—a conceptual lineage traceable to ancient Chinese thought. Consequently, he insisted that the

[23] In 1942, Japan hosted a symposium under the name Overcome Modernity (近代の超克) to discuss what was the essence of modernity, and to provide evidence for Japanese cultural superiority. The entire symposium sparked off heated debates throughout, and the participants failed to reach to any consensus in its closing either. Like other academic events during war time, this symposium also corroborated the Japanese government's military agenda to a certain extent, and was for a long time seen as a proof of Japanese intellectual circles' complicity with Japanese war crimes. Yet, as pointed out by Takeuchi Yoshimi, the debates that took place in this symposium still haunted Japan until today, and unlike other war time academic events in Japan which have long been forgotten, the debates in this symposium were often revisited by postwar Japanese scholars. Takeuchi also published an essay under the same title of "Overcome Modernity" (近代の超克) in 1959 to discuss the legacy of this symposium, and if a narrative for Japan's modernization process was possible.

For a more detailed discussion on the symposium please see: Sun, Ge. *The Paradox: Takeuchi Yoshimi 竹内好という問い*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten 岩波書店, 2005. P. 225-73

[24] Mizoguchi, Yuzo. *China as Method 作為方法的中國*. Translated by Jun-yue Sun. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2011. P. 12

[25] The concept of Great Unity (大同) can be dated back to one of the Five Classics of Confucianism, Book of Rites (禮記), written in 1st century BCE or earlier. The discussion and elaboration on the concepts of Great Unity happened in several imperial dynasties in China. During the late Qing period, the notion of Great Unity was often invoked by thinkers and activists such as Kang You-wei (康有為, 1858-1927), and revolutionary figures such as Sun Yat-sen (孫中山, 1866-1925), and Mao's speech "On the People's Democratic Dictatorship"(論人民民主專政) in 1949.

Chinese Revolution should be evaluated on its own epistemological terms rather than through Western modernity's normative standards. Ultimately, Mizoguchi's methodological intervention called for replacing "Asia as method" with "China as method"—a scholarly approach that would uncover the immanent dialectical forces operating within China's own historical trajectories rather than imposing external analytical categories.

Mizoguchi's methodological proposition—"to use China as method is to make the world our goal (object of study)"—encapsulates his radical epistemological intervention[26]. He conceptualized historiography or historical narratives as fundamentally world-constituting practices, observing that even critical scholars like Takeuchi Yoshimi remained unwittingly constrained by progressivist historiography that naturalized Western standards as universal benchmarks. When applied to Chinese history, Mizoguchi argued, such frameworks inevitably fragmented indigenous historical logics, reproducing Western-centric worldviews even in ostensibly anti-Western discourses. In Mizoguchi's analysis, Takeuchi's approach effectively inverted the proper methodological relationship: by "using the world as method to make China its goal (object of study)," Takeuchi's project remained paradoxically dependent on Western epistemic recognition. His conceptual "world" implicitly equated to the Western world, demanding China's validation through externally imposed criteria. Against this, Mizoguchi advocated a profound epistemic reorientation—adopting China's historical worldview as an analytical lens to relativize and particularize the supposedly universal standards derived from Western experience. This approach, Mizoguchi contended, could produce more authentic knowledge about our irreducibly multipolar, multiethnic, and multicultural world. Only by provincializing Western epistemological claims through sustained engagement with alternative historical consciousnesses—in this case, China's—could scholars achieve the critical distance necessary to assess Japan's modernization without romanticizing either Western models or Chinese alternatives. For Mizoguchi, "China as method" thus represented not sinocentric reversal, but rather the necessary epistemological decentering required for genuinely global historical understanding.

As a concluding reflection on Mizoguchi's methodological approach, it is crucial to

[26] Ibid., P. 130

emphasize—as noted by Sun Ge (孫歌)[27], one of his principal interlocutors and Chinese translators—Mizoguchi deliberately eschews the unproductive binaries of cultural essentialism and Sinocentrism. Sun observes that Mizoguchi occupies neither position, nor does he engage in scholarly debates with the intention of "defeating" ideological opponents. His project is fundamentally reconstructive rather than polemical. Mizoguchi's methodology neither posits China as an autochthonous entity existing outside Western epistemological frameworks, nor does it advocate intellectual isolationism. Rather, he insists on employing Western historical and philosophical traditions as vital points of reference—not as universal standards, but as comparative lenses through which to relativize China's position within world historical structures. This reciprocal analytical movement simultaneously provincializes Western claims to universality while situating Chinese historical experience as one constitutive element among many in global knowledge production. Significantly, Mizoguchi does not reject Western conceptual categories like "freedom" or "human rights" outright. Instead, he demands their rigorous historicization through Chinese intellectual traditions and social practices. His work exposes the fundamental asymmetry in conventional knowledge production: while Western epistemology routinely particularizes non-Western societies, it rarely subjects its own conceptual frameworks to equivalent scrutiny from non-Western perspectives. What emerges from Mizoguchi's work is thus an ambitious, inherently unfinished epistemological project. His "China as method" paradigm implicitly calls for parallel methodological interventions from other cultural spheres—the Islamic world, South Asia, and beyond—as essential components in constructing the truly multipolar, multiethnic, and multicultural world history he envisioned. This open-ended quality is not a shortcoming but rather the necessary consequence of his radical epistemological pluralism.

Research Materials and Research Questions

Returning to the central concerns of my research, readers may question why significant effort has been devoted to delineating these methodological approaches and their historical contexts. I argue that this groundwork serves two crucial purposes: first, to provide a critical genealogy of Chinese gender/sexuality studies in the U.S. academy; and second, to demonstrate

[27] Sun, Ge. "How Can China Become a Method? 中國如何成為方法?" In *China as Method 作為方法的中國*, 293–305. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2011.

how this field's conceptual frameworks have produced systematic modes of "not-knowing" that predetermine China as a particular kind of epistemological object.

Through what I term the "preconceived configuration" of gender/sexuality paradigms, anti-colonial nationalisms in the Global South become overdetermined as manifestations of transhistorical patriarchy, while colonial injuries become legible only when framed through U.S.-centric categories of gender and sexual minorities. My detailed engagement with alternative methodological approaches aims to create epistemic space beyond U.S. global hegemony, underscoring how these decolonial interventions remain not only relevant but increasingly urgent in contemporary scholarship.

The literature I plan to review spans from Robert Hans van Gulik's (1910-1967) foundational work on Chinese sexual culture to contemporary scholars like Charlotte Furth, Sophie Volpp, Howard Chiang's 2021 book, *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific*, and Sommer's new book in 2024, *Fox Spirit, Stone Maiden, and Other Transgender Histories from Late Imperial China*. Rather than offering an exhaustive survey, I trace the continuities, ruptures, and transformations in how gender/sexuality concepts translate into Chinese studies—with particular attention to male same-sex relations in imperial China. As my analysis will show, these studies frequently presume subject positions (like "gay/homosexual" or "transgender") that lack meaningful equivalents in Chinese historical contexts, replicating the epistemic erasures Laura Kang identified in her work on Asian women[28]. Just as U.S. feminist discourse first excluded then selectively recognized Asian women's victimhood under imperialism, current sexuality studies also tend to collapse Chinese sexual practices into homogenized categories, eliding crucial historical specificities.

I argue this "will to not-know" reflects broader conceptual habits in U.S. area studies—what might be termed the "gendering-culturalization-regionalization" triad. While echoing older Orientalist tropes, this framework operates through more sophisticated epistemological mechanisms that simultaneously affirm Western universality and Asian particularism via gendered historical narratives. When recounting colonial histories, area studies construct Asia as an imagined geography bounded by gender discourse, positioning women and gay men as the only legitimate victims of imperialism. This produces a temporal distortion where Western colonialism

[28] Kang, Laura Hyun Yi. *Traffic in Asian Women*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2020. P. 47

becomes historical while "Asian culture" endures as a transhistorical oppressive force—rendering Asian women, in Kang's terms, "existential victims prior to analysis." Following Sakai Naoki's concept of "civilizational transference," I show how this knowledge regime overdetermined positionalities through civilizational co-figuration, while adding that it uniquely genders colonial injury. Drawing on Lu Xun's parable of "The Wise Man, the Fool and the Slave," I demonstrate how such gendered historiography offers false salvation—equating decolonization with liberal gender/sexual liberation. Ultimately, I explore whether Lu Xun's method might open space for an anti-colonial subjectivity that refuses both existing conditions and their prescribed alternatives.

I will also propose new frameworks for Chinese "moral/sexual" discourse and its entanglement with the Chinese "gender" concept, and why a new framework for understanding the Chinese "masculinity" concept is necessary for understanding Lu Xun's critique of Mei and his followers. I suggest that Western concepts such as gender and homosexualities only obstruct our understanding of sexual practices in China, and "sexual" concepts developed in the Chinese context may prove to be more productive sources when analyzing colonial/imperial violence. The texts and documents I will reference include some primary sources from *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period*[29], and some other personal diaries and notes circulated in the Qing periods, such as *Anthology of Petty Matters in Qing* (清稗類抄)[30] and *Notes on Petty Matters in Yenching* (燕京雜記)[31]. I will selectively reference some Chinese studies scholars' works, including Tani Barlow and Martin Huang, and some scholars in theater studies, such as Yao Shu-yi (么書儀) and Wu Cun-cun (吳存存) who publish mostly in Chinese. I will also borrow concepts formulated by Chinese scholars from Inter-Asia Cultural Studies network published in Chinese,

[29] This is a 14 volumes compilation of archives related to Peking opera in the Qing period. The first 10 volumes were published in 2011, and it included materials collected from Flower Guides (writing focused on the connoisseurship of male prostitutes, mostly Xianggu actors), Anecdotal Writing (筆記寫作/小說), the records from the Qing court's theater service sectors, newspapers, diaries, and pictographs. The final 4 volumes were published in 2013, and these volumes included the remaining records of theatrical troupes and local news which were left out in the first 10 volumes. I will mostly consult data from Flower Guides, Anecdotal Writings, diaries and newspapers. Records from the Qing court and the theatrical troupes are related less to my research.

[30] Written by Xu Ke (徐珂), a former government official in Qing court and early Republic China. The book was published in 1917 in 48 volumes, collecting encyclopedic details of everyday lives which would not be recorded in official history books of the Qing period.

[31] Written by an unknown author in late Qing period. Covers the daily lives of ordinary people, especially those from the lower and underclass. Yenching is the old name for Beijing.

such as Ning Ying-bin (甯應斌), Liu Jen-peng (劉人鵬) and Ding Nai-fei (丁乃非). Some Japanese historians' works on Ming and Qing dynasties will also be consulted, such as Mori Masao (森正夫) and Kishimoto Mio (岸本美緒), whose Annales school style research provides significant insights into the social structures of late imperial China. This research is quite eclectic in its choices of theoretical, historical, and literary sources, and precisely through these eclectic choices, I want to show how my methodological approach is different from area studies.

The methodological approach of "China as method" does not seek to categorically dismiss Western scholarship as invalid, but rather to recognize Chinese conceptual frameworks as possessing analytical and philosophical value that may transcend their original context. This perspective reveals how conventional approaches to Chinese studies often fail to engage Chinese thought on its own terms. Robert Hans van Gulik's sinological research, for instance, projects Western sexual norms onto Chinese cultural practices, reducing China to a passive epistemological object. His conclusions become self-referential precisely because they take the West as the sole frame of reference.

Later scholars like Bret Hinsch, while incorporating Chinese source materials, similarly presuppose the universal applicability of Western categories like "gay/homosexual" identities, flattening the historical specificity of male same-sex relations in China. Matthew Sommer demonstrates greater methodological caution by acknowledging that modern homosexual identity categories cannot be trans-historically applied to imperial China. However, despite his careful use of Chinese legal archives, Sommer's analysis remains fundamentally structured by Western gender/sexuality theories. While he recognizes distinctions between Chinese and Western conceptualizations of gender and sexuality, he treats these differences as requiring only minor theoretical adjustments rather than substantive epistemological reconsideration.

I contend that merely including Chinese archival materials proves insufficient for proper historical analysis. What is required is a thorough archaeological investigation of Chinese conceptual frameworks themselves—an approach that recognizes Chinese discourses of "gender," "sexuality," and moral/sexual relations as containing theoretical potential independent of Western paradigms. In later sections, I will develop a detailed critique of Sommer's methodological separation of "gender" from status-based analysis, demonstrating why this analytical distinction cannot be meaningfully sustained within Chinese historical contexts. This critique will illustrate how even the most careful Western scholarship often fails to fully account for the philosophical

richness of Chinese conceptual systems.

The Author's Notes on China as Method

Before engaging with the relevant literature, several methodological questions require clarification. First, we must examine why an archaeological/genealogical approach to Chinese conceptual history is essential for both historical analysis and contemporary studies. This approach involves excavating Chinese epistemological frameworks to analyze not only China's social phenomena but also to illuminate contemporary historical and social developments. Such methodology recognizes the theoretical potential inherent in China's historical experience rather than relying solely on Western-derived analytical categories. Second, we must consider Mizoguchi Yuzo's contention that why "Japan as method" remains theoretically untenable.

To address the first question, we must first recognize that many foundational theoretical concepts—including individual freedom, human rights, and gender/sexuality frameworks—originated in pre-20th century Europe, yet their analytical validity for contemporary studies is rarely questioned. This observation invites us to consider why Chinese historical concepts should not be granted similar theoretical legitimacy when examining both historical and contemporary contexts. A more substantive response emerges when we consider the profound continuities between pre-revolutionary and contemporary China. Unless one posits an absolute historical rupture—a claim that would require substantial evidentiary support—we must acknowledge that older paradigms continue to shape contemporary Chinese social and political dynamics in subtle yet significant ways. The case of male performance traditions in Chinese theater offers a compelling illustration of these enduring cultural undercurrents.

While scholar such as Yao Shu-yi (么書儀) maintains that male prostitution in Qing dynasty Peking opera belong firmly to the past, and that the practice of male dan (旦) actors has been eradicated through social reforms[32], the affective residues of these traditions persist in contemporary theatrical discourse. Consider the 2014 declaration by Xu Xiang (徐翔), president of Beijing's Central Academy of Drama (中央戲劇學院), that the institution would neither train nor admit male dan actors—a statement revealing deep-seated cultural anxieties. Parallel

[32] Yao, Shu-yi. 2017. *The Reform of Peking Opera in Late Qing Period*. 3rd ed. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House. p. 226

discomfort is evident in Taiwan, where male dan performers remain marginalized. If early 20th century social reforms had truly eliminated the ontological presence of male prostitution and dan performers, why do we encounter such strikingly similar affective responses in modern Chinese theatrical circles? This paradox suggests that while the physical practice may have ceased, its cultural and psychological imprint endures—demonstrating the vital importance of archaeological approaches to Chinese conceptual history for understanding present-day social phenomena.

To properly address the second question, we must first unpack the theoretical underpinnings of Mizoguchi's methodological approach—assumptions that remained implicit in his original writings because they represented shared knowledge among Japanese historians of China during the 1980s. These presuppositions, which contemporary readers may no longer recognize as self-evident, require careful explication to fully appreciate Mizoguchi's conceptual framework. Mizoguchi's critique on "Japan as Method" stems from Japan's historical position as both colonizer and colonized, which complicates its capacity for neutral self-assessment. Mizoguchi proposes "China as method" as an alternative epistemological strategy precisely because China's distinct historical trajectory—marked by different colonial encounters and revolutionary experiences—offers a more objective vantage point from which to evaluate Japan's modernization and its consequences. His approach therefore aims to transcend the limitations of national historiography by employing China's historical consciousness as an analytical lens.

But at the core of Mizoguchi's methodology lies a crucial, though often unstated, theoretical distinction between the Chinese and Japanese revolutionary experiences. While he disagreed with Takeuchi Yoshimi's specific evaluation of the Chinese Revolution, Mizoguchi nevertheless accepted Takeuchi's fundamental premise that China's revolutionary trajectory emerged organically from internal dialectical forces within Chinese history[33]. This stood in stark contrast to Japan's Meiji Restoration, which Mizoguchi characterized as lacking comparable epistemological autonomy—a deficiency that paradoxically facilitated Japan's rapid alignment with Western modernity. Mizoguchi extended this analysis to argue that Japan's historical position rendered it fundamentally limited as a source of alternative knowledge paradigms. We might synthesize his implicit argument as follows: Japan occupies a doubly peripheral position—both

[33] Mizoguchi, Yuzo. *China as Method 作為方法的中國*. Translated by Jun-yue Sun. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2011. P. 11

within China's traditional world system and within the contemporary Western-dominated world order. This dual marginality means that while Japan can offer perspectives from the periphery, it remains constrained to choosing between Chinese or Western epistemological frameworks. Crucially, Mizoguchi's analysis suggests that peripheral positions may potentially replace existing centers of knowledge production, but cannot establish themselves as genuinely independent third alternatives.

This theoretical stance explains Mizoguchi's insistence on "China as method" rather than "Japan as method." For him, China's historical experience—marked by both resistance to and engagement with multiple imperial projects—offered greater potential for developing autonomous epistemological frameworks than Japan's more derivative modernization path. His approach thus seeks to leverage China's historical consciousness as a means to provincialize both Western and Japanese claims to universal knowledge.

While Mizoguchi never directly engaged with critiques of essentialism and Sinocentrism, and while his methodological approach exhibits nominalist tendencies, his rigorous historicization of Chinese concepts nevertheless succeeded in substantiating China as both an abstract subject and object of knowledge. His analysis of the Tian-xia (天下, all under heaven) concept particularly demonstrates that "China as method" should not be reduced to or essentialized as equivalent to nation-state formations or sovereign political entities.

I would further characterize Mizoguchi's approach as representing a distinctive form of historical materialism—one that rejects orthodox Marxist materialism while maintaining that Chinese civilization's essence emerges from the dynamic interplay of social, economic, cultural, and political factors. For Mizoguchi, "China" represents not a fixed geographical or political entity, but rather a constellation of abstract principles, social institutions, and knowledge paradigms generated through the lived experiences and dialectical forces of Chinese historical development. This conceptualization allows him to analyze Chinese civilization as an evolving epistemological framework rather than a static cultural essence.

This analysis ultimately raises a crucial question regarding Mizoguchi's conceptualization of the relationship between "China as method" and China as a political entity. Within the world-system framework that Mizoguchi reconstructs, how does he position China's epistemological and geopolitical roles? I argue that Mizoguchi envisions a dual positionality for China in this system. As a political entity, China inevitably occupies a central position due to its demographic scale and

vast intellectual production. However, his methodological approach crucially maintains space for peripheral perspectives to challenge this centrality. This dialectical tension becomes evident in his genealogy of the Great Unity (大同) concept. While originally deployed to legitimize imperial authority, Mizoguchi traces how this discourse gradually incorporated marginal social elements that ultimately subverted the very center it was meant to uphold—the imperial court itself[34].

Mizoguchi's framework thus suggests that while China's material conditions ensure its systemic centrality, its epistemological traditions contain within them the seeds of their own decentering. The Great Unity paradigm exemplifies how dominant Chinese discourses have historically drawn upon and been transformed by peripheral forces, creating what we might call a "decentered centrality"—a structural position that simultaneously occupies the center while being constantly reshaped by marginal perspectives.

A crucial consideration emerges regarding contemporary critical theories: while postcolonial and poststructural studies ostensibly challenge Western hegemony, their persistent framing from the periphery of Western discourse inadvertently reinforces the very center they seek to undermine. By positioning themselves as particular exceptions to Western universalism, they paradoxically reaffirm the West's epistemological centrality. Mizoguchi characterizes this paradox as "conducting Western studies without the West"—a critique that echoes our earlier discussion of Watsuji Tetsuro's arguments about Japanese uniqueness, which ultimately served to co-constitute Western universalism rather than subvert it.

Mizoguchi's "China as method" project proposes a more radical alternative: a framework of "contending modernities" and "contending particularities" capable of fundamentally challenging the knowledge paradigms of Western colonial modernity. This approach finds surprising corroboration in comparative analyses such as between early 20th century Chinese and Iranian discourses of sexual attraction, as evidenced in works like Afsaneh Najmabadi's *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*. In both contexts, we observe gender-neutral conceptions of sexual charm frequently expressed through tropes of effeminization—a paradigm markedly distinct from Western gender/sexuality frameworks[35].

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[34] Ibid., p. 24

[35] Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 2005.

Such comparisons suggest that Western gender/sexuality theories may represent not universal categories but merely one particular epistemological tradition among others. Alternative paradigms emerging from different civilizational centers may in fact possess greater theoretical potential for understanding non-Western contexts. While a full exploration of this comparison exceeds the scope of the present study, it powerfully illustrates the significance of Mizoguchi's "contending particularities" framework and points toward productive avenues for future research in decolonial epistemology.

And I want to add some additional remarks on Mizoguchi's "strategic essentialism, yet still comparative" method. As Radhakrishnan has pointed out, "why indeed compare, if all that comparison does is to reiterate the economy of a world structured in dominance? Why compare unless the performance of comparison transforms the world and the many actors who have volunteered to participate in the project? Why compare if, after the comparison, each actor goes back to her corner to pursue business as usual?"[36] Although I am not suggesting that an alternative epistemological framework will eventually lead to the "affirmative potential for projects of fusion and hybridity"[37] for the entire world as envisioned by Radhakrishnan, I do hope that through comparisons, we can generate something which transcends the celebration of "particularities." As Kevin Ochieng Okoth noted in his book in 2023, one of the prevalent approaches in neoliberal universities in the English-speaking world is "romantic particularism" where scholar became obsessed with coining up new oppositional object of the margins, and considers producing "oppositional knowledge" as the most subversive method of challenging the hegemony[38]. Yet this approach often remains trapped within the very epistemological frameworks it seeks to challenge, substituting genuine theoretical endeavor with what amounts to a proliferation of difference for its own sake. Moreover, I also want to raise important questions regarding the validity of claims made from self-proclaimed "marginal" or "peripheral" positions.

While for some "Japan as Method" advocates, Japan's doubly peripheral status (to both China's historical world-system and the contemporary Western order) remains theoretically

[36] Radhakrishnan, R. "Why Compare?" *New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (June 2009): 453–71. https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.0.0100. P. 470

[37] Ibid., p. 470

[38] Okoth, Kevin Ochieng. *Red Africa: Reclaiming Revolutionary Black Politics*. Verso, 2023.

significant, we should question whether this peripheralization manifests more acutely in Japan than in China under current geopolitical conditions of U.S. hegemony. This line of inquiry naturally extends to Taiwan—a crucial node in U.S. Cold War containment strategy that continues to position itself, even post-USSR, as a frontline bastion of American ideological expansion in Asia. Even after the collapse of the USSR, Taiwan still sees itself as the vanguard for the U.S. ideological campaign. As pointed out by Ning Ying-bin (甯應斌), many Taiwanese scholars argued that Taiwan has always been a victim of Sinocentrism, but ignoring the fact that Taiwan has occupied a more central position under the U.S. Cold War deployment[39]. In a previous research which I plan to publish soon, I also observed that the nationalist discourse in Taiwan has little to do with Taiwanese culture per se, instead, it is an affective politics that aims to create a sense of superiority over the Chinese by adopting rhetoric from the U.S. second-wave feminisms. By imagining that Taiwan has always been like a female victim under Chinese patriarchal oppression, this gendered discourse allows Taiwan to free itself from its ambiguous national status, and establish itself as a respectful nation through gender politics under Western hegemony. What merits particular attention is how this contemporary discourse unwittingly replicates the underlying logic of Fukuzawa Yukichi's late-19th century *Datsu-A-Ron*. Just as Fukuzawa advocated Japan's alignment with European powers at the expense of Asian solidarity, current geopolitical narratives in the region perpetuate a similar paradigm of Western-oriented self-positioning. This continuity suggests that the epistemic structures of Western hegemony persist not only in shaping external perceptions, but more insidiously, in structuring how Asian polities conceptualize their own geopolitical identities and relationships.

A persistent tendency in Taiwan's academic circles—one that also appears in certain postcolonial and area studies discourses—prompts me to critically examine Taiwan's presumed "peripheral" status. This tendency manifests in how any attempt to discover or reconstruct intellectual traditions outside Western paradigms is automatically dismissed either as "self-orientalism" (following Howard Chiang's critique[40]) or as Sinocentric cultural essentialism

[39] Ning, Ying-bin, ed. "China as Theory 中國作為理論." In *Re-Cognizing China 重新認識中國*, 7–54. Taipei City: Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies, 2015. P. 14-5

[40] Chiang, Howard. "Epistemic Modernity and the Emergence of Homosexuality in China." *Gender & History* 22, no. 3 (November 2010): 629–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2010.01612.x. P. 634

(echoing earlier New Qing History scholars' postcolonial rhetoric). Both responses reveal deeper epistemological problems: either they treat colonialism/imperialism as historical artifacts, thereby dismissing the need to challenge Western knowledge paradigms; or they conflate traditional empires with Western capitalist imperialism, casting any intellectual reconstruction from these regions as advocating alternative "imperialisms."

These positions share a fundamental denial of ongoing Western epistemological, political, and economic hegemony—the former through outright rejection of decolonial critique, the latter through redirecting attention to other "imperialisms." While a comprehensive engagement with New Qing History debates exceeds this paper's scope, I contend that such academic inertia in post-structural/colonial and area studies ironically replicates what Mizoguchi called "Western studies without the West," despite claiming to do the opposite. Through my current project employing "China as method" and reconceptualizing Asia (as both an internalized Western subject/object) as a potential reference point, I aim to develop alternative intellectual frameworks. These would neither affirm Western epistemological hegemony through an uncritical "periphery" position nor replicate its conceptual limitations, thereby advancing a more genuine decolonization of both knowledge production and subjective consciousness.

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Chapter 2: Chinese Studies without China—the Western Epistemology on Chinese Sexual Culture

From "Sodomites" to "Pathologia Sexualis"

The study of gender and sexuality in imperial China has long been shaped by Western epistemological frameworks, often projecting modern categories like "homosexuality" or "sexual repression" onto historical contexts where such concepts did not exist. This chapter critically examines how scholars—from Robert van Gulik and Michel Foucault to contemporary historians like Matthew Sommer—have interpreted Chinese sexual culture through Western theoretical lenses, inadvertently reproducing Orientalist binaries while claiming to challenge them. By analyzing the limitations of existing paradigms (e.g., Sommer's "status performance" vs. "gender performance" dichotomy) and highlighting the anachronistic application of terms like "deviance" or "tolerance," this research argues for a de-colonial approach to Chinese gender/sexuality studies—one that centers Chinese epistemic frameworks rather than treating China as a mirror for Western intellectual preoccupations. The persistent influence of van Gulik's "sexual repression hypothesis" and Foucault's *ars erotica/scientia sexualis* binary reveals a field still grappling with its methodological Eurocentrism, even as it seeks to move beyond it.

As the pioneering scholar who first systematically studied Chinese sexual culture, Robert Hans van Gulik (1910–1967) adopted the repressive hypothesis when analyzing Chinese sexual culture. However, unlike scholars who focused on Victorian-era sexual repression, van Gulik posited the existence of a "sexually repressive Qing regime," which he argued fostered widespread prudery in late imperial China. This claim later became one of the most widely cited—and contested—arguments in Western-language Chinese studies. Another frequently challenged assertion of his was that "homosexuality" in China occupied only marginal social space, because for him Chinese sexual culture was predominantly centered on polygamous heterosexual relationships.

Van Gulik's extraordinary linguistic abilities were cultivated early in life. While living with his father, a Dutch colonial medical officer stationed in Java (then part of the Dutch East Indies) from 1913 to 1922, he acquired fluency in Chinese, Javanese, and Malay. After returning to the Netherlands, he further mastered Greek, Latin, French, German, English, Russian, Sanskrit,

Japanese, and Tibetan—partly through formal education and partly through collaboration with Orientalist scholars.

Van Gulik's career epitomized that of a successful colonial intellectual in the Orient. As a diplomat serving in Japan, East Africa, India, Egypt, China, the United States, Lebanon, and Malaysia, he amassed an extensive collection of historically and archaeologically significant Chinese texts. Although he is best remembered today for his diplomatic accomplishments and his celebrated *Judge Dee* historical mystery novels, his scholarly contributions to Chinese studies remain highly influential—even if they did not strictly adhere to conventional Sinological methodologies. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who primarily focused on Confucianism and other "great traditions," van Gulik directed his attention toward marginal cultural phenomena. His diverse Sinological contributions included research on Chinese pictorial art, the cultural significance of gibbons in Chinese lore, the history and symbolism of the *guqin* (古琴, Chinese lute), and translations of a 13th-century Chinese legal manual.

Robert van Gulik's two scholarly treatises on sexual culture in ancient China—*Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* and *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.*—were initially published privately in the late 1950s or 1960s. These works marked the first translations of ancient Chinese bedchamber manuals—some dating back as early as 202 BCE—into Western languages. Until the excavation of the *Mawangdui* (馬王堆) archaeological site in the 1970s, van Gulik's translations and compilations of these texts remained the most authoritative and comprehensive resource on the subject available in Western scholarship.

In the preface to *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, van Gulik expressed significant reservations about disseminating such material indiscriminately, fearing that these sources might fall into the hands of readers lacking the necessary scholarly background. As a result, both books were distributed under strict limitations, circulating only among a restricted circle of academics. He explicitly stated: "In my Chinese studies, I had till then always shirked this subject, because I felt that this was a field best left to qualified sexologists—especially since I had gathered from casual remarks in older and later Western books on China that pathologia sexualis was largely represented

there."[41]

As evident in van Gulik's writings, the scholar exhibited considerable apprehension when addressing ancient Chinese sexual culture, while simultaneously striving to counter Western prejudices. As he explicitly stated in the preface of his book, that his intention was to "set right foreign misconceptions regarding sexual life in ancient China," revealing his dual concerns[42]. The profound unease articulated in the preface to *Sexual Life in Ancient China* stemmed from two principal anxieties: first, his perceived lack of formal training in sexology—a field that, during his time, was predominantly framed within medical science[43]; second, his fear that any inaccurate portrayal might reinforce existing Western biases against Chinese culture. Van Gulik particularly emphasized that "the ancient Chinese had indeed no reason for hiding their sexual life. Their handbooks of sex prove clearly that their sexual habits were healthy and normal…[44]" This assertion served both as a corrective to Western misconceptions and as validation of Chinese sexual practices within their own cultural context.

While the specific Western sources van Gulik referenced remain unclear, Paul R. Goldin's introduction to Brill's 2003 edition of *Sexual Life in Ancient China* reveals that van Gulik's conceptualization of *pathologia sexualis* was notably more restrictive than that of Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902), the renowned sexologist from whom van Gulik borrowed the term. Goldin notes that van Gulik's definition of *pathologia sexualis* encompassed: "sadism, masochism, homosexuality, masturbation with sexual aids, bestiality, [and] scatological material (feces and urine)." For van Gulik, "repressive" denoted sexual abstinence, while "perversion" referred to the diversion of libido from what he considered proper genital outlet[45]. Ultimately, van Gulik portrayed ancient Chinese sexual practices as embodying natural simplicity, primarily focused on heterosexual fulfillment within couples. He maintained that deviations from this heteronormative

[41] Gulik, Robert Hans van. *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.* Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003. p. xxxi

[42]Ibid., p. xxxiii

[43] Ibid., p. xxxvii

[44] Ibid., p. xxxii

[45] Ibid., p. xvi-xvii

paradigm—what he termed "sexual perversity"—were uncommon in the Chinese tradition.

We can perhaps draw an interesting comparison between Van Gulik and Matteo Ricci, in their respective responses to "sodomites" or *pathologia sexualis*. While both figures expressed shock at such sexual practices, their reactions diverged significantly: Ricci, though disgusted by "sodomites," felt no particular obligation to defend the Chinese people, whereas van Gulik was deeply troubled by Western characterizations of Chinese sexuality as inherently pathological. This distinction reflects both the evolving discourse of sexuality—which increasingly linked sexual behavior to racial identity—and fundamental differences in their approaches to the Other.

Ricci's *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas* (1615) presents China as a Confucian utopia akin to Plato's Republic, governed by philosopher-kings who had achieved enlightened absolutism. For Ricci and subsequent Jesuit missionaries, China represented a realization of natural theology—so much so that some, like John Webb (1669), even speculated that Chinese might be the pre-Babel primal language. From this perspective, China was not strictly a cultural Other, but rather a civilization whose apparent similarities to European ideals facilitated its incorporation into a Eurocentric world order. However, as Zhou Ning has observed, this rhetoric of "cultural inclusion" ultimately served proselytizing and colonial imperatives, using claims of affinity to justify Western expansion[46]. Van Gulik's approach differed markedly. Where Ricci sought common ground, van Gulik emphasized irreducible cultural/anthropological differences between East and West—often to the point of romanticizing Chinese sexuality. For Ricci, Chinese "sodomites" simply represented Foucaultian "acts against the law"—marginal transgressions that did not fundamentally challenge his positive view of Chinese society. Van Gulik, by contrast, confronted a Western discourse that frequently equated Chinese identity with sexual pathology. His consequent insistence on Chinese sexual "normality" led him to adopt an unusually restrictive definition of *pathologia sexualis*—one that was, as Paul Goldin notes, more stringent than Krafft-Ebing's original formulation. Where Ricci could dismiss sexual deviance as peripheral, van Gulik felt compelled to disprove its very existence in Chinese culture.

It is difficult to determine whose epistemological frameworks are more problematic between Matteo Ricci and Van Gulik, despite both expressing their admiration and desire for

[46] Zhou, Ning. *Western Images of China 天朝遙遠*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006. p. 79, p. 81-2

understanding the Other. What remains certain is their shared methodological foundation: both approaches originate from Western epistemic paradigms that position Europe as the knowing subject and China as the object of study. Ricci interpreted Chinese traditions through Figurism—an intellectual tradition that sought to reconcile Chinese thought with Christian prophetic traditions—while van Gulik constructed his understanding through presumed civilizational contrasts with the Occident. Ultimately, they both are on the same epistemic plane which uses the pre-established subject/object of the West as the point of departure for either identification or contrast.

This epistemic continuity reflects broader historical shifts in Western engagement with China. During the Age of Discovery, when Western military power remained limited, discourses of cultural affinity facilitated colonial expansion. However, as Western imperial dominance became established, Orientalist paradigms emerged, constructing rigid civilizational boundaries between West and East. This historical transformation explains the differing perceptions of Chinese sexuality: Ricci likely viewed Chinese "sodomites" as comparable to European libertines, while van Gulik treated *pathologia sexualis* as a distinctly Oriental concern. Significantly, van Gulik's work does not challenge the Western origins of sexual pathology concepts, but rather disputes their application to Chinese culture. The most striking distinction between these two scholars lies in van Gulik's conceptualization of sexual repression as a framework for civilizational analysis. Where Ricci's Figurism sought points of convergence, van Gulik's comparative approach reified difference—even as both remained bound to Western epistemological structures.

The Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci appears largely unconcerned with questions of sexual repression, whether in Europe or China. In stark contrast, Robert van Gulik positions sexual repression as a distinctly Western phenomenon, maintaining that pre-modern China had achieved sexual liberation while contemporary Chinese prudery represented a more recent development. Van Gulik's analysis of Ming-era erotic prints exemplifies this perspective: he meticulously catalogued sexual positions from erotic albums, concluding that "sexologists will agree that the table reproduced above represents a good record of healthy sexual habits."[47] For van Gulik, these "healthy sexual habits" entailed both proper genital focus and male responsibility for mutual

[47] Gulik, Robert Hans van. *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.* Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003. p. 330

orgasm in heterosexual relations—interpretations he derived from traditional Chinese sex manuals[48]. While his writing style remains ostensibly descriptive, his comparative framework becomes evident through repeated emphasis on Chinese sexual "health." This rhetorical strategy implicitly critiques Victorian sexual repression as its unstated counterpoint. Van Gulik's methodology effectively treats Western sexual norms as an independent variable against which Chinese practices are measured. Such an epistemological approach not only reifies civilizational binaries but also constructs Western sexuality as an autonomous, self-contained system. Ultimately, this framework serves to essentialize difference, reinforcing the conceptual divide between "West" and "Rest" rather than challenging its underlying assumptions.

Even Michel Foucault, while rejecting the repression hypothesis, was not able to escape the civilizational transference of the Western sexual repression hypothesis. His seminal distinction between Oriental *ars erotica* and Occidental *scientia sexualis* maintained a fundamental dichotomy: where Western modernity developed an elaborate science of sexuality, Eastern traditions cultivated an art of erotic pleasure. As Foucault emphasized, "[W]hat is peculiar to modern societies is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the* secret"[49]. According to Foucault, this epistemic difference manifests in their respective truth regimes. While in the procedure of ars erotica, the knowledge of sexual pleasure must remain secret, it was not because sex needed to be spoken as knowledge/power as in *scientia sexualis*, but because according to the tradition of *ars erotica*, as believed by Foucault, the pleasure/power regime needed to be in greatest reserve to achieve its maximum effectiveness[50]. To paraphrase Foucault, in *scientia sexualis*, there was no doubt a whole set of "restrictive economy" which constituted the sexual repression claimed by many Western critics, but this restrictive economy also created conditions of incitement to discourse. Therefore, in the level of discourse, we witnessed a steady proliferation of discourse of sexuality, in *scientia sexualis*, namely the modern Western societies. On the other hand, in *ars erotica*, as believed by Foucault, knowledge concerning sex must remain secret to prevent it from

[48] Ibid., p. 47

[49] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. p. 35

[50] Ibid., p. 57-8

losing its effectiveness, therefore there was no need to create the condition of "sexual repression" to incite discourse of sexuality. Hence, in ars erotica, namely the Oriental societies in Foucault's description, "China, Japan, India, Rome and Arabo-Moslem societies,"[51] repression only occurred in the level of discourse. Thus, while Western sexuality became enmeshed in knowledge/power networks that demanded constant verbalization, Eastern erotic arts allegedly operated through different epistemic principles.

Foucault's distinction between *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*, largely informed by van Gulik's problematic representations of Chinese sexual culture, proves epistemologically unstable. As Leon Antonio Rocha notes, Foucault notably retracted his claim about Greco-Roman *ars erotica* in interviews with Dreyfus and Rabinow, while maintaining its applicability to China[52]. The source of Foucault's Chinese references becomes clear upon examining the French edition of *The Use of Pleasure*, which contains two citations to van Gulik that were omitted from the English translation—a connection further confirmed in two additional interviews where Foucault acknowledges van Gulik's influence[53].

However, as Charlotte Furth demonstrates, both scholars fundamentally misapprehended the epistemic framework of Chinese erotic culture. The bedchamber manuals that fascinated them actually belonged to a comprehensive Chinese cosmological and medical tradition, where sexuality never constituted an autonomous domain of knowledge. Van Gulik particularly misconstrued these texts as prescriptive marriage manuals from an "enlightened Orient" that might address early 20th century European sexual anxieties—specifically concerns about female orgasm in heterosexual marriage[54]. His China thus became an imaginary realm of sexual liberation, reflecting Western desires for "ideal, normal sex" rather than historical reality[55].

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[51] Ibid., p. 57

[52] Rocha, Leon Antonio. "Scientia Sexualis versus Ars Erotica: Foucault, van Gulik, Needham." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 42, no. 3 (September 2011): 328–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2011.01.003. p. 332

[53] Ibid., p. 332-5

[54] Ibid., P. 129

[55] Ibid., 128

The interdependence between these supposedly distinct systems becomes even clearer when we consider, as Rocha does, that Havelock Ellis—whom Foucault identifies as a paradigmatic practitioner of *scientia sexualis*—drew substantial inspiration from Chinese and other Oriental sources[56]. Like many sexologists, Ellis appropriated "raw materials" from the Ottoman Empire, India, and China to construct Western sexual science. This reveals the fundamental irony: *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* are mutually constitutive rather than oppositional. By insisting on their radical separation, Foucault inadvertently reinforced the very repression hypothesis he sought to dismantle, ultimately replicating the Orientalist binaries his work otherwise challenges.

We must instead ask: What constitutes the " 'political economy' of a will to knowledge"[57] that sustained the sexual repression hypothesis's popularity—even ensnaring those who sought to deconstruct it? Foucault suggests that this persistence stems from the speaker's benefit—the intrinsic rewards that bind sexual discourse to "the revelation of truth, the overturning of global laws, the proclamation of a new day to come, and the promise of certain felicity."[58] In this framework, sexual discourse becomes imbued with utopian aspirations for societal transformation. Crucially, Foucault argues that this discursive mechanism concerns not sex itself, but rather the "pleasure in the truth of pleasure"—the gratification derived from discovering, exposing, and circulating sexual knowledge about the "self". This dynamic transforms sexuality into an epistemological tool that reifies anthropological differences—converting imagined distinctions between "Eastern silence" and "Western science" into seemingly concrete geographical categories. The purported "pleasure in the truth of pleasure" ultimately manifests as ethnocentric gratification, where descriptions of cultural others (xenotopia) function as self-referential truth claims. This creates a closed discursive system wherein Western assertions about non-Western sexuality become self-validating prophecies.

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[56] Rocha, Leon Antonio. "Scientia Sexualis versus Ars Erotica: Foucault, van Gulik, Needham." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 42, no. 3 (September 2011): 328–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2011.01.003. p. 334

[57] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990., p. 73

[58] Ibid., p.7

This phenomenon represents a distinct variation of Orientalism and civilizational transference. While not explicitly denigrating the cultural Other, the idealized Asiatic Other nevertheless serves as a constitutive element in Western self-fashioning. Crucially, we must recognize that this epistemological framework did not emerge suddenly in the nineteenth century, but rather developed gradually from the Age of Discovery onward. Throughout this extended historical process, China occupied a shifting position in the European imagination—transitioning from an object of fascination and desire to one of contempt. As Zhou Ning demonstrates, Europe's conceptualization of China underwent radical transformations between the early seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The dominant European image evolved from that of a utopian realm governed by philosopher-kings to a stagnant empire ruled by despotic tyranny.

For the benefit of the readers, I should perhaps borrow the whole process of Zhou's analysis from his book, to demonstrate how this process mirrored Van Gulik and Foucault's writing and thoughts in terms of their epistemological assumptions. A particularly revealing case emerges in the European reception of Matteo Ricci's China diaries. When Nicolas Trigault (1577-1628) edited and compiled these materials into *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas*, he consciously framed them within the established genre of utopian travel writing. The work's narrative structure follows a characteristic pattern: Ricci's first-hand observations precede Trigault's commentary on how this utopian model might inspire European social reform[59]. As Zhou insightfully notes, Trigault essentially substantiated China as an actualized utopia—serving as the symbolic "mirror" for Europe's ideological mirror stage during its formative self-conception.

Following the publication of *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas*, Enlightenment thinkers and religious reformers strategically employed China's model of "natural theology" to challenge Catholic Church authority. Notable figures in this intellectual movement included Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), whose collaborative efforts significantly shaped European perceptions of China. Leibniz facilitated the translation and publication of Bouvet's *Portrait historique de l'empereur de la Chine*, while Bouvet's missionary accounts from China provided empirical support for Leibniz's theories of natural theology. This positive valuation of Chinese thought persisted until the Chinese Rites Controversy erupted in the

[59] Zhou, Ning. *Western Images of China 天朝遙遠*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006. p. 79, p. 158-9

early 18th century, when the Holy See radically reclassified Chinese religious practices as pagan and primitive pantheism. The controversy led to the Vatican's prohibition of the so-called "Directives of Matteo Ricci"—the accommodationist approach that had permitted Chinese converts to maintain ancestral veneration and Confucian ceremonies while practicing Christianity. This ecclesiastical condemnation marked a decisive turning point, after which European discourse increasingly framed China as fundamentally incompatible with Western religious and cultural norms.

After Leibniz's death, his student Christian Wolff (1679-1754) advanced a provocative interpretation of Chinese philosophy in his *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica* (1721, published 1728). In this influential address, Wolff characterized China as an atheist nation governed by natural philosophy and ruled through enlightened absolutism by philosopher-kings. This formulation became instrumental for Enlightenment thinkers seeking to challenge both Catholic orthodoxy and monarchical authority in Europe. During this period, China occupied an ambivalent position in European political thought. While generally maintaining a positive image as an idealized version of Western society, competing interpretations emerged regarding its fundamental compatibility with European models. Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756) presents China's enlightened absolutism as fundamentally distinct from Western political traditions, despite its admirable qualities. Conversely, Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* (1748) reconfigured China within his theory of governance as the paradigmatic example of Oriental despotism—a system he argued should ultimately be superseded by republican government.

The Physiocratic school represented the final intellectual echo of the positive representations of China originally formulated by Jesuit missionaries. François Quesnay (1694-1774), the movement's leading thinker, enthusiastically praised China's meritocratic bureaucracy, standardized taxation system, and universal education in his *Le Despotisme de la Chine* (1767). Building on his foundational principle that agricultural production constituted the true source of national wealth, Quesnay advocated that European monarchs should emulate their Chinese counterparts by personally participating in agricultural rituals alongside peasant subjects. These idealized portrayals derived primarily from Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's (1674-1743) *Description de l'empire de la Chine* (1735), a compendium based on Jesuit correspondence rather than first-hand

experience. While Quesnay and his followers championed China as a model for enlightened absolutism, this positive image proved ephemeral. As faith in enlightened absolutism waned in Europe, so too did admiration for Chinese political institutions. The Physiocrats' vision faced mounting criticism from multiple fronts: mercantilist opponents dismissed their theories as impractical, while Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) argued that China's trade-restrictive policies would inevitably lead to economic stagnation. This intellectual trajectory reflects the remarkable transformation in Europe's conceptualization of China between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—from an idealized utopia governed by philosopher-kings to a stagnant civilization exemplifying Oriental despotism. The shifting perceptions reveal as much about Europe's evolving self-conception as they do about actual Chinese society.

Throughout this intellectual history, China consistently functioned as a conceptual pivot for Western self-definition, with its shifting image reflecting European socio-political transformations rather than Chinese realities. The Chinese Rites Controversy exemplifies this dynamic: when Jesuit accommodations of Chinese rituals proved too subversive to Catholic orthodoxy, Pope Clement XI issued papal bulls in 1704 and 1715 condemning Ricci's Directives as idolatrous, thereby reconstructing China as a land of pagan superstition.

Enlightenment thinkers subsequently rehabilitated China's image by emphasizing its natural philosophy and enlightened absolutism. However, post-revolutionary disillusionment with absolutism led to China's reclassification as an inferior Oriental despotism compared to emerging republican ideals. The Physiocrats represented the final intellectual defense of Chinese models, advocating agricultural-based economies and land reforms. Yet their vision conflicted with bourgeois capitalist interests, ensuring mercantilism's triumph and China was recast as an economically stagnant state.

Zhou Ning rightly observes that Europe's negative reconceptualization of China developed gradually rather than abruptly. However, his characterization of this process as mere "historical coincidence"[60] overlooks what Raymond Williams would term the "corporate systems" of European thought—the structural need to define itself through opposition to constructed Others. The ascendant capitalist class actively rejected Physiocratic land reforms in favor of Adam Smith's

[60] Ibid., p. 126

free market ideology, which better served colonial surplus extraction. Tellingly, while mercantilism failed to redress Europe's trade imbalance with China before the Opium Wars, it nevertheless became enshrined as emblematic of European superiority. This trajectory reveals how European "human progress" followed a specific ideological course—not the cultural compatibility imagined by Sinophile Enlightenment thinkers, but rather the "selective tradition" (also in Williams' terms) of capitalist elites who naturalized hierarchical distinctions between colonizer and colonized. The Chinese case thus illuminates how European self-conception required the continual reimagining of its Others to justify expanding imperial ambitions.

Building upon this intellectual trajectory, both van Gulik's and Foucault's conceptualizations of China operate within the same epistemological framework shaped by European capitalist, colonialist, and imperialist selective traditions—undoubtedly constituting a variation of Orientalist discourse. However, simply identifying this as Orientalism should not preclude deeper critical analysis. As Leon Antonio Rocha observes, contemporary Western scholarship on China has developed along two primary research trajectories: one is Sinography (practiced by comparative scholars like Haun Saussy, Eric Hayot, Timothy Billings, Christopher Bush, and Steven G. Yao), which treats writings about China as performative acts of "Chinese-ness" that exist independently of authenticity claims[61]. The other is the intellectual history of academic production (following Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* [1984/1990]), which examines China studies as circulating cultural capital within global academic labor divisions[62].

While valuable, these approaches remain peripheral to my current inquiry. More crucially, both trajectories share significant epistemological implications: they constitute knowledge production that ultimately serves Western epistemic frameworks—a continuation of the selective traditions I previously discussed. In this paradigm, China functions primarily as a mirror for Western self-reflection, rendering these essentially "China studies without China," comparable to the Japanese imperial court's Scholarship on China (漢学). This chapter focuses on delineating the conditions of Sinographic production and tracing how epistemological objects circulate

[61] Rocha, Leon Antonio. "Scientia Sexualis versus Ars Erotica: Foucault, van Gulik, Needham." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 42, no. 3 (September 2011): 328–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2011.01.003. p. 339

[62] Ibid., p. 340

through China studies. However, my ultimate aim—to be developed in subsequent chapters—is to initiate the reconstruction of conceptual frameworks existing outside Western selective traditions. Here, I will establish why such alternative epistemologies remain urgently necessary.

The Inventions of Chinese "Homosexuals"

The institutionalization of Chinese studies, like other area studies disciplines, emerged during World War II and became formally established through the National Defense Education Act of 1958. This legislation identified Chinese as one of six critical languages (along with Russian, Japanese, Arabic, and Hindi-Urdu) essential for U.S. strategic interests. Unlike traditional Sinology, which focused on China's classical past, these new area studies programs were designed to produce policy-relevant knowledge about contemporary China to serve American geopolitical objectives during the Cold War.

The most prominent figure in this institutional development was John King Fairbank (1907-1991), who directed Harvard's East Asian Research Center from 1955 to 1973, establishing it as the preeminent U.S. institution for China studies. As Fairbank openly acknowledged, this academic enterprise was deeply intertwined with Cold War priorities. In his 1968 presidential address to the American Historical Association, delivered on December 29 in New York City, Fairbank outlined what he termed the "academic assignment" for China specialists—explicitly framing their research as instrumental to U.S. foreign policy[63]. Fairbank grounded his proposal in three key assumptions: Firstly, the existence of a global crisis increasingly entangling American, European, and Chinese affairs; Secondly, the limited human capacity to adequately comprehend and address these challenges; Thirdly, China's status as a unique global problem requiring specialized understanding. These premises, particularly his characterization of China as an exceptional case demanding particularized approaches, reveal the fundamental epistemological framework underlying the Cold War-era U.S. China studies. The passages where he explained how China posed a special world problem were quite emblematic of the epistemological framework of U.S. Chinese studies, as we shall see from the following:

[63] Fairbank, John K. "Assignment for the '70's." *The American Historical Review* 74, no. 3 (1969): 861–79. https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/74.3.861.

> … … If China were not the most distinctive and separate of the great historical cultures, if the Chinese language were not so different and difficult, if our China studies were not so set apart by these circumstances, our China problem would not be so great. **But the fact is that China *is* a uniquely large and compact section of mankind, with a specially self-contained and long-continued tradition of centrality and superiority, too big and too different to be assimilated into our automobile-TV, individual-voter, individual-consumer culture. China is too weak to conquer the world but too large to be digested by it**. China's eventual place in the world and especially America's relationship to China therefore bulk large on the agenda for human survival. If China builds up an ICBM stockpile in the years ahead, nuclear deterrence will become more and more "a perilous triangular affair." **This will be something new because China in our experience has usually been only promises unrealized—promises of trade that never really developed, of Christianization that never got very far, of parliamentary democracy that aborted**. But missiles today are real. America may desperately want to turn inward, but nuclear missiles face outward. They hold us in a common destiny with our most distant adversaries. Our precarious coexistence will never be quite blind, but it may easily become myopic. The American historical image of China and of America's interaction with China thus may help or hinder our survival.
>
> … …
>
> I propose to deal with the role (or nonrole) of Chinese history in professional historical thinking in America, including the function of the China "expert" and how to get rid of him. We historians can help to lead American thinking in many ways, but the historical profession first has a job to do in its own thinking about China, a job that China specialists cannot do for it. **This job is simply to get a truer and multivalued, because multicultural, perspective on the world crisis, on our own role in it, and on the role of the Chinese as the most indigestible and unassimilable of the other peoples**. (Bold added)

In the cited passages, China is constructed as a singular global problem precisely because of its perceived radical alterity, cultural incommensurability, and fundamental separation from what Fairbank implicitly defines as the "world"—a conceptual category that effectively equates to

Western Europe and the United States. This formulation reveals two significant epistemological assumptions underlying Fairbank's framework: First, it demonstrates his presumption that the Western epistemological tradition constitutes the most comprehensive and inclusive framework for understanding global affairs. Second, it shows his belief that by making this Western framework ostensibly more "multi-valued" and "multicultural," it could achieve greater authenticity and truth-value as a representation of global reality. The rhetorical gesture toward inclusivity ultimately serves to reinforce Western epistemic hegemony by positioning non-Western societies like China as problems to be incorporated into, rather than alternatives to, the dominant Western paradigm.

Fairbank explicitly positioned U.S. Chinese studies as an instrument for shaping Sino-American relations during the 1970s. He distinguished this approach from traditional Sinology, which focused exclusively on classical China, arguing that only contemporary area studies could produce the practical knowledge necessary to effect desired changes in modern Chinese society. This institutional orientation reveals how Chinese studies, from its inception, internalized fundamental dichotomies of East/West, Self/Other, and Subject/Object—epistemological frameworks that positioned China as what Fairbank termed "the most indigestible and unassimilable of the other peoples." Significantly, this conceptual attempt of proselytizing China continues to undergird the foundational logic of area studies in the United States, even as many of Fairbank's specific historical claims about China have since been discredited.

As Gavin Walker and Naoki Sakai have critically observed, area studies as a discipline has been characterized by two persistent and interrelated features[64]. First, it embodies what we might call an epistemological sovereignty—a will to govern its object of inquiry through distanced yet controlling knowledge production. Second, it operates as a truth regime that systematically separates the West from the Rest, positioning the knowing Western subject as fundamentally exterior to and temporally advanced beyond its object of study. They indicated that this epistemic framework, as Johannes Fabian would term it, relies on a "denial of coevalness," refusing to acknowledge the contemporaneity of the Western knower and non-Western known.

[64] Walker, Gavin, and Naoki Sakai. "The End of Area." *Positions: Asia Critique* 27, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-7251793.

Fairbank's presidential address exemplifies how Chinese studies functioned within this paradigm. His formulation reveals the discipline's dual nature: it served simultaneously as an epistemological apparatus maintaining civilizational separation and as a political technology justifying Western intervention in its constructed "Rest." This dual function becomes particularly evident in Fairbank's characterization of China as a "promise unrealized"—a rhetorical move that positioned Chinese studies as the necessary mechanism for actualizing this deferred potential under Western guidance. Consequently, area studies—including Chinese studies—have typically been driven by what we might identify as three interlocking imperatives: (1) a governance impulse that seeks to render its objects administrable; (2) a proselytizing mission aimed at cultural transformation; and (3) a deficit model of comparison that frames research through questions like "Why does China lack X (which the West possesses)?"

Fairbank's influential work *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923* (1954) exemplifies his Western-centric paradigm of modernization. His "impact-response" model posited that China's modern history began only through its encounters with Western powers, framing China's modernization as merely reactive to Western stimuli. This approach rests on two problematic assumptions: first, that modernity is an exclusively Western phenomenon; second, that China's development should be measured by its degree of resemblance to Western models. Such a framework inherently positions China as beginning from a position of lack or deficiency.

While Fairbank's model dominated generations of China scholarship, it faced substantial criticism for its Eurocentric biases. Paul Cohen's *Discovering History in China* (1984) systematically challenged this paradigm, arguing for alternative approaches that recognized China's internal dynamics. Similarly, James Peck's seminal article "The Roots of Rhetoric: The Professional Ideology of America's China Watchers" (1969) accused Fairbank and his contemporaries of ignoring indigenous factors in China's modernization while effectively providing intellectual cover for Western imperialism[65]. These critiques emerged alongside broader methodological shifts in the U.S. Asian studies following the Vietnam War (1955-1975). America's military failures prompted profound reevaluations of area studies approaches, as scholars recognized fundamental flaws in Western understandings of East Asia. The postwar period saw

[65] Peck, James. "The Roots of Rhetoric: The Professional Ideology of America's China Watchers." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 2, no. 1 (December 1969): 59–69. https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1969.10405406.

growing demands for analytical frameworks that incorporated social, political, and economic factors beyond simplistic Western-centric models.

The subsequent generation of Chinese studies scholars moved away from Fairbank's approach of writing comprehensive official histories focused on political events and key figures. Instead, they increasingly challenged established narratives and shifted toward micro-level social and historical analysis. However, this methodological shift did not necessarily entail a fundamental change in epistemological frameworks. The field largely maintained what might be called a "proselytizing imperative"—the tendency to impose Western analytical categories that characterized much of Fairbank's work. Charlotte Furth's critical reassessment of van Gulik's scholarship also exemplifies this continuity. While Furth rightly criticized van Gulik's outdated notions of sexual perversion and his misreading of Chinese bedchamber manuals as guides for van Gulik's own sexual liberationist enterprise[66], her alternative framework similarly imposed Western conceptual categories. Furth indicated that these Chinese bedchamber manuals were rather used by men of power to sexually exploit young women to ensure their longevity and health, these manuels represented the gendered violence of exploiting women as sexual handmaidens[67]. Her solution—replacing van Gulik's sexological framework with gender analysis—while valuable, still reflected Western academic preoccupations rather than indigenous Chinese epistemologies.

While I largely concur with Furth's fundamental observation that sexuality did not constitute an autonomous domain of knowledge production in imperial China, I question whether her own analytical framework fully escapes the critique she levels against van Gulik. Although Furth rightly advocates for gender analysis as a corrective to van Gulik's misreading of sexual exploitation as liberation, she remains curiously uncritical of how Western gender theory itself might constitute an inappropriate epistemological framework for understanding Chinese women's historical experiences. This reveals a fundamental tension in Furth's approach: while recognizing Chinese erotic knowledge as epistemologically distinct from Western constructions of sexuality, she nevertheless applies Western gender categories trans-historically to Chinese women. Her

[66] Furth, Charlotte. "Rethinking Van Gulik: Sexuality and Reproduction in Traditional Chinese Medicine." In *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, edited by Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White, 125–46. Cambridge [Massachusetts], London: Harvard University Press, 1994. p. 129

[67] Ibid., pp. 145-6

analysis assumes "Chinese women" as a unified, undifferentiated category universally oppressed by patriarchy, ignoring significant internal differentiations. For instance, elite wives often occupied complex positions—they could simultaneously be victims of patriarchal structures and active participants in the exploitation of lower-status women as "sexual vampires" who facilitated their husbands' health regimens through controlled sexual practices. Similarly, gentry-class wives frequently employed slave women as surrogate childbearers to avoid the burdens of producing heirs. These nuanced power relations become flattened under Furth's gender framework, which fails to contextualize categories like "women" and "men" within specific Chinese socio-cultural formations.

Furth's later reflections, particularly in her 2005 review of van Gulik's works, reveal that her methodological shift from sexology to gender studies was not merely an academic updating but rather a conscious ideological intervention. She explicitly framed this transition as part of contemporary feminist struggles against established scientific and religious discourses about sexuality. As Furth wrote: "Today's fascination with gender theory cannot be separated from the ideological struggles of feminists against the claims of either mainstream science or institutional religion to establish the truth of sex. When **we** deconstruct the sexual binary or imagine gender as performative, **we** are asserting the right to live in new ways (emphasis added)."[68] This statement underscores how Furth's engagement with Chinese bedchamber manuals was fundamentally informed by U.S. feminist movements seeking to establish new sexual epistemologies. This raises important questions about the epistemological foundations of Furth's critique. Her analysis of Chinese women's sexual exploitation appears significantly shaped by American feminist concerns, potentially projecting Western liberationist frameworks onto Chinese historical contexts. The collective "we" in her writing seems to align more with her American academic peers than with the historical Chinese subjects she studies. In this sense, Furth replicates van Gulik's tendency to use China as a conceptual pivot for Western intellectual projects—though where van Gulik saw a xeno-utopian model, Furth constructs a xeno-dystopian counter-image that serves as a negative referent for Western feminist aspirations.

The historiography of male same-sex relations in China presents a particularly revealing

[68] Furth, Charlotte. "Rethinking van Gulik Again." *NAN NÜ* 7, no. 1 (2005): 71–78. https://doi.org/10.1163/1568526054622369.

case of how Western conceptual frameworks have shaped Chinese studies. Scholars' widely divergent assessments of this history demonstrate how research agendas have been driven more by U.S. sexual liberation movements and academic trends than by indigenous Chinese concerns, as evidenced by their fundamental research questions. Bret Hinsch's work *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (1990) exemplifies this tendency. While correctly noting that same-sex relations had been largely overlooked in scholarship, Hinsch makes several problematic claims: firstly, he posits a continuous "homosexual tradition" dating to the Bronze Age[69]; secondly, he argues for historical Chinese tolerance until Qing "sodomy laws" in 1740; thirdly, he presumes these laws made Han Chinese homophobic under Manchu influence[70]. This approach reveals three significant methodological issues. First, Hinsch employs "homosexuality" as a transhistorical category, anachronistically applying this modern Western identity construct to premodern China. Second, his central concern with evaluating "tolerance" reflects contemporary Western political debates rather than indigenous Chinese frameworks. Third, his classification of diverse same-sex relations under a single "homosexual" rubric ignores crucial contextual differences in how such relations were understood in imperial China.

While subsequent scholars challenged Hinsch's assumptions, their critiques remained framed within Western concerns about "sexual tolerance" toward homosexuals—a conceptual framework foreign to imperial Chinese contexts. Historical evidence suggests that most dynasties imposed few restrictions on male same-sex relations; indeed, elite men were often expected to engage sexually with male subordinates as a pastime. Legal intervention typically occurred only in cases where status hierarchies were violated—specifically when a higher-status man was anally penetrated by a social inferior. This reveals that the fundamental concern in imperial China was not same-sex relations per se, but rather the maintenance of proper social hierarchies during sexual acts.

This crucial distinction highlights why inquiries about "sexual tolerance" toward homosexuality remain fundamentally anachronistic when applied to premodern China. Nevertheless, early scholarship on this topic—including the works of Sophie Volpp and Giovanni

[69] Ibid., p. 2

[70] Ibid.

Vitiello—continued to be shaped by questions emerging from U.S. sexual liberation movements rather than indigenous Chinese frameworks. For example, Volpp contested Hinsch's claims of Ming tolerance, arguing that literary depictions of male same-sex relations merely reflected heteronormative paradigms, thereby reinforcing their deviant status[71]. Vitiello countered that male homoeroticism permeated both Ming and Qing society, and sublime male homosociality also became an evaluation framework for sublime heterosexual relations[72]. Throughout these debates, scholars persistently employed Western analytical categories— "normative," "homosexuality," "deviance"—that lacked conceptual equivalents in imperial China's sexual cosmology. This persistent terminological imposition underscores the field's ongoing struggle to engage Chinese same-sex relations on their own historical and cultural terms.

In conclusion, post-Fairbank scholarship on Chinese gender and sexuality has largely engaged in constructing and debating categories that were conceptually non-existent in imperial China, reflecting concerns rooted in U.S. gay liberation movements rather than indigenous Chinese contexts. This analytical tendency manifests clearly in three key scholarly positions: Hinsch's Bronze Age dating of "homosexuality" in China primarily serves to identify historical gay-friendly societies across cultures, while eliding the indigenous Chinese concern with status subversion in same-sex relations. Volpp's characterization of male same-sex relations as "deviant" implicitly draws parallels with Western oppression narratives, without accounting for why certain configurations of male intimacy escaped censure in imperial China. Vitiello's egalitarian framing of same-sex and heterosexual relations similarly projects Western categorical distinctions, using China instrumentally to envision an idealized sexually-liberated society. These approaches collectively reproduce van Gulik's epistemic framework, whereby China serves as either mirror or counterpoint to Western constructions of sexuality. By applying anachronistic categories like "homosexuality" and "deviance," such scholarship continues to position the Western subject as the primary referent, even while attempting to recover Chinese sexual histories.

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[71] Vlopp, Sophie. 2001. "Classifying Lust: The Seventeenth-Century Vogue for Male-Love." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 61 (1): 77–117.

[72] Vitiello, Giovanni. 2011. *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. See Chapter 2, Friendship and Love, and Chapter 3, Libertine Masculinities.

Chinese Archives and Western Concepts: Sommer's Political Economy of Chinese "Gender" and "Sex"

While these scholarly debates have made valuable contributions to Sinographic studies, they primarily offer insights into Western intellectual preoccupations rather than illuminating China as an ontological reality. Recognizing this limitation, some researchers have advocated for grounding analyses more firmly in Chinese historical sources to move beyond Western-centric representations. Matthew Sommer's work exemplifies this approach through his innovative use of local Chinese legal archives, which reveals fundamental flaws in applying the concept of "homosexuality" to imperial China. Sommer's research makes several crucial interventions: he demonstrates that inquiries about "sexual tolerance" are misguided, as Western-style homophobia was absent in imperial China. Moreover, he shows that Qing sodomy laws emerged from internal social crises aimed at protecting peasant households, rather than prosecuting specific sexual acts[73]. In conclusion, he establishes that Chinese sexual hierarchies were structured primarily around social status rather than sexual orientation or gender identity. Sommer therefore introduces the concept of "status performance" to describe imperial China's sexual culture, wherein notions of "legitimate" sex served to codify the sexual privileges of elite males. However, he also notes that China's socioeconomic transformations eventually rendered status an inadequate framework, leading to the gradual emergence of gender as a new evaluative paradigm during the Qing period.

While I find value in Sommer's analysis of male same-sex relations in China, I question whether his conceptual distinction between "status performance" and "gender performance" fully escapes the analytical pitfalls he himself critiques. In the following section, I will demonstrate why this binary framework proves problematic and why alternative analytical approaches are necessary.

Sommer's concept of "status performance" effectively captures how imperial China's rigid social hierarchy dictated sexual morality and obligations. As he notes, individuals were categorized into hereditary social positions—officials/aristocrats, Free Commoners, and Mean

[73] Sommer, Matthew. 2002. *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 116

Persons—each with distinct role expectations that included sexual and gendered dimensions[74]. This system manifested in several ways: including sumptuary regulations that had distinct clothing requirements reinforced status boundaries; differential punishment which varied social consequences dramatically by the person's social standing; and sexual double standards which determined elite women would face severe penalties for extramarital relations, while Mean-status women bore no expectation of marital fidelity (or were even compelled to commit adultery); at the same time, aristocratic men could freely exploit female slaves, regardless of the slave women's marital status. Finally, and most importantly, the presumed criminal subjects were the Mean-status male slaves whose potential sexual attempt to cross status lines (e.g., male slaves with masters' women) constituted grave offenses.

The traditional social hierarchy of imperial China remained relatively stable during earlier dynasties due to limited social mobility. The hereditary aristocracy, including the imperial family itself as the most powerful aristocratic house, maintained its privileged position through exclusive practices: elaborate family rituals, restricted marriage customs inaccessible to commoners, preferential legal treatment, and birthright access to bureaucratic positions. However, this system underwent radical transformation beginning in the Song dynasty (960-1279), when meritocratic scholar-officials from the Free Commoner class gradually displaced the hereditary aristocracy. These new elites promoted a theoretically open society ranked by achievement rather than birth—a system emperors favored for weakening aristocratic power. By the Qing period, as Sommer notes, the aristocracy had virtually disappeared except for a small Manchu elite (the Eight Banners), replaced by a gentry class whose status depended entirely on success in the fiercely competitive civil service examinations rather than inherited privilege[75].

The Mean status group, originally comprising war captives and their descendants bound to penal servitude (including sexual services for elites), represented another pillar of this hierarchy. Unlike commercial prostitution, their sexual labor constituted compulsory servitude, with their moral/sexual identity defined by enforced non-conformity. While numerically small in early

[74] Ibid., p. 6

[75] Ibid., p. 8

periods, late Ming's "nascent capitalism"[76] created a growing "surplus population"[77] entering debt bondage, blurring traditional status boundaries. This transformation made social position less self-evident, requiring performative demonstrations of moral/sexual propriety.

Sommer therefore argues that these changes precipitated a shift from status-based to gender-based sexual regulation during the Qing. With birthright status diminishing in significance, gender performance—specifically through heterosexual, procreative marriage—became the new marker of social standing[78]. He believes that Qing legal archives reveal a gender system where: "men" were defined by penetrative sexual capacity and fatherhood; "women" by receptivity and motherhood; while full gender realization required marriage within one's social stratum, and theoretically eliminated the Mean status in practice by imposing the same sexual/moral penalty across all class.

While Sommer provides insightful analysis of how heterosexual marriage became the defining framework for gender norms in Qing China, his focus remains disproportionately centered on marital heterosexuality. This emphasis leads him to under-examine two crucial aspects of the so-called Qing's "gender regulation": the emerging cult of male chastity and the phenomenon he termed as "gender inversion" encoded in the dynasty's new sodomy laws[79]. The Qing legal system established distinct chastity requirements for men and women, for women, it was absolute sexual fidelity to their husbands; but for men, the Qing's new sodomy law prohibited them from being

[76] None of the historians that I cited in this paper used the word "nascent capitalism," but I believed that might be the most appropriate term to categorize the social change in that period.

Goldstone, Jack. 2016. *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World: Population Change and State Breakdown in England, France, Turkey, and China, 1600 –1850 25th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Routledge.

[77] Mizoguchi noticed that in the beginning of the early 17th century (late Ming period), lands were highly concentrated, privatized by the emerging mercantile class. This created a tension between the mercantile class, and the old elite of landlords—imperial courtiers and the scholar-official class who worried the privatization and concentration of land would undermine the stability of their rule.

Mizoguchi, Yuzo. 2011. *China as Method*. Edited by Ge Sun. Translated by Jun-yue Sun. Beijing: Joint Publishing. P. 14

[78] Sommer, Matthew. 2002. *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. p. 97

[79] Unlike its English definition which includes all "unnatural sexual acts", the Qing "sodomy law" was specifically mostly for anal sex between men.

the receptive partner in any male same-sex relations. Men who were anally penetrated faced severe penalties, including disqualification from civil service examinations and appointments—effectively reducing them to a status comparable to the theoretically abolished Mean class. As historian Kishimoto Mio (岸本美緒) has demonstrated, Qing social standing increasingly depended on moral reputation rather than hereditary status, and being the receptive partner in male same-sex relations could damage one's social standing as severely as having a criminal record[80].

While Sommer interprets the stigmatization of penetrated males as evidence of anxiety about "gender inversion" and disrupted gender hierarchies[81], I propose an alternative reading: these figures functioned paradoxically to reinforce the status performance which were undermined during the Qing period, as claimed by Sommer. Much like the Mean-status individuals in earlier periods, penetrated males served as constitutive "anchors" that defined and stabilized the social order through their abjection. Sommer himself also acknowledges that concerns about gender inversion operated selectively within status boundaries, because the Qing legal records reveal a striking double standard: elite men faced no consequences for penetrating catamite boys; yet poor peasant boys from decent boys penetrated by dispossessed "bare sticks" male provoked intense social concern This distinction exposes the fundamental contradiction in Sommer's gender framework. Many male prostitutes and catamites came from the same impoverished peasant backgrounds as those whose penetration caused alarm when being penetrated by the wrong men[82]. The variable reaction suggests the primary concern was not penetration itself, but rather who was penetrating whom—a matter of status propriety rather than gender norms. The complete absence of elite men from sodomy case records further demonstrates that the alleged "gender anxiety" in fact reflected Commoner status anxieties. The Qing jurists' selective prosecution reveals their true concern: not gender inversion per se, but the violation of status boundaries through inappropriate

[80] Kishimoto, Mio. 1997. "Sensibility of Social Identity in Ming and Qing Periods　明清時代の身分感覚." In *Basic Questions in Histories of Ming and Qing Period 明清時代史の基本問題*. Tokyo: Kyuko Shyoin Publishing. p. 403-28.

[81] Sommer, Matthew. 2002. *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. P. 117

[82] Wu, Cun-cun. 2017. *Play Outside Play: Theater Culture and Xianggu Tangzi in Late Qing China Beijing 戲外之戲：清中晚期京城的戲園文化與梨園私寓制*. Hong Kong University Press. P. 21-22

sexual domination.

This analysis demonstrates the fundamental impossibility of studying "gender/sexuality" as an autonomous category in imperial China, as these concepts were inextricably embedded within the political economy of a hierarchical society. This realization raises a crucial methodological question: if Western gender theory proves inadequate, what framework might more appropriately illuminate Chinese gender systems? While Sommer's work commendably incorporates Chinese archival sources, his analytical framework remains largely informed by Western gender/sexuality theories, despite minor adaptations. A more significant limitation stems from his engagement with what might be called the "Chinese sexual repression hypothesis"—a paradigm largely constructed by van Gulik that has dominated studies of Chinese sexual culture. Sommer's intervention argues that Qing gender segregation and the female chastity cult did not constitute sexual repression in van Gulik's sense, but rather enabled peasant women to exercise social and political agency through economic rewards and moral authority. In this regard, his work parallels Foucault's critique of the repression hypothesis in Victorian Europe, revealing how discourses of sexuality could be productive rather than merely restrictive. However, this raises deeper epistemological questions: why has a theory of Chinese sexual repression—essentially a Western construct reflecting Western anxieties—maintained such centrality in the field? Why do scholars persist in analyzing gender and sex as discrete categories when Chinese sources reveal no such conceptual separation? These questions point to a persistent Western epistemological dominance in Chinese studies. In the following chapter, I will propose an alternative theoretical framework for understanding Chinese sexual/moral systems—and I will demonstrate why the framework has more theoretical valence when analyzing sexual culture in imperial China.

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Chapter 3: Beyond Feminism Gendering and the Trade of *Nanse* (男色) Boys

Introduction

Much of the scholarly discourse on gender and sexuality has been dominated by Western theoretical frameworks, which are frequently applied cross-culturally as universal categories despite their historically specific origins. For instance, concepts such as "gender," "sexuality," and "homosexuality" have often been imposed on studies of Chinese sexual cultures without sufficient attention to their historical and cultural particularity. This tendency presumes these categories as transhistorical and overlooks the distinct epistemologies that shaped Chinese understandings of intimate relations. Consequently, same-sex relations in China have frequently been evaluated through the Western framework of "homosexuality," with studies of imperial China focused disproportionately on whether Chinese society was "tolerant" of such practices.

In this chapter, I aim to challenge the hegemony of these Western constructs by interrogating the historical and cultural dynamics of male same-sex relations in imperial China, specifically through the lens of "*Nanse*" (男色)—a term denoting male eroticism that evolved from an elite practice to a widely recognized social phenomenon during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Rather than asking whether China was "tolerant" of same-sex relations, I analyze how *Nanse* was embedded in socio-economic networks, political structures, and philosophical traditions that diverged fundamentally from Western models of sexual identity. By situating *Nanse* within these localized frameworks, this chapter seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of how non-Western societies constructed sexuality and gender outside the teleology of Eurocentric modernity.

The concept of *Nanse* emerged as a distinct social category in late Ming China (1368–1644), offering a critical lens through which to interrogate the presumed universality of Western gender and sexuality theories. Broadly defined as the cultural valorization of male beauty and desirability—particularly in male same-sex contexts. However, its socio-cultural significance underwent a radical transformation during the Ming dynasty, a period characterized by urbanization, commercial expansion, and shifting moral-philosophical paradigms. I argue that late Ming *Nanse* cannot be reduced to the binary frameworks of "heterosexual" or "homosexual" that dominate Western sexual epistemology. Unlike identity-based, rights-oriented discourses that emerged from post-Enlightenment Europe, *Nanse* reflected a culturally specific social

consciousness rooted in Neo-Confucian philosophies of desire, self-cultivation, and relational subjectivity. This is evident in its portrayal in late Ming literature, where *Nanse* was simultaneously aestheticized, commodified, and moralized—neither wholly condemned nor fully liberated, but negotiated within existing hierarchies of status and power. Crucially, the proliferation of *Nanse* discourse in popular literature and the commercial market for male prostitution signaled a broader transformation in Chinese personality structures. The demand for *Nanse* boys was not merely a niche erotic phenomenon but a socially embedded practice, reflecting shifting ideals of masculinity, pleasure, and social necessity in a rapidly changing society.

This study examines the philosophical dimensions of *Nanse* within China's modernization processes through the lens of Michel Foucault's conceptual framework—particularly his notions of the "deployment of sexuality" (*dispositif de sexualité*) and the "deployment of alliance" (*dispositif d'alliance*). I contend that the proliferation of *Nanse* discourse during the late imperial period reflects not merely a shift in Chinese sexual and moral subjectivity, but more significantly, an alternative pathway of modernization—one that diverges from the Eurocentric model of sexual modernity predicated on identity formation and biomedical categorization. By interrogating *Nanse* through Foucault's analytics of power, this analysis reveals how late imperial Chinese sexual culture operated outside the epistemic regime of Western "sexuality." Whereas Foucault's "deployment of sexuality" describes the modern West's production of sexual identities through institutionalized knowledge (e.g., psychiatry, demography), *Nanse* flourished within a distinct paradigm—one shaped by Neo-Confucian ethics, literati aesthetics, and the commercialized erotic economy of the Ming-Qing era. This challenges the universalizing claims of Western queer theory, which often assumes sexual modernity necessitates a transition from "acts" to "identities."

In concluding this chapter, I call for a critical reevaluation of the theoretical foundations of Western feminism and queer studies, which have frequently imposed ahistorical and decontextualized categories onto non-Western experiences. Instead, I propose that indigenous frameworks such as *Nanse* (男色, male beauty) offer more nuanced tools for analyzing Chinese sexual history. By centering these concepts, this study outlines a preliminary theorization of "Chinese sexual modernities"—pluralized to account for regional, temporal, and ideological variations that resist homogenization under Western paradigms.

Male Same-sex Relations in Histories of China

During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1636–1912) dynasties, male same-sex relations were not only socially visible but occupied distinct positions across different strata of Chinese society. Among the elite, such practices were often fashionable pursuits, while among the middle and lower classes—particularly in regions like Fujian province—they took institutionalized forms such as *qixiongdi* (契兄弟, "sworn brother") marriages. The late Ming writer and official Shen De-fu (沈德符, 1578–1642) documented these practices in his *Wanli yehuo bian* (《萬曆野獲編》, *Unofficial Gleanings of the Wanli Era,* 1619), noting that *qixiongdi* unions mirrored heterosexual marriages in their ceremonial and economic dimensions. For instance, the elder "brother" (assuming a husband-like role) was required to pay a substantial bride price to the younger brother's family, and cohabitation could only commence after parental approval. What distinguished *qixiongdi* from other male same-sex relations in imperial China was its enduring nature. Whereas most such relationships dissolved once the younger partner reached adulthood, sworn brothers maintained their bonds indefinitely—even after both parties contracted heterosexual marriages. Notably, the elder brother's obligations extended beyond the initial union: he was expected to provide ongoing financial support, including covering the younger brother's bride price for his subsequent marriage to a woman. Despite the prevalence of *qixiongdi* in southern provinces like Fujian, the dominant form of male same-sex relations in imperial China remained those between socially prominent men and their adolescent subordinates. This bifurcation underscores the class-inflected diversity of Chinese homoerotic practices.

Male same-sex relations in China were documented long before the Ming and Qing periods, appearing in foundational historical texts such as Sima Qian's (司馬遷, 145–86 BCE) *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 《史記》, 91 BCE). *Shiji* includes a dedicated chapter, *Biographies of Male Favorites* (*Ning-xing Lie-zhuan* 《佞幸列傳》), which records intimate relationships between emperors and their male courtiers—relationships that often carried erotic undertones. However, Sima Qian's treatment of these figures was not primarily concerned with their sexual behavior but rather with their political implications. He framed these men as cautionary examples of poor governance, illustrating how imperial favoritism based on personal charm rather than merit could destabilize the state.

In the chapter's opening, Sima Qian cites a proverb: *"'Physical strength in farming cannot be compared to the advantage of a favorable year; to rise in rank, talent and skill is less important than seizing the right opportunity.' This certainly holds true. It is not only women who use their beauty and charm to win favor—men do so as well."* Here, he critiques a system in which political advancement depended on personal connections and physical allure rather than administrative competence or virtue. The tragic fates of these favorites—often falling from grace once their patrons lost interest—serve as explicit warnings against cronyism. Notably, Sima Qian contrasts these disreputable figures with two celebrated Han dynasty generals, Wei Qing (衛青, ?–106 BCE) and Huo Qu-bing (霍去病, 140–117 BCE), who also enjoyed imperial favor due to personal ties with Emperor Wu (漢武帝, r. 141–87 BCE). Unlike *ning-xing*, however, Wei and Huo possessed demonstrable military talent that justified their high ranks. For Sima Qian, then, the core issue was not male homoerotic relations *per se* but the corrupting influence of unmerited privilege. His account thus reveals Chinese perspective in which same-sex intimacy was morally neutral unless it disrupted Confucian ideals of meritocratic governance and social hierarchy.

The *Book of Han* (*Hanshu*《漢書》, 111 CE), another foundational Chinese historical text, similarly dedicates a chapter to male imperial favorites (*ning-xing* 佞幸) who maintained intimate, often romantic relationships with emperors. Like Sima Qian before him, the historian Ban Gu (班固, 32-92 CE) framed these figures as cautionary examples—not primarily for their same-sex relations, but for exemplifying the dangers of cronyism and poor governance. Ban Gu explicitly connects this critique to Confucian ethics, quoting: *"Beauty and gentle disposition are not solely feminine traits; men too may possess Nanse (男色, male beauty)... This is why Confucius warned against three types of harmful friends, and why rulers are cautioned against appointing personal favorites to office."*[83] Here again, the historian's censure targets the breakdown of meritocratic principles rather than homoeroticism itself.

[83] From the *Analect* "Confucius said, 'There are three types of friends who can bring positive influences, and there are three types of friends who can bring harmful influences. Befriends with the righteous; befriends with the honest; and befriends with the man of knowledge - these are friends of positive influences. Befriends with sycophant; befriends with the fawners; and befriends with the silver tongued - these are friends of harmful influences." Here, Ban Gu was citing Confucius to prove that these male favorites were also included in the categories of three types of harmful friends who should be avoided.

While Ban Gu's chapter expands upon Sima Qian's earlier accounts with additional biographical details, his introduction of the term *Nanse* marks a significant conceptual development. Crucially, *se* (色)—denoting beauty or physical allure—operated as a gender-neutral category in classical Chinese thought. Adjectives describing physical attractiveness could apply equally to men and women in premodern texts, reflecting a worldview where sexual appeal transcended rigid gender binaries. This linguistic flexibility underscores how classical Chinese conceptions of desire diverged fundamentally from modern Western frameworks: sexual attraction was understood as a response to *se* (beauty) in the abstract, unconstrained by notions of "sexual orientation" or heteronormative assumptions.

The very absence of terms equivalent to "sexual orientation" in traditional Chinese discourse reveals the historical specificity of modern identity-based sexual categories. The contemporary tendency to ascribe gender-specific meanings to *se* and to categorize desire according to fixed patterns reflects a relatively recent epistemic shift—one rooted in Western heteronormative paradigms rather than any universal or inevitable progression. This analysis challenges teleological narratives that position modern Western sexual taxonomy as the apex of historical development, instead highlighting alternative configurations of gender and desire in China's intellectual tradition.

In *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (2012), Anne Fausto-Sterling traces the historical emergence of modern Western conceptions of sex and sexuality, demonstrating how these categories became disentangled from gender in the 18th century[84]. This epistemic shift, she argues, first crystallized with the invention of the "sodomite" as a distinct social type—a figure whose sexual acts came to define their identity rather than merely their behavior. By the 19th century, this separation intensified as scientific discourses sought to delineate heterosexuality through its opposition to newly pathologized forms of "sexual perversity." Crucially, these taxonomies were not simply descriptive but actively productive: they generated the very deviances they purported to classify, as Michel Foucault famously theorized in *The History of Sexuality*.

George Chauncey's work further complicates this narrative by revealing how early

[84] Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World*. New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012.

sexologists initially framed same-sex desire through the lens of *gender inversion*—the assumption that homosexual men were "feminine souls trapped in male bodies" and vice versa[85]. However, this model proved inadequate for explaining women who occupied conventionally feminine roles within lesbian relationships. To resolve this contradiction, medical authorities invented the concept of "homosexuality" to encompass *all* same-sex desires, regardless of gender presentation. As Fausto-Sterling and Chauncey both emphasize, this redefinition served not merely to classify but to *multiply* forms of sexual deviance, as Foucault observed in his analysis of 19th-century psychiatric discourse. The consequences of this epistemological rupture were profound. By binding sexuality to fixed gender binaries (masculine/feminine) and codifying attraction as either same-sex or opposite-sex, these scientific frameworks naturalized what Judith Butler would later term the "heterosexual matrix." Within this system, gender and sexuality became mutually constitutive: masculinity was inextricably linked to desire for femininity, and vice versa, thereby reinforcing the binary opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality as ostensibly natural categories.

This classification system, which continues to undergird contemporary gender and sexuality frameworks, operates through four interlocking principles[86]: 1) essentialized sexual identity: Sexual orientation is construed as an innate, stable characteristic that forms the core of social identity. This formulation naturalizes desire as an immutable psychological trait rather than a fluid social practice. 2) binary sex/gender complementarity: the system presumes a dyadic model of masculinity (sexually aggressive) and femininity (sexually passive), which are positioned as mutually constitutive through heterosexual attraction. Within this paradigm, homosexuality emerges as a pathology requiring explanation—initially through the theory of *gender inversion* (the notion that same-sex desire results from a "feminine soul in a male body" or vice versa). Paradoxically, this medicalized framework was later adopted by sexual minorities as an identity category, demonstrating what Foucault termed the "reverse discourse." 3) historical construction of heterosexuality: the term "heterosexuality" was first codified in 1892 in the United States,

[85] Chauncey, George. "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance." In *Sexuality and Sexual Behavior*, edited by Nancy F. Cott, 324–56. DE GRUYTER SAUR, 1993. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110976342.324.

[86] For a more detailed account, please refer to "Chapter 6: Thinking about Homosexuality", Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 2012. *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World*. New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. P. 70-98

creating a "sexual apartheid" that demarcated normative from deviant desire. As Ann Laura Stoler also demonstrates in *Race and the Education of Desire*, this taxonomy circulated transnationally, returning to Europe where it became entrenched during WWII as both a marker of Western modernity and a tool of racialized social control[87]. 4) quantifiable orientation: sexual desire is rendered measurable and deterministic, tethered to fixed gender and sexual identities through psychological, medical, and legal apparatuses. Collectively, these principles constitute what Foucault identified as the modern *dispositif de sexualité* (deployment of sexuality)—a regime of truth that supplanted earlier kinship-based systems (*dispositif d'alliance*). Unlike premodern systems that regulated sexuality through marital and economic alliances, this new epistemology instituted control through the categorization of desires themselves. Crucially, even individuals who perfectly perform normative gender roles (e.g., a masculine gay man or feminine lesbian) are still pathologized under this system, revealing its fundamental logic: not the regulation of gender nonconformity, but the very *production of sexual deviance* as a mechanism of biopolitical management.

The application of Western gender/sexuality frameworks to imperial China often relies on problematic assumptions about the transhistorical universality of these categories. While scholars like Matthew Sommer have acknowledged that gender distinctions in late imperial China did not strictly align with the anatomical-scientific binaries prevalent in Western thought, his analysis of Qing sodomy laws nevertheless presumes that legal prohibitions stemmed primarily from anxieties about "gender inversion."[88] Sommer contends that penetrated males were stigmatized for disrupting proper gender hierarchies, but this interpretation requires critical reassessment when examined through the lens of *Nanse* practices. I argue that, far from undermining gender hierarchies, the penetrated *Nanse* boy played a constitutive role in maintaining them. As Sommer himself notes, the so-called "gender anxiety" manifested only within specific social strata: while elite men faced no censure for penetrating *Nanse* boys, intense social panic arose when "rootless

[87] Stoler, Ann Laura. Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things. Duke University Press, 1995.

[88] Sommer, Matthew. 2002. *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. P. 307

bare sticks" (光棍)[89] penetrated boys from humble peasant families[90]. This selective outrage reveals a fundamental irony—many *Nanse* practitioners came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, yet only certain configurations of same-sex relations provoked juridical intervention. Such patterns suggest that what Sommer characterizes as "gender anxiety" might be more accurately understood as status anxiety. The Qing legal system operated through a clear double standard: it punished only those sexual relations that violated established status boundaries while tacitly endorsing those that reinforced existing power structures.

This analysis raises crucial questions about Sommer's theoretical framework. If status domination remained the primary logic governing sexual regulation in the Qing period—with gender performance serving merely as its symbolic expression—can we genuinely claim that gender had supplanted status as the organizing principle of sexual norms, as Sommer suggests?[91] The evidence points instead to a more complex interplay between status and gender, where apparent concerns about "proper hierarchy" ultimately served to maintain class boundaries. This interpretation aligns with broader critiques of imposing Western sexual epistemologies on non-Western contexts, where indigenous systems of social stratification often intersected with, but were not reducible to, gender binaries. I propose the necessity of developing an alternative framework for analyzing Chinese discourses of sex—one that moves beyond the limitations of Western gender/sexuality paradigms. The dominant two-sex model, rooted in historically specific European epistemologies, proves inadequate for understanding imperial China's conceptual landscape. Not only does this framework resist translation to the Chinese context, but its uncritical application risks reinforcing Eurocentric assumptions as universal truths.

To articulate a more culturally grounded approach, I draw upon Ning Yin-bin's (甯應斌)

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[89] Sommer defined *guan-gun* (bare stick, 光棍) as dispossessed single men who could not be bound by family because they had no land. Theoretically speaking, the bare stick should have the same status as a Free Commoner, but in reality, they were the presumed criminal subject of the Qing judiciary, which had a specific sub-statute directly singled them out for some harshest punishment.

[90] Wu, Cun-cun. 2017. *Play Outside Play: Theater Culture and Xianggu Tangzi in Late Qing China Beijing 戲外之戲：清中晚期京城的戲園文化與梨園私寓制*. Hong Kong University Press. P. 21-22

[91] Ibid., p. 9

recent theorization of *Se* (色, beauty/desirability) in Chinese male same-sex relations[92]. As Ning demonstrates, *Se/beauty* operates as a gender-neutral concept that challenges the modern concept of desirability and sexual orientation. In this system, erotic relationships are constituted not through gender or sexual identity, but through an asymmetrical dynamic between: 1) The possessor of *Se/beauty*: an individual (regardless of gender) who embodies desirability through effeminate physical appearance and self-presentation (similar to Erving Goffman's impression management in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*). This passive position involves awaiting courtship while cultivating aesthetic appeal. 2) The *Hao Se/beauty* (好色) desiring subject: The active pursuer who desires and claims *Se* through social, financial, or romantic initiative. This role requires both the capacity to desire and the means to possess—qualities determined by status rather than gender. This philosophical framework renders gender and sexuality secondary to more fundamental hierarchies of power and status. As Ning emphasizes, *Se/beauty* foregrounds the constitutive inequality within all intimate relations—whether expressed through differences in social standing, economic capital, or desirability. The crucial divide lies not between masculine/feminine or homosexual/heterosexual, but between those whose *Se/beauty* value are available and those who are able to *pursue* it.

The fundamental assumption that intimate relations in imperial China were structured by status and wealth inequalities still aligns with what Matthew Sommer has termed the status performance paradigm, which he believes is gradually supplanted by gender performance in the Qing period. This framework helps explain why, despite frequent references to male beauty (*Nanse* 男色) in Chinese historical records dating back to the Bronze Age, these references did not coalesce into one distinct social group with internal cohesion. Rather, male same-sex relations functioned primarily as a privilege reserved for elite men who maintained male subordinates. For much of imperial Chinese history, aristocratic men were socially permitted— even expected—to sexually penetrate their male slaves and servants as a leisure activity[93]. In contrast, commoners

[92] Ning, Ying-bin. "Forget Homosexuality, Revisit Nanse." *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies* 111 (2018): 165–229.

[93] Sommer, Matthew. 2002. *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press., p. 309

without the means to keep male dependents left few traces of such practices in the historical record.

As Sommer's research has demonstrated, sexual regulation in this context aimed not to prohibit specific acts per se, but to maintain proper social hierarchies[94]. The crucial distinction lay not in the nature of the sexual act, but in ensuring that status superiors consistently occupied the penetrative role. This system produced what we might characterize, following Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe's analysis of Islamic societies, as a "will not to know"—though with a crucial difference[95]. Whereas Middle Eastern traditions often accommodated male same-sex relations through discreet tolerance, late imperial China actively celebrated such practices among elites. The late Ming period (1368-1644) in particular witnessed an unprecedented flourishing of male same-sex relations in both elite culture and commercial markets. This transformation becomes evident in the proliferation of literary works praising male-male intimacy, from popular fiction to canonical texts. The emergence of a robust commercial sex market catering to elite and wealthy commoner clients—featuring both male and female prostitutes—signals a significant shift in social attitudes. I argue that this phenomenon reflects more than mere behavioral change; it marks the crystallization of a distinct *Nanse* consciousness that reshaped fundamental aspects of Chinese personality structure during the late imperial period.

The Great Transformation and the Social Consciousness of Nanse (男色)

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the socioeconomic transformations of the late Ming period (1368-1644)—including the emergence of nascent capitalism, the global silver trade, demographic pressures, and a failing fiscal system—generated unprecedented social dislocation. These intersecting crises produced a growing population of dispossessed individuals who existed outside traditional kinship and community structures. While many became *guan-gun* (bare stick, 光棍)—rootless, landless men without family ties—a significant number entered the expanding commercial sex market as private prostitutes or actors. Jack Goldstone's analysis of this period highlights how population growth and inflation undermined the traditional elite's social

[94] Ibid., p.309

[95] Murray, Stephen O., and Will Roscoe. *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History and Literature*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1997.

dominance[96]. Building on this, Philip C.C. Huang's concept of "involution" describes an economic paradox where increased agricultural inputs yielded diminishing per capita returns[97]. Though Huang focused primarily on production systems, the social ramifications of involution were profound. Among the lower and middle classes, survival pressures created a floating population with ambiguous legal status, while even elite literati found their positions precarious as bureaucratic competition intensified.

This socioeconomic upheaval had several important consequences: 1) professional choices are no longer bound to social status/hierarchy: many dispossessed individuals turned to previously stigmatized occupations like prostitution and acting, which now offered viable livelihoods in the commercializing economy. 2) status ambiguity: some practitioners of these "lowly professions" paradoxically achieved economic success, creating a new social category of financially prosperous but culturally marginalized individuals. 3) hierarchical erosion: traditional status markers became increasingly fluid as wealth accumulation through commerce challenged Confucian ideals of agrarian-based gentility. The late Ming thus witnessed a fundamental reconfiguration of social identity, where economic realities increasingly trumped inherited status in determining one's position within the changing social order.

The late Ming dynasty (1368-1644) witnessed an unprecedented expansion of commercial sex markets, fueled by widening economic inequality and a growing population of dispossessed individuals[98]. Private prostitution became institutionalized within elite and mercantile circles, with courtesans becoming a staple in urban social life. Significantly, this period also saw the flourishing of male prostitution catering to male clients, reflecting broader transformations in sexual

[96] Goldstone, Jack. 2016. *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World: Population Change and State Breakdown in England, France, Turkey, and China, 1600 –1850 25th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Routledge. P. 375

[97] Huang, Phillip C.C. 1990. *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350-1988*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

[98] According to Wang Shu-nu's research, he related several accounts from the Ming dynasty where people described the incredible amount of prostitutes residing in each great city in the southern part of China.

Wang, Shu-nu. 2014. *The History of Prostitution in China*. Edited by Deng-shan Tsai. Taipei City: Showwe Information (秀威資訊科技) Publishing. P. 163-82

commerce[99]. This cultural shift found vivid expression in popular erotic literature. Works such as *Long-yang Yi-shi* (《龍陽逸史》), *Yi Chun Xiang Zhi* (《宜春香質》), and *Bian er Chai* (《弁而釵》) not only documented but actively shaped a thriving male sex trade. These novels suggested that there was a mature commercial market for male same-sex relations, the "peasantization"[100] of male homoerotic relations practiced beyond aristocratic privilege, and male same-sex intimacy also emerged as a legitimate subject of popular discourse.

The proliferation of such texts suggests that male same-sex relations had transitioned from being an exclusive elite practice to a widely recognized, if contested, element of urban culture. This transformation reflects both the commercialization of pleasure and the destabilization of traditional status hierarchies during the late Ming period.

The proliferation of male homoerotic novels during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) does not necessarily indicate the existence of a modern "homosexual" identity, but it does reveal the growing social visibility of male prostitution and the crystallization of a distinct *Nanse* identity. Unlike earlier periods when the term referred primarily to courtiers who curry favor through physical charm to emperors, late Ming discourse specifically applied *Nanse* to male prostitutes and their clients, marking an important semantic shift. As Ning Yin-bin's (甯應斌) research demonstrates, we must resist interpreting these relationships through modern Western categories

[99] In the past, only certain categories of Mean people (賤民) hereditary class were involved in prostitution under the government's management as part of their penal servitude. They were official prostitutes (官妓), and since their sexual service was rather a punishment than commercial sex, they were different from that of the private prostitutes ran and managed by private individuals.

[100] Sommer quoted the concept of peasanization from Kathryn Bernhardt, who argued that from Tang-Song to Ming-Qing period Chinese legal system, we witnessed a fundamental change to the subject of codified law where peasant women's property inheritance practices were established into codified laws. Sommer borrowed her explanation and expanded its significance by arguing that the emphasis of Chinese law shifted from the perspective of aristocracy to ordinary commoner peasants. Sommer's core argument in the book was that the legal discourse of sexual offense in the Qing period paralleled this process, where commoner sexual morality was extended to all classes. Here, I am borrowing the expanded definition from Sommer, than Bernhardt's, although I am also expanding Sommer's use of "peasanization." Sommer uses peasanization to indicate the shift of legal subject from aristocracy to Commoner peasants, where Commoner's morality is extended to aristocracy, but my use in male same-sex relations, it is the aristocrats' practice of male same-sex relations being adopted by wealthy Commoner peasants as a fashion. See: Sommer, Matthew. *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. P. 14

of sexual identity[101]. The *Nanse* phenomenon was structured by two distinct social positions: *Hao Nanse* (好男色): clients of higher social status who assumed the dominant, penetrative role; *Nanse*: professional male prostitutes who occupied the submissive, penetrated position. This division highlights a crucial difference from contemporary gay identity politics— while under the Western discourse of homosexualities, these two groups of people belonged to the same category of gay men, under the Chinese discourse of *Nanse*, they were two groups of people who had different identifications.. *Nanse* developed exclusive professional rituals and practices (administered through guild-like associations) that reinforced their group identity while excluding their *Hao Nanse* patrons. Their conscious rejection of adult male sartorial norms (such as refusing to wear the *wang-jin* 網巾 headgear) and persistence in the profession beyond adolescence further demonstrates the emergence of a distinct *Nanse* consciousness rooted in professional identity rather than sexual orientation[102].

Their self-awareness alone did not guarantee that the social consciousness of *Nanse* was a marker of sexual identity under Western modernity, nevertheless; if we could not adopt the conceptual framework developed by Western theorists to determine how "modern" theseNanse prostitutes were, how should we evaluate these groups of people? The *Nanse* phenomenon differed fundamentally from contemporary homosexuality in two key aspects: (1) it lacked any grounding in scientific discourses of sexuality, and (2) it emerged from a distinct social epistemology that did not categorize desire according to gender binaries. Michel Foucault's conceptual distinction between the "deployment of alliance" (systems regulating kinship and inheritance) and the "deployment of sexuality" (biopolitical management through scientific classification) proves illuminating here. By Foucault's criteria, *Nanse* practitioners were decidedly pre-modern subjects, as their self-conception remained untouched by the medicalized, psychological discourses that produced the modern "homosexual" as an identity group. However, to insist on this Western developmental trajectory as the sole benchmark of modernity risks reproducing a colonial epistemology that renders China perpetually "backward" until its forced incorporation into global

[101] Ning, Ying-bin. 2022. "Identity and Politics of Late-Ming Dynasty Nanse (Male Beauty) in Longyang Yishi (Forgotten Stories of Catamites) and Other Works." *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies* 123: 61–112.

[102] Ibid., 73

sexual modernity through figures like Tan Sitong (譚嗣同)[103].

Following Mizoguchi Yuzo's (溝口雄三) critique of unilinear modernity[104], we might instead conceptualize China as pursuing an alternative modernization path—one in which transformations in sexual subjectivity occurred through different frameworks rather than through the adoption of Western biomedical models. This approach demands new analytical categories that can account for specifically Chinese configurations of selfhood, desire, and social organization without subsuming them under the Eurocentric taxonomy system. Returning to Foucault's conceptual framework, we might reconsider his distinction between the "deployment of alliance" (*dispositif d'alliance*) and "deployment of sexuality" (*dispositif de sexualité*). The former operated through kinship networks to reproduce aristocratic privilege among a select elite, while the latter emerged as a modern biopolitical apparatus that regulated entire populations through scientific discourses of sexuality. This analytical framework finds resonance in Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process* (1939), which traces how European modernity produced new psychological structures through the process of political centralization, increasing social interdependence, and the internalization of behavioral constraints[105]. While Elias's teleological assumption that modernization necessarily led to sexual repression is questionable[106], his fundamental insight about expanding social regulation aligns with Foucault's analysis. Both scholars demonstrate how modern governance implicated ever-larger populations as subjects of control—populations previously excluded from such disciplinary regimes.

When applied to late imperial China, this framework reveals significant transformations in

[103] A well-known Chinese politician and reformist in late Qing China. As one of the leading figures who directed the failed Hundred Day' Reform (1898), he was executed at the age of 33. Tan and his reformists colleagues' execution by the Qing government was considered as the Qing court's failure to reform, and this incident consequently radicalized many intellectuals who originally supported a constitutional monarchy led by the Qing government. His students included Yang Chang-ji (楊昌濟,1871-1920), an educator, philosopher and writer who exerted great influence on Mao when teaching in Hunan First Normal University (湖南省立第一師範).

[104] Mizoguchi, Yuzo. *China as Method 作為方法的中國*. Translated by Jun-yue Sun. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2011.

[105] Elias, Nobert. *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Edited by Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Stephen Mennell. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Blackwell Publishing, 2000.

[106] Lasch, Christopher. "Historical Sociology and the Myth of Maturity: Norbert Elias's "Very Simple Formula." *Theory and Society* 14, no. 5 (1985): 705–20. P. 715-6

the Ming-Qing transition. The emergence of *Nanse* discourse and the commercialization of male prostitution suggest parallel, though distinct, reconfigurations of Chinese subjectivity. Rather than reproducing Western patterns of sexual modernity, these developments indicate a different trajectory of psychosocial change, where new forms of sexual consciousness emerged alongside shifting patterns of social and economic organization.

The Confucian ideal of the "Philosophy-King" (聖 王) underwent significant transformation during China's late imperial period. Originally conceived as an exclusive moral/sexual subject position reserved for aristocratic males, this paradigm gradually expanded to include commoner-class men. The Cheng-Zhu School of Neo-Confucianism (程朱理學), which dominated Song dynasty (960-1279 CE) intellectual discourse, articulated this ideal through its famous dictum: "Preserve the Heavenly Principle while eliminating human desires" (存天理，滅人欲). This framework entails the elite's monopoly on moral subjectivity, i.e. the emperor and ruling-class males were positioned as sole embodiments of Heavenly Principle (天理), the only legitimate candidates for achieving Philosophy-King status. One of the founder of the Cheng-Zhu School of Neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200 CE) and his followers envisioned a hierarchical governance structure that was explicitly top-down, where moral authority flowed exclusively from this narrow elite. We could find this exclusivity from Zhu Xi's commentary on a controversial passage from the *Analects*: "Women and small men (小人) are difficult to nurture. If you become intimate, they become insolent; if you keep distant, they resent it" (唯女子與小人難養也，近之則不孫，遠之則怨). While later interpretations emphasized the "small men" was people who lacked virtue, Zhu's reading revealed the the "small men" also referred to the male subordinates for the moral/sexual subjects of Confucianism[107]. In Zhu's interpretation, the speaking position assumed the Philosophy-King's subject position, therefore; in Zhu's perspective, proper moral/sexual relations required the Philosophy-King to maintain proper hierarchical distance to both women and "small men."

This configuration established a rigid dichotomy between the Confucian moral subject (the

[107] Liu, Jen-peng. 2000. *Feminism Discourse in Modern China: Nation, Translation and Gender Politics*. Taipei City: Studentbook. P. 17

elite male Philosopher-King) and his various lesser Others (women, subordinate males), with the former obliged to maintain careful relational boundaries. Under this sense, the Confucian ideal of the Philosophy-King is similar to Foucault's conception of the modern desiring subject, but with significant difference. While Foucault's desiring subject is constituted *through* sexuality and desire, the Philosophy-King is constituted *despite* desire, through its proper regulation. Furthermore, unlike the desiring subjects which refers to unanimous, anonymous, individual subjects of a population, the Philosophy-King only refers to a very specific group of subjects—the elite aristocrat male who is able to discipline his own desires according to Confucian propriety and enforce proper social relations among subordinates, especially his boundaries with both women and "small men." The Philosophy King's disciplinary imperative over women and the "small men" reveals the complex dynamics within Confucian subjectivity. The "small men"—subordinate males occupying liminal social positions —played a crucial yet often overlooked role in constructing elite man's manhood. The Philosophy-King's moral authority thus depended on a dual negation: the systematic exclusion of women and "small men" from political agency, and the simultaneous incorporation of these groups as necessary foils for self-cultivation of Confucian manliness.

The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) witnessed a radical reconfiguration of Confucian subjectivity through Wang Yangming's (王陽明, 1472–1529) School of Heart (心學). Departing from Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy, Wang's philosophy posited that Heavenly Principle (天理) was immanent in the human heart (心)—including individual desires—rather than the exclusive domain of the elite. This epistemological shift carried profound implications for moral and sexual subjectivity in three key aspects: Firstly, Wang's famous declaration that "everyone on the street is a Philosophy King" (滿街都是聖人)[108] fundamentally challenged the Cheng-Zhu paradigm that restricted moral cultivation to rulers and ministers. By locating ethical capacity in universal human desire, the School of Heart reconfigured Confucian subjectivity as potentially accessible to all social strata. Secondly, whereas Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism advocated top-down moral transformation through elite exemplars, Wang's philosophy envisioned bottom-up transformation model. Under Wang's updated Confucian philosophy, the rural landlord class became new bearers

[108] A famous quote from Wang Yang-ming's *Records of Instructions* (Chuan-Xi-Lu, 傳習錄).

of Confucian governance. Finally, this philosophical reorientation effectively interpellated more commoners into systems of moral surveillance previously reserved only for the elite. The subject position of the Philosophy-King remained formally unchanged, but its field of operation expanded dramatically to include broader populations now charged with self-cultivation and therefore the "sexual sensibilities" (as manifestations of human desire or male same-sex desire) that was previously preserved only for the elite, also spreaded across social boundarie. The School of Heart's innovation lay in its paradoxical conservatism: while maintaining the Philosophy-King as an ideal, it transformed Confucianism into a popular practice even among the Commoners.

The Cult of Qing (情) and the Mainstreaming of Neo-Confucianism Human Desire

The mid-Ming period witnessed the rise of the *Cult of Qing* (情) as a distinctive discourse among disenfranchised literati. This intellectual movement, which valorized sentiment (*qing*) as a form of cultural capital, served as both a psychological refuge and a strategy of social distinction for scholars marginalized within the examination system. By embracing roles as writers and patrons of courtesans rather than pursuing conventional bureaucratic careers, these literati transformed *qing*—a complex concept encompassing emotion, passion, and desire—into a marker of elite sensibility that compensated for their declining political status. The *Cult of Qing* operated within the broader philosophical framework of the School of Heart (心學), which had reconfigured Confucian orthodoxy by asserting the moral potential of human desire. However, as Martin Huang has demonstrated, the longstanding pejorative connotations of "human desire" (*ren-yu* 人欲) in classical discourse necessitated conceptual innovation. The literati therefore rehabilitated desire through the more culturally palatable lens of *qing* (情), effecting what we might term a "sentimental turn" in Ming intellectual history: *The Cult of Qing* (情) provided an ethical vocabulary for desires that maintained Confucian resonance[109].

Another popular concept of the same period was *feng-liu* (風流), translated as "libertine" by scholars like Giovanni Vitiello, represented also an important parallel to the Cult of *Qing* in late

[109] Ibid., 31

imperial Chinese discourse[110]. While acknowledging certain surface similarities with Western libertinism, a careful examination reveals crucial distinctions that illuminate the unique contours of Ming-Qing intellectual and cultural history. It would be useful to explain the discourse of *feng-liu*, and to conduct some basic level comparison between the Western discourse of libertine for the sake of convenience and to ensure the ease of readers' that both traditions shared a spirit of rebellion, but their methods diverged fundamentally. Western libertines typically opposed religious and social norms through sexual transgression, but *feng-liu* scholars subverted Confucian propriety through cultivated appreciation of *qing* (情)—a complex blend of sentiment, passion, and aestheticized desire. While in Europe, romantic love occupied a central, positive trope in cultural discourse, in China, passionate attachments represented potential threats to familial and social order[111]. Therefore, unlike the libertine in Western tradition where desire was considered as the central and only driving force, the discourse of *feng-liu* demanded disciplined connoisseurship and self-cultivation. Thus, Western-style Restoration libertines[112] would be portrayed as negative exemplars even in erotic novels in the Ming and Qing period. Whereas Western libertinism sought fulfillment through sexual conquest, *feng-liu* discourse valued the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of relationships over physical consummation.

While the Cult of *Qing* (情) originated as an elite discourse among disenfranchised literati, it gradually permeated commoner society during the late Ming's (1368-1644) socio-economic transformation which led to cultural transformation. As mentioned earlier, the period;s commercial expansion enabled wealthy commoners to accumulate significant fortunes through trade and craftsmanship and challenge sumptuary laws by emulating literati lifestyles. Consequently, many of them were able to participate in cultural practices previously reserved for elites. The School of Heart's (心學) radical proposition—that moral cultivation was accessible to all—combined with

[110] Vitiello, Giovanni. 2011. *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

[111] Epstein, Maram. 2013. "*Giovanni Vitiello* The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China* . Giovanni Vitiello. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. Xii+296." *Modern Philology* 111 (2): E232–36. https://doi.org/10.1086/671962., p. E234

[112] I adopt the definition of Restoration Libertinism from this source: Arena, Tiziana Febronia. 2017. "The Importance of Being Man: An Introduction to the Libertine Ideology." *US-China Foreign Language* 15 (2): 129–37.

feng-liu (風流) discourse and *The Cult of Qing*'s valorization of personal sentiment, created an ideological framework for commoner self-fashioning to aristocratic life styles and hedonism that was prohibited by law and condemned by Confucian morality in the precious period.

The "Deployment of Alliance" through the Trade of Nanse (男色) Boys

We can perhaps observe an interesting example of how Commoner, aspiring to ascend the social hierarchy, adopted the "sexual" sensibilities of the elite and were thereby co-opted into elite networks of power. In *Plum in the Golden Vase* (《金瓶梅》, 1610), one of the most renowned novels of manners from the Ming dynasty, its libertine protagonist Xi-men Qing (西門慶), a paradigmatic *feng-liu* (風流) figure whose pursuits of sensual pleasure are deeply intertwined with ambitions for social advancement. As Giovanni Vitiello noticed that in this novel,, Ximen Qing cultivates *Nanse* sensibilities—that is, an aesthetic and erotic appreciation of male beauty—strategically aligning himself with elite tastes in order to advance his political and social standing[113]. These sensibilities are not merely private inclinations but are deployed within broader "homosocial" networks—circles of men bound by shared political, economic, and cultural interests—through the exchange and display of beautiful boys.

A telling episode occurs when Xi-men Qing's bureaucratic aspirations begin to yield the desired results: he receives a studio boy named Shu-tong (書童) as a gift from a county magistrate. Shu-tong is not only strikingly handsome but also skilled in music and literary arts, qualities that reflect the cultivated ideal of male beauty in elite culture. He subsequently becomes both Xi-men's personal assistant and catamite during his stay at an outer studio used for official business. Later, as part of his effort to strengthen political alliances with rising officials, Xi-men hosts a gathering for Primus Cai (蔡狀元) and Scholar An (安進士), both imperial degree holders. At this occasion, Ximen arranges entertainment by Shu-tong and a troupe of transvestite boys, effectively performing his access to the refined pleasures of elite male culture. Xi-men did not belong to the class of the literati, and seemed to share little with his guests in taste, but Primus Cai and Scholar An were immediately impressed by the service offered by Here, homosocial bonds and distinctions

[113] Vitiello, Giovanni. 2011. *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. P. 94

among men were mediated, and even constituted, through *Nanse* practices—the eroticized exchange of beautiful boys. Moreover, these exchanges underscore how sexualized bodies functioned as instruments of social capital and vehicles for the negotiation of power. In this context, the circulation of male youth served both as an erotic currency and as a means of enacting social distinction, thereby linking sexual practices to broader structures of hierarchy and governance.

This phenomenon of *Nanse* commerce raises several critical theoretical questions that challenge conventional analytical frameworks: What historical significance emerges from the trade of *Nanse* boys as social commodities? Does this exchange represent a form of gendered trafficking (as per Rubin's "traffic of women" paradigm)? Are these *Nanse* objects trafficked as "women" or are they trafficked as "slaves and serfs" as indicated by Gayle Rubin that men were never trafficked simply as men[114]? It became evident that gender was insufficient as the primary analytical framework when examining cases like Xi-men's political networking.

Gayle Rubin's seminal work, *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex*, fundamentally shaped contemporary gender studies by theorizing what she termed the "sex/gender system." Rubin's central thesis posits that kinship systems across cultures have historically operated through the exchange of women as gifts, thereby reducing them to their gender as sexual objects. This system, she argues, accounts for both the cross-cultural diversity and persistent similarity of women's oppression[115]. For Rubin, sex refers to anatomical and physiological differences between men and women, while gender refers to culturally constructed roles that transform biological sex into hierarchical social relations. Crucially, Rubin maintains that while men might be trafficked as slaves, serfs, or other socially marginalized figures, they are never exchanged simply as men—a fate reserved exclusively for women[116]. This gendered exchange system, reinforced through psychoanalytic conscription like the Oedipal complex, positions men as sexual subjects and women as sexual objects[117].

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[114] Rubin, Gayle S. 2011. *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*. Durham & London: Duke University Press. P. 45

[115] Ibid., p. 35

[116] Ibid. p. 45

[117] Ibid. p. 54

However, the case of *Nanse* in late imperial China presents a significant challenge to Rubin's framework. The exchange of *Nanse* boys—whether as Xi-men's catamites or the male prostitutes featured heavily in late Ming erotic novels—cannot be adequately explained through Rubin's model. *Nanse* were valued precisely for their sexual appeal as men, not as substitutes for women. Indeed, Vitiello noticed that there was a common discourse of *Nanse* in the Ming period, which described *Nanse* as the substitute for the more desirable yet unavailable sex with women, and men had sex with boys simply to quench their temporary thirst or for reasons of expediency[118]. However, Vitiello also noted that despite some veins of *Nanse* writing did entail an implicit hierarchy of sexualities, in the dominant *feng-liu* discourse in the Ming period, it was taken for granted that men should be equally drawn to both women and men, and sexual desire towards either one should never exclude the other. Therefore, a more common assessment was to use the culinary and botanical metaphor to describe sex with women and sex with men as an opposite pair of interconnected and mutually reinforcing categories. If sex with women was "home flower" (家花), then sex with men was "wild flower" (野花); if women were "home food" (家食), then men were "game meat" (野味). The point was not to determine which one was superior to another, but rather, the corollary was that there was no way that a sexually potent man would only desire one type of food or flavor, instead, man needed both to live on a healthy "sexual diet.[119]" The juxtaposition of both indicated that despite their co-presentation, they were still categorically different from each other. Therefore; *Nanse* was not simply a substitute for women, and they were desired, exchanged, precisely because their sexual value was different from that of women. While some *Nanse* engaged in cross-dressing, their appeal stemmed from their status as desirable males performing femininity, not from being categorically gendered as women. The preservation of their identity as men remained central to their sexual valuation. This evidence suggests that the late Ming system of male-male sexual exchange operated through fundamentally different cultural logics than those described in Rubin's model, requiring alternative analytical frameworks attentive to Chinese historical context.

Rubin's theoretical framework posits that kinship systems psychologically inscribe gender

[118]Ibid., P. 20

[119] Ibid. p. 24

divisions by enforcing heteronormative structures through the incest taboo. According to this view, girls undergo a particularly traumatic gendering process as they internalize their status as exchangeable objects signifying male ("phallic") power. This raises crucial questions about its applicability to the *Nanse* subject and their "gendering" in imperial China. While some might argue that *Nanse* relationships avoided gendered oppression because: they could not be formally recognized through marriage and concubinage, and the relations were usually temporary arrangements. Nevertheless, asserting that *Nanse* relations were rather temporary and informal oversimplified the nuanced dimension of their oppression, and also overlooked the resourcefulness of the human kinship system in generating signs to be exchanged. If we assumed that marriages and childbearing were the only means to formalize human kinship, then we would risk to essentialize the aspect of procreation in human sexuality too much. Aside from the sworn brotherhood (*qixiongdi* 契兄弟) customs in southern China which could also achieve quasi-marital status[120], *Nanse*, like concubine and female slaves, often occupied defined positions within their masters' family systems, even without formal marriage.

I agree with Rubin that the sex/gender system of kinship is not just the reproductive moment of mode of production[121], and if we can not take account of other forms of survival which exchange sex for sustenance, we may end up ignoring a large portion of the population who don't have the qualification or resources to enter formal marriages but still live as "fictive kins." I argue that the trade of *Nanse* boys in late imperial China represents a significant expansion of what Foucault termed the "deployment of alliance." This system incorporated more marginalized subjects into networks of power through complex mechanisms of sexual exchange and domestic servitude. Xi-men's exchange through Shu-tong's sex exemplifies that although unrelated by blood or formal affinity to Xi-men, Shu-tong's sex can creat social linkages beyond domestic arrangement by reinforcing his master's social and political capital, and also provides essential domestic and sexual labor to keep the house running. The trade of *Nanse* subject also bear many similarities with female bondservants, whose relations with their masters are established through debt-bondage, and both are "symbolically castrated" by their masters as they both had restricted

[120] Wu, Cun-cun. 2000. *Sexual Culture in the Ming and Qing Period*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House. P. 132

[121] Ibid. p. 40

marital rights and low social status. While the master's wife remained bound by strict fidelity norms, the bondservants—regardless of gender—became instruments of both domestic labor and potentially resources of their masters' networking. It suggests that traditional Chinese kinship systems demonstrated remarkable flexibility in generating parallel systems of sexual exchange not through marital relations, but through fictive kinship and servitude. Furthermore, man can also be traded for their sexual value as social currency.

This study has offered a preliminary framework for conceptualizing Chinese sexual modernities through the indigenous categories of *Nanse*. I have demonstrated how Chinese sexual modernity developed through distinct philosophical and social trajectories that cannot be reduced to Western paradigms of gender and sexuality. Rather than measuring Chinese experiences against Western developmental models, this analysis highlights the need to understand sexual modernity as plural—comprising multiple, coexisting trajectories shaped by local historical conditions and philosophical traditions. The *Nanse* framework ultimately suggests that sexual oppression operates through culturally specific mechanisms that demand equally specific analytical tools.

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Chapter 4: Actors and Their "Gender Nonconformity"—The Case of Yang Yue-Lou (楊月樓)

On December 23, 1873[122], *Shen Bao* (《申報》, *Shanghai News*)—one of the most influential newspapers in late imperial and early modern China—reported a criminal case involving the abduction of a young woman by Yang Yue-lou (楊月樓, 1844–1890), a renowned Peking Opera actor of the Chun-tai (春臺) troupe in Shanghai. Given Yang's celebrity status, the case quickly escalated into a sensational scandal. Following the conventions of anecdotal writing (*biji xiaoshuo* 筆記小說), the initial report framed the incident through a literary chronicle composed in classical Chinese. The narrative blended poetic imagery with moralistic undertones, presenting the case as a tale of seduction and familial disgrace:

> **The Abduction Scandal of Yang Yue-lou was Exposed** [123]
>
> Amidst the transient beauty of peach and plum blossoms, where willow catkins drift aimlessly[124] over Shen-jiang (the Huang-pu River), the demimonde of Shanghai's pleasure quarters seldom surprises—yet who could have imagined a sheltered gentlewoman would forsake propriety to pursue a mere actor? Let this brush recount the affair. Madame Wang, a native of Wu (Chinese abbreviation for Zhe-jian province), served as the concubine of a merchant. Her husband, a tea trader who wandered the floating markets of Jiang-nan (south of the Yangtze River Delta), remained absent for years. As spring blossoms withered and autumn moons waned, Madame Wang's beauty faded into middle age. Her daughter, now of hairpin-coming-of-age (ji ji 及笄)[125], possessed a loveliness surpassing flowers.

[122] The date of these new events are usually recorded with the Chinese Lunisolar calendar, in accordance with the current emperor's reigning periods. For the sake of convenience, I adopt the closest equivalent in the Gregorian calendar instead. Therefore, the timeline included in these news commentaries did not have an exact match with the time and date provided in this paper.

[123] "The Abduction Scandal of Yang Yue-lou was Exposed" (楊月樓誘拐捲逃事發), *Shen Bao*, Dec. 23, 1873, from Fu, Jin. *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period, Volume 4 京劇歷史文獻彙編: 清代卷 4*. 4. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2011.

[124] Both the allusions of peach, plum and willow catkins referred to people who have a doubtful moral/sexual character, and illegal sexual intercourse.

[125] The traditional coming-of-age ceremony for women, at the age of 15.

Disdaining the tawdry life of courtesans, she dwelled in seclusion, her virtue intact. While Yang Yue-lou, the actor of the Chun-tai Troupe is a man of striking physique, around whom fallen blossoms flocked like moths to flame. Madame Wang, too, found herself enthralled during midnight lamplight performances upon the woolen stage. Yet age rendered self-advancement unseemly; thus, she offered her daughter as a lure. Laden with gilded trunks—with the contents of their wealth surrendered to Yang—the trio absconded to Wen-yun (文運) village. On the solstice eve, under the auspicious Three Stars (metaphor for marital harmony), their clandestine union was commenced. Alerted by neighbors, the merchant's kin decried this plunder of a lifetime's wealth and the defilement of his daughter by a mere actor. His kin reported to the authorities: "When the cuckold returns, he shall find not only his place emptied but his very household gone." Authorities raided at dawn, breaching walls to seize Yang, the mother and daughter, and seven suitcases of valuable property and jewelry. Yang remained at the prison of the Municipal Police Station, while the daughter—still clad in crimson bridal robes—was paraded as a prisoner through streets to the Mixed Court (Shanghai International Settlement's Sino-foreign tribunal). Spectators swarmed like clouds, jostling shoulder-to-shoulder, carriages clashing, until the court overflowed. Alas! The Magpie Bridge[126] of lovers proved but an illusion by the actor; a mother's folly resulted in a reality in the prison. How pitiable is the maiden's disgrace, her crimson phoenix match torn asunder! Yet justice, undeterred by shape-shifting schemes[127], shall unveil deceit. As to the verdict, let us await the tribunal this morning.

Two days later, *Shen Bao* published a follow-up report that sharply diverged from the initial account. The second article reframed the case as one of mutual consent rather than coercion:

Yang Yue-lou Transferred to Outer Prison for Abduction and Theft

Following his initial transfer from the Mixed Court to the county magistrate's jurisdiction, as previously reported, Yang Yue-lou faced renewed interrogation on the fourth night of the Chinese luni-solar month. The plaintiff presented detailed accusations

[126] Reference to the Cowherd-Weaver Girl legend, where lovers meet each other on the Magpie Bridge. Here it is an inverted critique of the author to the theatrical artifice.

[127] The original used the metaphor of Cang-gou (蒼狗), meaning azure hound, an allusion from Du Fu's (712-770 AD) poem to indicate mutability.

of abduction and theft, prompting Yang's formal cross-examination. Unable to deny the charges, Yang admitted to acts of aggravated criminality. Given the severity of his offenses, he was sentenced to 100 strikes on the shins and remanded to the county jail. Madame Wang, now identified as the wet nurse of the abducted woman, Ah Bao (阿寶), was found guilty of aiding the escape. She received 200 lashes to the back. Ah Bao herself, when questioned, invoked the adage "marry a chicken, follow a chicken" [128] declaring unwavering loyalty to Yang. Despite her claims, she was subjected to 200 slaps in the face. A female chastity inspector (Wen-po, 穩婆) confirmed she was no longer a virgin, with further testimony revealing their illicit relations had commenced on the third day of the fourth lunar month and occurred repeatedly thereafter. The wet nurse was implicated as the matchmaker. Subsequent investigations uncovered a box of dark, pungently fragrant powder—allegedly an aphrodisiac —in Yang's residence. This discovery compounded his crimes: not only was his guilt in abduction and theft irrefutable, but his use of stimulants to manipulate women rendered his actions unforgivable. Interrogations revealed that Yang and Ah Bao's liaison originated during theatrical performances, facilitated by the wet nurse's covert arrangements. It was also disclosed that the reported "Madame Wang" was, in fact, an alias assumed by the wet nurse, for which she faced additional punishment. Yang's prior criminal record—including involvement in a public brawl at Xiao-dong-men (小東門)—further aggravated his sentence. He received 100 strikes to the ankles and confinement in the outer jail, pending final judgment. The aphrodisiac was submitted as evidence, ensuring stricter penalties. The full sentencing will be published following formal adjudication.[129]

The discrepancies between the two reports are striking. The first depicted Ah Bao as an unwilling victim, coerced into marriage by her mother's infatuation with Yang. The second, however, revealed her active participation, with her old wet nurse acting as the matchmaker—a clear sign of

[128] A Chinese folk aphorism underscoring traditional expectations of female submission in marriage, even to unworthy partners.

[129] "Yang Yue-lou was transferred to Outer Prison for Abduction and Theft" (楊月樓拐盜收外監), Shen Bao, Dec. 25, 1873, from Fu, Jin. *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period, Volume 4 京劇歷史文獻彙編: 清代卷 4*. 4. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2011. P.28-9

her own involvement in the affair.

attracted tremendous attention from the public, and during a nearly a month-long debate in the press, approximately 30-40 news reports and editorial commentaries concerning Yang's verdict were published[130]. These discussions could be coalesced into two opposing factions: one is the conservative faction–spearheaded by the Cantonese Merchants' Association, led by Ah Bao's paternal uncle, this group demanded severe punishment for Yang. They reframed the elopement not as a consensual affair but as a capital crime involving abduction and property theft. Their rhetoric emphasized Yang's transgression of rigid social hierarchies—a *jianmin* (賤民, mean-class actor) daring to kidnap the daughter of a wealthy Commoner (*liangmin*, 良民) family, thereby attempting a form of status usurpation through alleged manipulation and aphrodisiac use. From their perspective, Yang's actions constituted a dual crime: abduction and theft– Ah Bao, as an unmarried woman, was legally regarded as her father's chattel, and her dowry represented familial wealth. By eloping with her, Yang was accused of stealing both. Another is Yang's conspiracy against the Social order—as a Mean people, Yang's liaison with a Commoner's daughter was interpreted as a deliberate assault on traditional status boundaries. Given imperial China's legal tradition of harsh penalties for hierarchy violations (e.g., *liangjian buyi hun* 良賤不婚, prohibitions on inter-status marriage), his actions theoretically warranted capital punishment.

On the other hand, Shanghai's intellectual circles, acclimated to the fluid sociocultural dynamics owing to its status as a foreign concession and comprador capitalism, did not find Yang's transgression of social hierarchy as offensive, and hence issued a counter-narrative in the press. While many of them acknowledged Yang's low social status, they also emphasized Yang's significant economic success should offset his debased social class in a place where wealth mattered more than traditional status. While many of them acknowledged Yang's legally debased status, reformist commentators contended that his economic success mitigated traditional status prejudices. In Shanghai's commercialized environment, where mercantile wealth often eclipsed hereditary status, Yang's prosperity (earned through his theatrical fame) arguably legitimized his social standing. In the subsequent follow-up reports for Yang's case, they also pointed out

[130] Li, Zhang-li. "The Yang Yue-Lou Case and the Transformation of Socio-Norms in Late Qing China 从'杨月楼案'看晚清社会伦理观念的变动." *Modern Chinese History Studies* 1 (2000). P. 82-118

evidences which contradicted with the claims of the conservative factions: a week after Yang's arrest, the real Madame Wang (Ah Bao's mother) submitted herself to the county magistrate, asserting that **she** had proposed the marriage—a right afforded to parents under Confucian marital customs. She further disclosed that her husband, during his earlier stay in Shanghai, had verbally consented to the union. According to her account, Yang and Ah Bao's marriage was lawful, since Yang had obtained permission from Ah Bao's parents[131]. The reformists also questioned the excessive use of torture during Yang's interrogation violated statutes in the Great Qing Legal Code, which prescribed limits on judicial coercion. In addition to this, they also questioned the impartiality of the county magistrate, a native of Guangdong with documented ties to the Cantonese Merchants' Association (Ah Bao's uncle's faction). As a result, many questioned whether the investigation process was fair and transparent, and whether the Cantonese merchants and Ah Bao's uncle were abusing the imperial law to justify lynching and honor killing of the Wei family.

The heated public debate surrounding Yang's case was abruptly curtailed after approximately one month when the editorial staff of *Shen Bao* received death threats from both the Cantonese Merchants' Association and local county officials. Following the publication of a defiant editorial response on January 24, 1874, the newspaper ceased accepting public commentaries and opinion pieces, limiting its coverage to factual reports on the case's judicial proceedings[132]. Owing to the huge controversies stirred up by Yang and his supporters, Yang's case was remanded for retrial. But the retrial only reaffirmed Yang's original sentence under charges of abduction and theft, resulting in his exile to frontier garrisons. Yang was convicted of abduction and theft and sentenced to exile at a frontier garrison. Meanwhile, Ah Bao, having been disinherited by her family after her mother's death during the trial, was consigned to a Shan-tang (善堂, charity house) for arranged marriage. This final outcome of Yang's case only marked the decisive victory of the conservative faction, reinforcing the old sociopolitical norms of status

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[131] "Details of the Re-examination of Yang Yue-lou's Case" (楊月樓覆訊情形), Shen Bao, Jan. 1st, 1874, from Fu, Jin. *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period, Volume 4 京劇歷史文獻彙編: 清代卷 4*. 4. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2011. P. 32-3

[132] "On Re-publication of Xiang-shan Commentator's Account of the Wei-Yang Affair" (本館復刻香山人論韋楊事情節), Shen Bao, Jan. 24, 1874, from Fu, Jin. *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period, Volume 4 京劇歷史文獻彙編: 清代卷 4*. 4. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2011. P. 52

hierarchies, yet it also enraged the Shanghai intellectual circles.

On May 23, 1874, following the announcement of Yang's final verdict, *Shen Bao* published a scathing editorial that marked a significant escalation in its critique. Moving beyond its previous censure of the Cantonese Merchants' Association and their collusion with local magistrates, the newspaper now directly challenged the Qing imperial court and its legal apparatus[133]. The editorial articulated profound disillusionment with a judicial system that appeared susceptible to cronyism and willfully disregarded established legal procedures outlined in the Great Qing Legal Code. This bold critique reflected growing concerns about China's international reputation. The editorial noted that Yang's case, having gained notoriety not only among Chinese communities but also in foreign press circles, threatened to undermine the credibility of both the Qing government and Shanghai's status as a treaty port.

In an unexpected turn of events, Yang's fate changed on April 7, 1875, when Empress Dowager Cixi (慈禧太后) issued a general amnesty to commemorate her 40th birthday[134]. This imperial grace allowed Yang to return from exile and eventually resume his theatrical career in Shanghai. However, while Yang personally regained his freedom, the public discourse surrounding his case abruptly ceased.

My purpose is not to examine jurisprudential scrutiny nor to evaluate its societal reverberations, but to excavate the implicit moral/sexual dimensions in these press commentators' writings. While Yang Yue-lou's trial is classified among the "Four Major Cases of the Late Qing Period" (清末四大奇案), it has received less scholarly attention than the more notorious Yang Nai-wu and Little Cabbage case (楊乃武與小白菜案, 1873-1877)—another miscarriage of justice extensively covered by *Shen Bao* that significantly influenced late Qing legal discourse. Nevertheless, Yang Yue-lou's case presents a particularly revealing lens for analysis. Yang's case happened prior to the introduction of Western sexual concepts, therefore it is especially valuable

[133] "On the Retrial of Yang Yue-lou Case" (記楊月樓覆審一案), Shen Bao, May. 23, 1874, from Fu, Jin. *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period, Volume 4 京劇歷史文獻彙編: 清代卷 4*. 4. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2011. P. 64

[134] "Yang Yue-lou's Judicial Pardon" (楊月樓遇赦), Shen Bao, April. 7, 1875, from Fu, Jin. *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period, Volume 4 京劇歷史文獻彙編: 清代卷 4*. 4. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2011. P. 64

for interrogating the limitations of conventional gender frameworks in East Asian studies. The discrimination Yang faced stemmed not from perceived gender nonconformity, but from his occupational status as an actor—a position that denied him recognition as a complete man (nan 男) within the traditional social order, yet did not render him categorizable as either transgender or female.

Recent scholarship, particularly Matthew Sommer's work, has examined clergy, eunuchs, and female-impersonator actors (a category that might broadly include Yang Yue-lou) as interconnected examples of gender transition in imperial China. While acknowledging the value of this approach, I contend that Yang's case reveals the fundamental inadequacy of applying modern gender/sexuality frameworks to traditional Chinese moral and status hierarchies. Sommer's theoretical position emerges most clearly in his engagement with Howard Chiang;s *Transtopian in the Sinophone Pacific* (2021). He noted that many of Chiang's "trans" subjects were criticized for not being "trans-enough" for some Western readers. Sommer expressed his surprise to the "degree of boundary policing[135]" for the criticisms received by Chiang's book, and proposed that a more flexible framework of "trans" to be adopted, when discussing subjects outside of Western context. In response, Sommer advocates for a more flexible conception of "transgender" that emphasizes practices rather than identities—a definition influenced by Susan Stryker's work[136]. He proposed that "trans" subjects in imperial China should refer to people who moved away from their assigned gender at birth, or people who crossed the boundary which were constructed by their culture to define and contain their "gender." This leads Sommer to interpret "leaving the family" (出家)—the practice of Buddhist clergy and eunuchs—as a form of gender transition, since it involved renouncing normative familial and reproductive roles[137]. He further observes that many female-impersonator actors temporarily adopted the career of clergy, suggesting to him a shared pattern of gender nonconformity among these groups. However, Yang's case challenges this interpretation by demonstrating that status discrimination operated independently of gender categories, and the moral/sexual hierarchy of late imperial China cannot

[135] Sommer, Matthew. *The Fox Spirit, the Stone Maiden, and Other Transgender Histories from Late Imperial China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. P. 85-6

[136] Ibid., p. 9

[137] Ibid., p. 6

be reduced to Western paradigms of gender nonconformity.

While I agree with Matthew Sommer's premise that late imperial China lacked modern conceptions of "transgender identity"—as sexual status was socially assigned rather than being expressions of personal agency—I contend that his interpretation of boundary-crossing practices requires a second-thought. Sommer argued that when gender transitioning confirmed the established status hierarchy and privileges, these practices were usually less controversial or was even widely accepted, therefore the "gender transition" by clergy, eunuchs and actors were tolerated in imperial China because it took place within narrowly defined institutional context and did not threaten normative order[138]. However, this interpretation reveals three problematic theoretical assumptions: first, Sommer's framework inadvertently imposes Western gender binaries onto late imperial Chinese social taxonomies. Sommer's assumption was essentially hetero-normalization and the reduction of sexual categories into two, which not only presupposed what would be viewed as effeminate characteristics, but also presumed that effeminization entailed boundary ("gender") transgression for men. Therefore, male effeminization is automatically framed as boundary-crossing behavior by Sommer, and sexual categories are artificially compressed into a binary structure where subversive " gender transgression" can be overstated. This critique does not negate the value of Sommer's work, but rather suggests that his analytical framework requires recalibration to better account for the distinctive moral-sexual matrix of late imperial China.

An interesting example was Sommer's interpretation of Harvard's Hasty Pudding Theatricals; it serves as a revealing case study of his theoretical approach. He interprets the elite male students' cross-dressing as a form of privileged gender transgression, arguing that their social status allowed them to temporarily violate gender norms without consequence, thereby reinforcing their class position. This interpretation relies on a framework that understands cross-dressing primarily as gender inversion—an assumption that proves problematic when applied to the Chinese context. The Chinese technical terms of traditional Chinese theatrical tradition, *fan-chuan* (反串, role-crossing) operated on fundamentally different principles. Unlike Western models of cross-dressing as gender transgression, in traditional Chinese theater, actors/actresses were

[138] Ibid., p. 11

assigned roles based on their vocal capabilities, temperamental suitability and dramatic flair to either male/female roles, rather than based on their biological sex. When actresses gained stage access in the late Qing, many excelled in male roles (*sheng*, 生). For example, the celebrated actress Meng Xiao-dong (孟小冬, 1908-1977) was known for her mastery of masculine composure, vocal performance which had resonant timbre and sonorous depth surpassed male actor's male roles. Her artistic and romantic partnership with Mei Lan-fang (梅蘭芳), an actor mastered in the female role also created a celebrated examples of traditional Chinese theater aesthetics.

Sommer's analytical model presumed the performative substrate and sociality of gender, namely the binary opposed femininity and masculinity traits as an universal category attached to the gender concept, which could be applied even to late Qing China. However; under the "gender" system of traditional Chinese theater, actresses such as Meng Xiao-dong cross-dressing and performing as male roles would not be considered as gender inversion. Sommer's approach therefore may fundamentally misrepresent the operative logic of traditional Chinese theater, where role assignment followed artistic convention rather than gender essentialism. And true boundary transgression would have occurred only if Meng had performed female roles (*dan*, 旦) outside her specialization.

Furthermore, Sommer's paradigm of "leaving family" also did not require "the renunciation of normative gender roles based on marriage and procreation" as claimed by Sommer[139], instead, in imperial China, the marriage system was created to deliberately keep it out of reach to certain populations, regardless of their normative gender (if there was such a concept). Under the traditional moral/sexual hierarchy, many men and women were prevented from affording marriage, therefore; they were compelled to "leave the family." Yet, these people, including Buddhist nuns and monks who vowed for celibacy, did not simply transgress their normative gender roles, rather, they were only considered as lesser than their own kinds. The marriage system deliberately excluded large populations—from impoverished lower-status men to women without proper familial connections. Buddhist monks and nuns were viewed not as gender

[139] Ibid., p. 6

transgressors but as occupying a lower rung within existing status hierarchies.

A more appropriate analogy to Sommer's Harvard cross-dressing example within the late imperial Chinese context might be found in the phenomenon of *piao-you* (票友, "ticket friends")—amateur performers from respectable families who participated in theatrical performances. Unlike professional actors who occupied a debased social status, these elite hobbyists could freely perform across role types (oftentimes opposite to their biological sex) without incurring social stigma. Crucially, their boundary-crossing operated along an axis of status rather than gender. Where Western cross-dressing often carries connotations of gender subversion, *piao-you* performances were understood as cultivated leisure rather than identity statements. The true transgression would have been a respectable gentry member becoming a professional actor—a matter of social degradation, not gender confusion.

This would be more obvious, if we look into the news commentary on Yang's case. Yang's profession as an entertainer was intrinsically linked to pollution, rendering his work debased and effeminizing within the Confucian social order. While not a specialized female impersonator, a significant portion of his theatrical services involved serving male patrons, placing him within the conceptual frame of *yi se shi ren* (以色事人)—"serving others through sexualized labor." This idiom, though typically applied to women, equally captured Yang's professional identity as one whose livelihood depended on the commodification of *se/beauty* (色).

It is perhaps worthwhile to re-elaborate on the concept of *se/beauty*, briefly discussed in the previous chapter. *Se/beauty* denoted an eroticized beauty of effeminization that transcended strict gender binaries. While it is usually associated with feminine qualities, it could be applied to both men and women without rendering them equivalent to each other. As Najmabadi's *Women with Mustache and Men without Beard: Gender and Sexual Anxieties in Iranian Modernities* on Iranian mukhannas demonstrates, premodern societies often maintained distinct (even if related) categories for effeminate men and women under the broader umbrella of "nonmanhood." Najmabadi suggested that many of the gendered notions of sexual desires and sexual representations were relatively recent inventions, and reducing affiliated categories of nonmanhood into one category was largely a modern phenomenon. In imperial China, possessing the effeminate quality of *se/beauty* did not always have connotations marking the subject as women,

but it could be used to signify nonmanhood. Yang's profession related to the commodification of *se/beauty* rendered him "unmanly", yet this did not constitute gender transition—he remained categorically distinct from women.

The conservative commentaries surrounding Yang's case reveal a deliberate narrative strategy that denied him full "manhood"—the possibility of genuine attraction between the actor and a respectable young woman. This rhetorical maneuver necessitated the transformation of a consensual elopement into a story of criminal abduction. They first constructed a causal sequence of sexual transgression, alleging that Yang's initial adultery with Ah Bao's mother enabled the subsequent "abduction" of the daughter. This framing therefore established Yang's debased character, not just in profession, but also in terms of moral/sexual principle. And by accusing Yang as the opposite of Confucian manliness ideals (self-cultivation and restraints to desire)—a man driven by insatiable lust—they transformed a private elopement scandal into a moral threat to the public. In imperial China where there was a long legal tradition which equated sexual desire transgress social hierarchy as potentials and signs of rebellion, Yang's offense could potentially suffer capital punishment.

Aside from defaming Yang by his alleged affair with Madame Wang, in the writings of the conservative commentators, there were also other notable tendencies: 1) as an actor specializing in Sheng (生, young male lead) roles, his critics strategically pathologized his unmanly servility, which had large to do with his profession as a service provider than femininity in appearance and attire; the theatrical entertainer's role as a service provider (particularly to male patrons) marked him as constitutionally unfit for respectable society. 2) he was often compared to the bare stick (光棍), oftentimes served as a background in debates whether a more severe punishment was justifiable; 3) the discourse of *yin* (淫), namely the discourse of illicit sex in Chinese, was highlighted and framed as the major charges against Yang throughout the writings. The discourse of *yin* became a focal point of contention whether Ah Bao and Yang's mutual attraction could be categorized as "normal" according to Confucian moral principle.

While Sommer pointed out the paradox that only off stage male to female cross-dressing

constituted a severe crime[140], Yang's case revealed that this apparent contradiction in fact reflected that the underlying logic was never primarily about "gender" transgression. The core anxiety expressed by Yang's critics was rather centered on status boundary transgression—a lower class man gained access either through cross dressing or providing entertainment service to women who were sequestered in the inner chamber. Conservative commentators employed sophisticated rhetorical strategies to reinforce this status hierarchy. Their deliberate juxtaposition of Yang with the "bare stick" (*guang-gun*, 光棍) archetype was no accident, but rather reflected their hidden moral/sexual hierarchies. The hyperbolic accusations of Yang's affair with Madame Wang, while seemingly hysterical, served the crucial function of denying his manhood in two key ways: first, by portraying him as unfit for the husband role according to Confucian ideal, and second, by excluding him from the legitimate marriage system that recognized him as a full man. The conservative faction's deployment of *yin* (淫) discourse also significantly pathologized Ah Bao's attraction to Yang. By framing her desire as "abnormal," they not only invalidated the relationship's legitimacy but also reinforced the traditional boundaries of respectable society.

The Debate Surrounding the Discourse of Yin (淫), Illicit Sexual Desire

The discourse of *yin* (illicit sexuality) occupied a central position in traditional Chinese moral/sexual principles, serving as a key conceptual boundary marker in Confucian sexual ethics. As defined in the early Han dynasty dictionary Xiao Er-ya (小爾雅, c. 208 BCE), *yin* denoted sexual relations that transgressed Confucian ritual propriety: "When a man and woman's relations exceed ritual boundaries, this is called *yin*." This deceptively simple definition belied a complex social reality where the implications of *yin* varied dramatically according to one's social status. For women of respectable families, *yin* primarily meant extramarital sexual relations—any intimacy outside the sanctioned bonds with her husband. The patriarchal system granted men considerably more sexual latitude, permitting relations with concubines, female slaves, and even certain categories of prostitutes. However, male sexuality too had its boundaries; *yin* described those cases when a man's sexual appetites exceeded these socially approved outlets, becoming excessive and disruptive to familial harmony. The burden of *yin* fell most heavily upon the so-

[140] Ibid., p. 36

called Mean People (*jian-min,* 賤民) of debased status. Caught in a circular logic of social control, their unfree condition both compelled them into sexual impropriety (compulsory labor included prostitution) and simultaneously served to justify their continued low status. Under framework, where arranged marriages by parents was the only, or the most dominant ways of establishing lawful relations between men and women according to the Book of Rites[141], sexual desires not contained by marriages and families were considered as inappropriate.

Pan Suiming's (潘綏銘)[142] analysis reveals that prostitution in imperial China did not exist in opposition to the marital-family institution, but rather functioned as an integral component of a comprehensive patriarchal polygynous system. This system, which Pan characterizes as "the harmonious family operated through the internal hierarchy of wives, concubines, female slaves, prostitutes, and Buddhist nuns under the patriarch," maintained strict differentiation between categories of women, each serving distinct roles within the Confucian social order[143]. At the apex stood legitimate wives (妻), whose status were validated through formal marriage rituals prescribed in the Book of Rites. Charged with domestic management and lineage continuity, wives often found their demanding responsibilities left little room for fulfilling their husbands' sexual needs. This gap created space for concubines (妾), typically younger women acquired through informal arrangements who served as sexual companions. Unlike wives, concubines held no legal personhood, and any children they bore belonged legally to the principal wife while maintaining higher status than their birth mothers. The system extended further to include female bondservants (婢), who performed domestic labor while remaining sexually available to their masters. Unless formally promoted to concubinage, these women remained in perpetual servitude. Beyond the household, courtesans and prostitutes (妓) provided sexual services that complemented rather than challenged familial structures. During the pre-Ming period, most prostitutes came from the

[141] One of the Five Classics (五經) of Confucian Canon, memorized by all people of all educated class, including women. It described social norms, ceremonial rites and administration propriety, as it was allegedly compiled by Confucius himself.

[142] One of the earliest Chinese sexualities scholars, the founding father of Chinese Sexology. He taught and research in Renmin University in Beijing for more than 30 years.

[143] Please see Ch. 1. Pan, Suiming. *Being and Absurdity: A Study of China's Underground Sex Industry 存在與荒謬：中國地下"性產業"考察*. Popular Tribune Publishing 群言出版社, 1999.

debased (jian 賤) class and worked in state-regulated brothels. However, the late Ming witnessed the rise of private courtesans who catered to elite tastes through their cultivation of arts and literature, becoming idealized romantic partners for scholar-officials while serving as mere sexual surrogates for the mercantile class. Finally, Pan concluded that the Buddhist nuns fulfilled men's sexual fantasies on a symbolic level. He pointed out that they occupied a paradoxical position in Confucian moral/sexual system; on the one hand, they represented the unsullied female virtue through chastity—akin to Medieval European courtly ideals of unattainable noblewomen, they sometimes also served as illicit sexual partners for men through covert relation.

This hierarchical taxonomy of women, based fundamentally on their sexual-utilitarian value, created a moral paradox within the Confucian system. Only two categories of women—wives and Buddhist nuns—could fully escape accusations of *yin*. All others, whether due to poverty or debased status, found themselves systematically excluded from attaining respectable womanhood through formal marriage rites. The system thus operated through a fundamental contradiction: while ostensibly condemning moral depravity, it actively manufactured the conditions for sexual immorality while using these very accusations to justify institutionalized (sexual) exploitation. The Confucian moral order therefore relied on this dialectic of respectability and transgression. Its conception of virtue depended fundamentally on defining and differentiating immorality—what was deemed sexually respectable gained meaning precisely through contrast with what was excluded. This binary construction extended beyond sexual morality to shape broader gender categories. Moral/sexual deviance helped define both nonwomanhood and nonmanhood, though crucially, these excluded positions did not constitute simple gender inversion. A man deemed sexually deviant did not thereby become womanly, just as a "fallen woman" did not become mannish. Rather, these categories represented liminal social positions that reinforced the normative gender order through exclusion rather than transformation. Just as Yang Yue-lou, whose debased status as entertainer rendered him "unmanly" without making him womanly—despite being considered as effeminate.

The Qing dynasty witnessed an unprecedented cult of female chastity and the sequestration of women from public life, leading to increasingly stringent moral standards for respectable womanhood. This cultural shift elevated the discourse of *yin* to central importance in legal adjudications of adultery and rape cases. As Matthew Sommer's analysis of the Great Qing Legal

Code reveals, Qing jurisprudence employed the term *jian* (奸) to denote illicit sexual intercourse, constructing a legal framework where female consent held no bearing on a case's outcome[144]. Paradoxically, while a woman's will was legally irrelevant in establishing rape, victims were nevertheless required to provide extensive evidence of violent coercion and demonstrate unrelenting physical resistance. This legal paradox stemmed from the Qing court's fundamental concern with female chastity as the defining marker of respectable womanhood. A rape victim's pre-existing sexual reputation became the determining factor in sentencing, often overshadowing the circumstances of the assault itself. The legal process thus created a double bind: accusations of prior *yin* conduct could mitigate perpetrators' sentences while simultaneously exposing victims to secondary punishment for imagined moral failings. Sommer further elucidates how Qing magistrates understood *jian* as typically originating from a low-status man's *yin-xin* (淫心, licentious desire)[145]. This presumption created a parallel between the systemic sexualization of low-status women, excluded from formal marriage to compulsory prostitution, and the automatic criminalization of low-status men's interactions with women above their station. In both cases, the legal system presumed inherent sexual degeneracy of *yin* based on social position rather than individual actions, reinforcing the moral-sexual hierarchy through institutionalized suspicion of subordinate groups.

The legal discourse surrounding *yin* also proved pivotal in determining whether Yang's alleged relations with Madame Wang warranted capital punishment. The conservative faction's allegation of Yang's illicit connection with Madame Wang served dual purposes: it invalidated any claims to legitimate marriage while simultaneously confirming Yang's inherent sexual degeneracy in the eyes of the court. This legal strategy must be understood within the broader context of competing familial authority , and the tensions inside the Wei families with the Cantonese Merchant's Association. Traditional agrarian Chinese society organized itself around patrilineal clans (宗族) that functioned as fundamental socio economic units. These clans—comprising blood-related families inhabiting the same region—held substantial authority over domestic affairs, including the unilateral annulment of marriages deemed unsuitable. Disobedient families risked

[144] Sommer, Matthew. *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. P. 34-5

[145] Ibid., p. 35

excommunication, effectively severing their social identity and economic prospects. In contrast to traditional agrarian society, Shanghai was a migrant society driven by capitalism and was demographically fluid. Most migrants had severed ties with family clans, relying instead on native-place associations and guilds. While these organizations echoed certain clan-like functions, their capacity to intervene in domestic matters was significantly weaker.

This tension between traditional and modern family structures, as noted by scholar Li Zhangli (李長莉), formed the crucial backdrop to Yang's case[146]. Madam Wang asserted parental prerogative in arranging her daughter's marriage with her husband's acquiescence according to the Qing legal tradition, rejecting external interference. The Cantonese Merchants' Association, however, upheld the uncle's claim as the legitimate representative of the clan's authority. Normally, Ah Bao's father would enforce the discipline from the family clan under their pressure, but his tacit approval of the union left traditionalists powerless. This impasse compelled the uncle to resort to litigation—a drastic measure to nullify the marriage through state intervention. And for the conservative Cantonese merchant's faction, to argue that Yang's *yin-xin* prompted this case, was one of the easiest excuses to deny Madame Wang's prerogative and to impose the death penalty on Yang.

One week after *Shen Bao* first reported the Yang Yue-lou incident, an anonymous editorial signed by "The Impartial Observer" mounted a defense that challenged prevailing narratives through both legal argumentation and literary allusion[147]. The commentator, while professing impartiality, constructed a counter-narrative that reframed the relationship between Yang and Ah Bao in terms that directly contested conservative interpretations. The Impartial noted that the union between Yang and Ah Bao followed recognizable social conventions, with Madame Wang's explicit consent and the ceremonial exchange of dowry goods marking it as something more substantial than mere illicit liaison. This characterization directly contradicted the conservative faction's portrayal of the relationship as simple abduction. The editorialist also expressed

[146] Li, Zhang-li. "The Yang Yue-Lou Case and the Transformation of Socio-Norms in Late Qing China 从'杨月楼案'看晚清社会伦理观念的变动." *Modern Chinese History Studies* 1 (2000): 82-118

[147] "On Yang Yue-lou's Case by an Impartial Observer" (本館論楊月樓事書), Shen Bao, Dec. 29, 1873, from Fu, Jin. *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period, Volume 4 京劇歷史文獻彙編: 清代卷 4*. 4. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2011. P. 29-31

particular dismay at the disproportionate punishments meted out, observing that even if the case were classified as *he jian* (和奸, consensual illicit sex), established legal precedent would typically mandate only corporal punishment and repatriation rather than the severe penalties imposed.

What makes the Observer's argument particularly noteworthy is its strategic deployment of cultural references to reshape perceptions of the central figures. By drawing parallels between Yang and respected figures like Li Jing (李靖, 571-649)[148]—the legendary figure who accepted courtesan Hong-fu's (紅拂)[149] overtures—the commentary worked to rehabilitate Yang's image. By comparing Yang to Li Jing and Ah Bao to Hong fu, the editor invoked the popular "Beauty and Scholar" (才子佳人) literary trope, effectively recasting Yang as the deserving poor scholar unexpectedly blessed with romantic fortune, thereby naturalizing what conservatives viewed as transgressive attraction.

The editorial's most significant intervention lay in its subtle inversion of the prevailing *yin* discourse. Where conservative commentators portrayed Yang as the active seducer driven by *yin-xin*, the Impartial Observer's narrative positioned him as the passive recipient of women's attention. This reversal extended to their portrayal of Ah Bao as the relationship's initiator, a characterization that challenged fundamental assumptions about women's chastity and modesty in a decent family. In the telling of the Impartial Observer, the mutual attraction between an acor and gentlewoman appeared as a natural phenomenon requiring no further explanation through allegations of aphrodisiac use.

If we juxtapose this editorial piece with one of the responses from the conservative factions, we would be amazed by the profound ideological divide. Published a week after the initial editorial of the Impartial Observer, the "Indignant Elder Man's" rebuttal demonstrates how conservative

[148] A famous and legendary general living in the early Tang dynasty (619-907), but here the author did not refer to Li as recorded in history, but him as a fictional figure in popular literature, where his career was significantly romanticized and mythologized through the short novel, *The Biography of the Dragon-Beard Man*, written by Du Guang-ting (杜光庭, 850-933).

[149] Hong-fu was a fictional and central figure in *The Biography of the Dragon-Beard Ma*n. A beautiful courtesan who belonged to a high ranking official in the Sui dynasty (581-618), she eloped with Li when Li visited the official's house to address the common people's welfare. Hong-fu was impressed by Li's ambition and fell in love with him, and thereafter became his purported wife in the short novel.

writers constructed an entirely different narrative that insisted on interpreting the relationship as abduction rather than consensual elopement[150].

The conservative commentator's rhetorical strategy reveals several key tactics in reconstructing the events. First, he systematically denigrated Yang's social position, dismissing actors as inherently "insignificant and debased", therefore rejecting the relations as genuine. More crucially, the conservative writer employed the *yin* discourse with remarkable flexibility to serve contradictory purposes. On one hand, he portrayed Ah Bao as both victim and perpetrator —an innocent maiden corrupted by Yang's *yin-xin*, yet simultaneously an unchaste woman who "schemed elopement." This paradoxical characterization enabled two mutually exclusive and contradictory legal interpretations: the case could be treated as a serious abduction requiring capital punishment for Yang(if emphasizing Ah Bao's victimhood), at the same time a *he jian* (和奸, consensual illicit sex) warranting punishment also on Ah Bao (if acknowledging her agency).

The commentary's internal contradictions expose the deeper cultural anxieties at play. The writer's inability to reconcile Ah Bao's alleged active role in the elopement with his insistence on her essential innocence reflects a fundamental unwillingness to acknowledge that respectable women could genuinely desire relationships with low-status men. This cognitive dissonance stemmed from the conservative worldview that equated social status with sexual attractiveness and moral worth—a perspective that rendered inconceivable the notion that a gentlewoman might willingly choose an actor as her partner. Ultimately, the Indignant Elder Man's argument demonstrates how the *yin* discourse functioned as a flexible rhetorical tool that could be deployed to reinforce traditional hierarchies regardless of factual inconsistencies. By maintaining that women of status could never genuinely desire low-status men, conservatives could simultaneously portray such relationships as both criminal violations requiring severe punishment and moral failings deserving of censure—a paradoxical position that nevertheless served to uphold the established social order. The creative double-standard of *yin* discourse adopted by the Indignant Elder Man could only be understood from another unspoken discourse of unmanly man, which made conservative writers, such as the Indignant Elder Man, finding it impossible to believe that

[150] "An Indignant Elder Man's Discussion of the Yang Yue-lou Affair" (不平父論楊月樓事), Shen Bao, January 7, 1874, from Fu, Jin. *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period, Volume 4 京劇歷史文獻彙編: 清代卷 4*. 4. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2011. P. 34-6

women of decent family could fell for unmanly men from the debased social class.

A Popular Star, but An Unmanly Man

Li Zhangli's (李長莉) research reveals the striking economic disparities that made Yang Yue-lou's success particularly galling to traditional elites[151]. According to late Qing records, a popular theater actor like Yang could earn up to a thousand silver taels annually—a sum that dramatically eclipsed the modest hundred taels a gentry-scholar might earn working as a tutor, despite the scholar's superior social standing in the traditional Four Occupations hierarchy[152]. Even news editors at the commercially successful *Shen Bao*, considered well-paid professionals, typically earned only about 180 taels per year by comparison. Yang's substantial wealth accumulation enabled a lifestyle that openly flouted sumptuary laws restricting the debased class, provoking considerable ire among traditionalists. However, what truly unsettled the conservative establishment was not merely Yang's economic success, but the cultural capital and sexual appeal it afforded him. In the Confucian moral imagination that equated social status with moral worth, Yang's popularity among women across class boundaries represented a profound challenge to the presumed connection between respectability and desirability. The very possibility that a "debased" actor could be more attractive than respectable scholars struck at the heart of traditional status hierarchies, exposing the fragility of their ideological foundations in the face of emerging urban cultural economies.

The seething resentment of traditionalists became glaringly apparent in news commentaries published immediately after Yang Yue-lou's arrest. These writings reveal how deeply entrenched moral and sexual hierarchies shaped perceptions of Yang's supposed "unmanliness," despite his widespread popularity. The conservative backlash was not merely about legal transgressions but about the perceived threat Yang posed to the established social order. One such commentary, titled *The Abductor Yang Yue-lou Was Sent to County Jail*, framed Yang's arrest as the inevitable

[151] Li, Zhang-li. "The Yang Yue-Lou Case and the Transformation of Socio-Norms in Late Qing China 从'杨月楼案'看晚清社会伦理观念的变动." *Modern Chinese History Studies* 1 (2000): 82-118, p. 92-3

[152] Si-min (四民), also translated as Four Categories of People. In this social hierarchy system, Shi (士, gentry-scholar or scholar-official) was the most respectable of all classes, Nong (農, peasant farmer) ranked the second, Gong (工, artisans and craftsman) followed the next, while Shang (商, merchants and traders) were the lowest.

consequence of moral decay[153]. The author invoked the proverb "*Past misdeeds can return with vengeance*" to suggest that Yang's downfall was a long-awaited reckoning. The piece meticulously emphasized his debased status, noting that as an actor, Yang belonged to a social category beneath even the lowest of the Four Occupations (scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants). The writer's disdain was palpable as they dismissed actors, prostitutes, and entertainers as morally corrupt, their professions rendering them incapable of true respectability and genuine affection.

The commentary then reconstructed the events of Yang's alleged crimes with dramatic flair. Madame Wang, the concubine of a Cantonese merchant, was portrayed as a fading beauty whose loneliness led her to Yang. Her daughter, Ah Bao—described as young and fair-faced—was depicted as an impressionable girl swept up in Yang's deception. The narrative insisted that their elopement was not an act of mutual affection but a calculated abduction, facilitated by a scheming wet nurse. The writer's language dripped with contempt, framing Yang's actions as the culmination of a predatory pattern: a lowly actor seducing women above his station and dreaming of usurpation of his superior.

What stands out most in this account is the writer's barely concealed bewilderment—even outrage—at Yang's popularity. Despite being "*the lowest of the low,*" Yang had captivated women across social strata, from courtesans to sheltered gentlewomen. This phenomenon directly contradicted the Confucian moral/sexual schema, which assumed that respectability and desirability were inextricably linked. The author could not fathom that Yang's appeal might stem from genuine charm or talent; instead, they insisted his success must have been the result of trickery or supernatural influence ("*What sorcery lets such a lowly actor revel in such fortune?*"). Ultimately, the commentary framed Yang's arrest as a moral victory—proof that justice would always prevail against those who dared to blur social boundaries. The magistrate's harsh sentencing was anticipated with grim satisfaction, reinforcing the conservative belief that Yang's punishment was not just legal retribution but cosmic justice. Yet beneath this moralistic fervor lay a deeper anxiety. The writer's insistence on Yang's inherent degeneracy betrayed an unwillingness to confront an uncomfortable truth: that traditional hierarchies were being challenged by shifting

[153] "The Abductor Yang Yue-lou Was Sent to the County Jail"(拐犯楊月樓送縣)*Shen Bao*, Dec. 2, 1873, from Fu, Jin. *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period, Volume 4 京劇歷史文獻彙編: 清代卷 4*. 4. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2011., p. 27-8

cultural values. Yang's popularity, particularly among women, exposed the fragility of a system that equated social status with moral and sexual worth. The conservative backlash was not just about punishing Yang—it was about reasserting a worldview that could no longer fully account for the realities of late Qing urban life.

The conservative commentary's rhetorical strategy becomes particularly revealing when examining how the author framed Yang Yue-lou's physical appearance. The comparison of Yang to jade—a stone traditionally symbolizing moral purity and Confucian virtue in Chinese culture—was deliberately inverted to emphasize his perceived degeneracy. By asserting that Yang's looks were "*not as perfect as jade,*" the writer implied that his outward charm masked inner corruption, reinforcing the trope of the deceptive "gold-jade exterior hiding rotten stuffing."[154] This metaphor gains deeper significance when considered alongside the commentary's use of effeminizing language. Terms like "*willow catkins*" (柳絮) and "*wildflowers*" (野花), though partially lost in translation, carried strong cultural connotations in classical Chinese literature. These were conventional epithets for courtesans and women of questionable virtue—figures whose beauty was seen as superficial, masking moral decay. The deliberate application of such vocabulary to Yang served two purposes: first, it feminized him by associating him with sexually suspect women, and second, it reinforced the idea that his profession as an actor rendered him similarly morally dubious. The implications of this rhetorical choice are profound. By likening Yang to these stigmatized female figures, the author embedded him within a preexisting moral/sexual hierarchy that equated low social status with both effeminacy and inherent sexual deviance. This framework made Yang's popularity among women especially threatening—it suggested that his appeal transcended the Confucian ideal that linked desirability to respectability. For conservative writers, Yang's ability to attract women of status could only be explained through deception or supernatural influence ("*What sorcery lets such a lowly actor revel in such fortune?*"), as the alternative—that women might genuinely prefer him over "respectable" men—undermined the entire ideological foundation of status-based sexual morality.

[154] A Chinese idiom coined by Liu Ji (劉基, 1311-1375 AD), a famous politician, military strategist and philosopher. He helped the Hong-wu Emperor, Zhu Yuan-zhang (朱元璋, 1328-1398) established the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). In his famous allegorical-sarcasm prose, "An Orange Seller's Argument" he used the idiom to criticize the elite whose splendid outfit and appearance could not conceal their inner decay.

This context clarifies why the Indignant Elder Man reacted with such vitriol to the Impartial Observer's comparison between Yang and the revered Tang general Li Jing. To conservatives, equating a debased actor with a paragon of martial virtue was not just inaccurate but ideologically offensive—a "*grotesque mismatch*" akin to "*likening sparrows to phoenix.*" In their moral taxonomy, Yang belonged not to the category of "man" but to that of sexually suspect femininity, alongside the prostitutes and courtesans his descriptors evoked.

The conservative commentary's rhetorical strategy extended beyond social critique to cosmological justification through its invocation of the "Interactions between Heaven and Mankind" (天人感應) discourse. This philosophical framework, systematized by Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) scholar Dong Zhong-shu (董仲舒, 179-104 BCE), posited that celestial forces actively regulated human affairs through visible signs and interventions. By characterizing Yang's extraordinary popularity among women as an unnatural phenomenon requiring divine correction, the commentary transformed a social anomaly into a cosmological violation. The argument followed Dong's discourse precisely: just as natural disasters signaled imperial misrule, Yang's arrest represented heaven's mechanism for restoring proper order after his transgressions. While premodern China lacked scientific sexological theories, discourses like the Heaven-Mankind interaction fulfilled analogous functions as a regime of truth to describe human essence and sexual instinct. While some may argue that traditional Chinese philosophy and discourse did not constitute legitimate "science," let us not forget that psychology and sexology knowledge which described homosexuality as abnormality also used to be considered as "science." Just as 19th-century psychology once medicalized homosexuality as pathology, Qing conservative discourse similarly pathologized Yang's cross-class appeal as cosmological disorder. In such, the traditionalists discourse are similar to 19-century psychology which both produced "truth claims" defined proper manhood, marked certain desires as dangerous, and authorized or legitimized institutional interventions.

The debate over whether Yang Yue-lou should be classified as a "bare stick" male under Qing legal conventions revealed another fundamental ideological dimension of the conservative

factions' discourse[155][156]. This dispute centered on the appropriate punishment for Yang's alleged crimes, with conservatives advocating immediate decapitation while reformists argued for more lenient sentencing. As Matthew Sommer's research clarifies, the bare stick stereotype represented a specific legal category in Qing jurisprudence—rootless, propertyless men lacking familial ties that might restrain their behavior[157]. These individuals were considered particular threats to patrilineal order and typically received the harshest penalties for sexual crimes. Yang's case complicated this framework because his substantial wealth and professional success clearly distinguished him from the typical impoverished, vagrant bare stick. Conservative commentators nevertheless insisted on drawing parallels between Yang and bare sticks based on their shared potential to undermine familial boundaries. Where traditional bare sticks threatened the social order through their poverty and dispossession, Yang endangered it through his ambiguous moral/sexual status and perceived "pathological effeminization." Both figures, in the conservative view, represented dangerous outsiders to the Confucian family system, albeit through different mechanisms. The conservative insistence on classifying Yang as a bare stick, despite his obvious socioeconomic differences from the stereotype, demonstrated their determination to maintain traditional boundaries even when faced with cases that challenged conventional categorization.

The controversy surrounding Yang Yue-lou's case ultimately revolved around fundamentally competing interpretations of social/sexual identity and their implications for Qing legal and gender norms. Conservative commentators strategically framed Yang as an abductor comparable to the legal category of "bare stick" males while simultaneously deploying rhetoric that feminized him—not to position him as womanly, but to deny him any legitimate manly status whatsoever. This representational strategy reveals a crucial distinction from Western models of gender inversion, where effeminacy typically signals movement toward femininity. In Yang's case, his theatrical profession and alleged sexual transgressions placed him in a liminal position that

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[155] "Admonishing the Impartial Observer to Cease Debate, Drafted by a Recluse of Yang-jiang" (勸持平子息論事), Shen Bao, January 13, , 1874, from Fu, Jin. *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period, Volume 4 京劇歷史文獻彙編: 清代卷 4*. 4. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2011. P. 41-2

[156] "The Impartial Elder's Admonition to Cease Disputes" (公道老人勸平息爭論), Shen Bao, January 9, and January 10, 1874, from Fu, Jin. *Compiled Archives of Peking Opera: Qing Period, Volume 4 京劇歷史文獻彙編: 清代卷 4*. 4. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2011. P. 36-40

[157] Sommer, Matthew. Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China, Stanford University Press, 2002. P. 97

Qing discourse constructed as neither properly masculine (as he failed to meet patriarchal obligations) nor acceptably feminine (as he lacked the virtuous qualities associated with respectable womanhood), but rather as a de-gendered moral and sexual deviant. As Matthew Sommer's research demonstrates, the bare stick archetype was legally defined by poverty and social marginality, criteria that Yang's material success and public prominence clearly contradicted. Conservative writers resolved this dissonance by shifting emphasis from economic to moral rootlessness, arguing that Yang's alleged sexual improprieties and professional effeminacy negated his claims to normative manhood regardless of his financial standing. This rhetorical move exposed a distinctive cultural logic: where Western frameworks often interpret effeminacy as gender transgression, Qing discourse reconfigured it as status deviance. The extreme punishment demanded by conservatives—decapitation rather than the exile Yang ultimately received—reflects this fundamental difference in conceptualization. Their goal was not to correct perceived gender inversion but to completely nullify Yang's social/sexual agency, reinforcing the boundaries of a system that could accommodate neither his professional success nor his cross-class romantic appeal. This case thus illuminates how Qing legal and social discourses operated through mechanisms that differed fundamentally from Western gender binaries. The conservative campaign against Yang sought not to reassert a masculine/feminine dichotomy, but to reinforce a moral hierarchy in which certain forms of success and desire became literally inconceivable—and therefore punishable as existential threats to the social order itself.

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Conclusion

The first chapter has critically examined the epistemological foundations of area studies and postcolonial scholarship through the lens of Mizoguchi Yuzo's "China as method" framework. By analyzing the limitations of both Western-centric paradigms and romanticized peripheral perspectives, the discussion has revealed how even postcolonial critiques often inadvertently reinforce the center-periphery dynamic they seek to dismantle. Through case studies ranging from Chinese gender/sexuality discourses to comparative analyses of East Asian historiography, the chapter demonstrates how alternative epistemological frameworks emerging from non-Western contexts can challenge the universal claims of Western social theory.

These insights lay the groundwork for reimagining area studies as a project of "contending particularities" that neither rejects comparison nor uncritically celebrates difference, but rather transforms the framework of "modernities". The chapter ultimately calls for a methodology that centers non-Western knowledge production while maintaining critical reflexivity about all positionalities.

In my second chapter, I critically examined the epistemological frameworks through which imperial Chinese gender and sexuality have been studied, revealing how Western theoretical constructs—from van Gulik's "sexual repression hypothesis" to Sommer's "gender performance" model—have often distorted historical realities by imposing anachronistic categories like "gender" and "masculinity/femininity." I argue that instead of "gender performance" paradigm proposed by Sommer, Qing sexual regulation was still fundamentally rooted in hierarchical social relations, with anxieties about male penetration reflecting *status* rather than *gender* transgression.

In the third chapter, I examined the limitations of Western gender and sexuality frameworks in analyzing traditional Chinese sexual cultures, proposing Chinese concepts of *Nanse* (男色, male beauty/desirability) provide critical lens to China's sexual modernity. Through historical and textual analysis of late Ming practices, theoretical debate of Chinese erotic concepts and erotic literature—the chapter demonstrates how Chinese sexual modernity operated through distinct epistemological and social logics from *ars erotica*. I argue that the trade of *Nanse* boys expanded traditional kinship systems (*deployment of alliance*), incorporating

marginalized males into networks of patronage and control while maintaining their symbolic difference from women. Instead of through the deployment of sexualities, the scientific discourse of sexual knowledge, China's sexual modernity are established through an ever-expanding network of kinship or "fictive" kinship of sexual transactions. The framework not only redefines Chinese sexual oppression but also invites broader reconsiderations of how non-Western societies organized intimacy, power, and subjectivity.

The final chapter examined the sensational 1873–74 case of Peking Opera actor Yang Yue-lou through competing frameworks of gender, status, and legal interpretation in late imperial China. Analyzing press commentaries, legal discourses, and social tensions, the study reveals how Yang's trial became a flashpoint for broader debates about morality, class mobility, and the limits of gender framework. The conservative factions used the rhetoric of *yin* (淫, illicit sexuality) to portray his relationship with Ah Bao as a threat to social hierarchy rather than gender norms. In addition, his theatrical profession also marked him as inherently "unmanly" and effeminate, but did not transgress the boundary of gender, instead, he was simply considered as a de-gendered moral delinquent. The debate over whether Yang qualified to be punished as a "bare stick" male also exposed contradictions in Sommer's analysis of Qing legal categories. While reformers emphasized Yang's wealth and fame to downplay his debased status, conservatives redefined moral (rather than economic) rootlessness as the criterion for exclusion. Where Sommer interprets cross-status practices (e.g., clergy celibacy, eunuchism) as forms of "gender inversion," Yang's trial reveals a more complex reality in which social status, not gender identity, served as the primary axis of transgression.