

History is Gay Podcast  
Episode 3: Mei Ai Hold Your Hand?

## Introduction

**Gretchen:** Hello and welcome to *History is Gay*, a podcast that examines the underappreciated and overlooked queer ladies, gents, and gentle-enbies that have always been there in the unexplored corners of history. Because history has never been as straight as you think.

[Theme music plays]

**Gretchen:** Hi, I'm Gretchen. And here with me is my co-host...

**Leigh:** Leigh! Hello!

**Gretchen:** Hello! And in this episode, we are going to be talking about the '*passion of the cut sleeve*'. So what is that? That is the male homosexual tradition in China, but we are also going to be talking about the female homosexual-

**Leigh:** The female, the female, homosexual-

**Gretchen:** The female homosexual.

**Leigh:** I like it. I like it. Yeah, not as much as the male homosexual tradition in China. But this whole episode, we're going to be focusing on the male homosexual tradition and behaviors and literary milieu around it in early China. Which is, pretty interesting and really cool. We wanted to kind of get it out of the Western world. So we're diving right in.

**Gretchen:** Yeah! We want everyone to know that we really care about this being, like, as global and inclusive as possible. Just because we've existed all over the world, for forever.

While we are probably going to focus a lot on Western tradition. Which is, you know, something that actually may come up when we talk about China; is that, like, one thing that we, I think, in America are really missing, is like a connection to our roots as like, queer individuals.

We're missing this sense of:  
Who are we?

How do we situate ourselves in society?

How do we understand ourselves?

And how do we understand ourselves, like, vis-a-vis, like historical examples of people who are like us?

So yeah, while many like, people and phases in history that are Western are going to come up; because that's something we kind of want to reclaim and re-situate. We definitely also want to be like: Hey, but queers aren't just Western, we're everywhere.

**Leigh:** Yeah, we're everywhere.

**Gretchen:** Literally everywhere. [laughter] So the straights hate that idea. But hey, get over it. [sniggering]

**Leigh:** You mean we're not one character in a TV show who has zero queer friends?

**Gretchen:** No, and we're not an invention of, like, the 20th century.

**Leigh:** Whoa! Gays didn't exist before 1969. I don't know what you're talking about.

### **Content Warnings:**

But yeah, before we go into our main topic for the episode, we just want to put in an announcement of some content warnings.

So due to the strong overlap between anatomy and gender in this discussion, we're going to be short-handing some things. We're going to use "male" to refer to both someone with a penis and the social gender role of man, and "female" to refer to someone with a vagina and social gender role of a woman unless otherwise noted- it does come up!

There are some fascinating stories of gender presentation and social customs that we might expand in a later episode, but for now we want listeners to be aware we're not trying to dilute the gender spectrum we just need to sort of shorthand things for this specific context.

**Gretchen:** Right, and there is another thing to be aware of. We definitely will mention pederasty. We're not going to be explicit, or go into a lot of detail because it actually wasn't quite as common in this context as you might- as you know, perhaps in a place like Greece or Rome, but it is going to be mentioned.

So we want people to be aware of that like,- this is something that will come up in the discussion. It won't be very explicit, and it won't be very long. But I mean, it is something we have to touch on.

**Leigh:** We will try to put- anywhere that would be appropriate- we'll try to put time codes in our show notes.

## **Main Topic: Homosexuality in Imperial China**

**Gretchen:** So without further ado, let's get into homosexuality in ancient China. Male homosexuality, especially in early or ancient China- was pretty openly expected as an integral part of imperial court politics.

There are many stories that we're going to get into of emperors and social elites who bestow gifts upon male favorites and spend tender and loving time with them. As centuries went on and literacy and the prevalence of more accessible prose expanded, stories of the homosexual tradition began to shift from stories of beloved court favorites and male-male companionship towards popular erotic fiction, in things like plays or other fiction, stories, and poems. Things only really begin to change with the Western colonial influence.

**Leigh:** Christian missionaries to China in the 17th century actually decried flagrant homosexuality and "pederasty" that they saw everywhere, and Spanish colonialists in the Philippines around that time actually bemoaned the Chinese traders were bringing homosexuality and popularizing it among the native Filipino population. So you know, just, just catching the gay.

**Gretchen:** [both laughing] It's infectious.

**Leigh:** It's infectious. I mean, I find it infectious. I don't know about you. But-

**Gretchen:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** I see pretty ladies and I am consistently reaffirmed in the fact that I'm a big ol' homo.

But- So while this is likely an exaggeration, due to Christian moral outrage- whoo!- and the fact that in Chinese cultures, like kissing between men and women was reserved for the privacy of your own home; whereas other forms of PDA, like [high pitched] holding hands, and going out together, were acceptable, like that between a

noble and his favorite, or even between a man and a male or female prostitute. No historian will deny that China had a very different view of same-sex interactions than much of the Western European and American tradition.

**Gretchen:** Yeah. Like, in fact, a lot of the modern homophobia that we see in the People's Republic of China today is actually a reaction to and, weirdly, a conformity to Western ideals, rather than actually being an ancient tradition. Even though if you listen to many of the leaders or the official Chinese, you know, government statements about homosexuality, they'll say, like: "Oh, China's always been, anti-gay." But that's lies.

**Leigh:** [imitating] "We got it from the missionaries who were coming, and they were engaging in pederasty with all of our people. And- "

**Gretchen:** Right. Right-

**Leigh:** It just got weirdly twisted. It was really interesting to learn about.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, this idea of like: "The West is so decadent, look how decadent the West is, they have homosexuality and that's where gay comes from," which is just an ignorance of their own tradition.

And a lot of, actually, from what we read, a lot modern, the modern experience of being gay or lesbian in China really does involve, like a lack of awareness of their own tradition. Precisely because the current government has done so much to try and like, repress the knowledge of their own, historical tradition. Which is really sad and tragic.

Because, I mean, as we'll talk about this tradition of homosexuality- I mean it dates back - I mean it's millennia, [agreeing noises] like literally millennia, we're not exaggerating. Like this is a couple thousand years of tradition of acknowledging that these relationships exist, and are fairly well accepted by widespread society.

**Leigh:** Yeah, it's sad how there's been a kind of turn of events. But we're going to go into the happy long tradition and hopefully-

**Gretchen:** Yeah!

**Leigh:** Some things can change and people can become more aware of their line in this long timeline of love.

It's also important to note that there's still disagreement about how frequent or common same-sex relationships were among men and women, and to what degree we can map those onto modern experiences of homosexuality.

Not all scholars agree about the prevalence of male versus female homosexuality, either. Some will say it was more common among men and we have little to no evidence of sapphism. Others will say the opposite, that sapphism was quite common and encouraged, but we have no basis for believing gay behavior between men was widespread. You know, it's kind of all over the place.

**Gretchen:** Yep. Yep. We tend to think that both were fairly common.

**Leigh:** Yeah, you just–

**Gretchen:** We'll just let you know that ahead of time–

**Leigh:** –based on experience.

**Gretchen:** Yeah. [Laughter]

**Leigh:** [Laughter] Gretchen, do you want to talk a little bit about sources? Where we get this stuff?

**Gretchen:** Yeah, yeah, so for much of Chinese history, most of the writings concerned with court life– were concerned with court life and only what was highly unusual would have been recorded, so we can't entirely know how common it is.

So one of the sources that we're using is a book called *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* by Bret Hinsch. It's quite exhaustive. Especially on the male homosexual tradition, which is primarily his focus and he says:

*"Because Chinese society always held both literary pursuits and examples from the past in exceptionally high regard, it became possible to discern a homosexual tradition developing through time, with successive authors taking reference from previous works and making them relevant. Homosexuality came to be described through reference to famous individuals of ancient times associated with same sex love."*

So that's where he gets this idea of male homosexual tradition. That it's like a literary tradition of talking about current experience in terms of past examples, and stories that they have from older sources.

**Leigh:** And we can glean from the lack of judgment placed on sex— itself in the sources that most were more concerned with the political or social repercussions of, like, favoritism, than who the Emperor or his courtiers were fucking. So fuck who you want, [emphasis] just don't make them your general if they're not qualified or if they're going to impair your judgment in being able to rule over your kingdom.

**Gretchen:** Right! Any negativity associated with these stories is more along the lines of like: "Dude! that guy's not qualified to do the position that you elevated him to... Like, you know, enjoy your sex with him if you want but, that could— that could ruin the kingdom if you're promoting people who don't deserve it."

**Leigh:** I think there was a really good quote that was like: "A pretty boy can do much to ruin a ruler's head," or something.

**Gretchen:** Uh-huh

**Leigh:** Which I think really gets at— at the meat of it. Who was in these relationships was not important. There was no— denouncement of homosexuality based on: "Oh, that's immoral and bad." It was, "Hey, you're thinking a little bit too much with your dick [laughter] to make good political decisions".

**Gretchen:** Right? Right. Well, and that goes to what was said earlier, about only what was unusual would have been recorded. So, like the stories we have would be situations where a ruler promoted this general too high and then people invaded. So— maybe don't do that.

But kind of everyday life in normal situations where nothing crazy happened, they wouldn't have written it down. So, you know, an emperor could have had ten male lovers, but they only wrote about one because it was that one that something, you know, unique or interesting happened that they wanted to write down.

So this is just stuff to keep in mind. They're only writing about like, the things that stand out. And I mean, there could have been hundreds or thousands of more stories where, you know, everything was fine and normal, [agreeing noises] but that wasn't written down.

**Leigh:** And most of our records are of the emperor or the elite. We don't have much knowledge of lower classes. We do get a little bit more into that when you start looking into prose fiction and humor sources in later dynasties. You see it more expanded into the peasantry. But a lot of it was very, very insular.

**Gretchen:** Right. And just about everything we have is written by men. So there's not as much about female sexuality. And, in fact, I mean Hinsch will say that the term "homosexual tradition" really only applies to men.

Because unlike Western society, where we see male and female homosexuality as being, you know, related, like two sides of the same coin. In China, they were considered completely separate forms of sexuality. So a man writing about his own experience with other men would not have drawn any kind of conclusion about what that meant for women having relationships with other women.

And also they were mostly writing about themselves. So we just don't really have a lot of information about women. And again, because they are elite, most of the women that we have stories about are women from the court harem or concubines of the elite, rather than just like your average middle class or lower class woman. That is, until later dynasties.

**Leigh:** Another interesting component is that Chinese language, especially in this period, doesn't classify gender the same way we do. So many of the poems are inconclusive for gender. Plus, at certain times, male poets would even take on the conceit of writing from the perspective of a woman. So it's not certain to what degree it expresses their own desire, or one assumed from a female point of view.

**Gretchen:** Right. Just linguistically, they don't mark gender in pronouns. So you can have a poem written by a man about a beautiful person, and you don't know if that beautiful person is a man or a woman. Or, you know, sometimes even playing with the ambiguity of both— we just can't tell. And that's just a linguistic thing to be aware of. So as Oprah put it, what is the truth?

**Leigh:** [Laughter]

### **Social Context: Confucianism, Daoism, and Conceptions of Sex**

**Gretchen:** What can we be certain of about the male and female homosexual traditions in China? So that's what we're going to talk about.

To start that off, it's important to understand the social context of the philosophies that would have been shaping the cultural understandings throughout much of Chinese history. So I'm going to talk a little bit about Confucianism and Taoism and how those influence the concepts of sex, and then how that can shape how we

understand why homosexuality might have been more common in that tradition than it is here in the West.

So Confucianism developed from what is termed the "Hundred Schools of Thought" from the teachings of Confucius, sometime in the sixth century BCE, based on the ideas inherited from the Shang dynasty and the Zhou dynasty.

Also, before I go any further, we are going to have a timeline of the dynasties in our show notes. [laughs] I 100% needed one as I was reading because I would forget which one was which and what time periods those encompass. If you get confused, you can look at our show notes, they're going to be there.

So Confucianism, it was the dominant philosophy in the Han Dynasty and had a revival in the Tang Dynasty that evolved into the Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty. Again, you can look at the outline for notes on what those time periods are.

For Confucianism, the emphasis is on family and social harmony. It is generally considered to be a humanistic philosophy where the ordinary acts of human life are a manifestation of the sacred as well as an expression of one's moral nature. There's a lot of emphasis placed on social structure, hierarchy, and rightly ordered relationships both within the family and within society.

Now, the family is the core of social stability, and strict gender roles were necessary for familial stability. There's a general trend in Confucianism of women being silent, hardworking and compliant, following the lead of the males in their lives— their father, then their husband, then their sons after the death of their husband. And especially in later dynasties chastity was valued, especially for women, of course. Though, there is an acknowledgement of their value as the *yin* principle to the male's *yang* principle which brings us to Taoism!

Where Confucianism was primarily concerned with social positions and social roles of men and women, Taoism primarily governed sexual life specifically. Its roots are in the fourth century BCE, but it coalesced into a coherent tradition during the Han Dynasty, which is the third century BCE to the third century CE.

Taoism was less rigid in terms of social order and ritual than Confucianism was, and was more concerned with living in accordance with the underlying natural order of the universe, which is called "the way," which in Mandarin is *tao*— which is where we get the term Taoism—. At its root, it posits that one cannot grasp human life fully as a concept, intellectually, but must be learned through experience. It emphasizes



spontaneity, naturalness, simplicity, and what is called *wu wei*, which is a state of being that is effortless and entirely natural.

It is most commonly expressed by the *yin-yang* symbol, where the white represents the *yang* principle, and black represents *yin* and— where this gets— I know, it probably sounds super boring and unrelated— but where this gets interesting to me is that it does actually affect how they viewed the act of, you know, sexual intercourse.

According to Taoist belief, the entire universe was created by the harmony of the active and receptive *Chi* [also spelled *Qi*] principles, the active principle is *yang*, and most commonly associated with masculinity. And the receptive principle is *yin*, and most commonly associated with femininity. [sarcasm] Gee, I wonder why.

**Leigh:** Hmm. [Laughing]

**Gretchen:** This is— a strain of thought that we see echoes of various reflections of in other cultures. That viewed male as active, women are passive. I guess it makes sense from a biological perspective, but it is very, very frustrating.

So, sex between men and women was seen as a harmony of these two principles and procreation was a sacred duty, as the act of sexual intercourse in order to have a baby, mirrors the creation of the world by this harmony of the *yin* and the *yang*.

So, in nitty gritty terms the *yang* essence of males— so, their semen— is considered limited and capable of being expended to the point that men can become ill or even die if they use up too much of their *yang*.

Exposure to female *yin*— her, you know, vaginal secretions or womb secretions— sometimes it's referred to as her blood— really it just means any like, fluid produced by female bodies, er, women with— people with vaginas— so exposure to female *yin* was considered limitless— oh! *Yin* was limitless. Like people with vaginas have an endless supply of *yin* and exposure to that *yin* can invigorate or revitalize the limited male *yang* so, because ejaculation reduces *yang* vitality, and you want to save up the best *yang* for the creation of children.

That, coupled with their idea that *yin*— the female *yin*— was at its most effective for revitalizing males when a woman orgasms, means that the female orgasm was highly prized and necessary for successful sexual interaction. But— many males practiced *coitus interruptus* to preserve their *yang* for the right time to make babies. So they're kind of storing up all of their *yang* [laughter] by not ejaculating, but all of

the women they're having sex with are orgasming. And they're... I think of it as a power-up. You gotta get your *yang* power-up from the lady orgasms.

**Leigh:** Oh my god. It's Sex Power Rangers!

**Gretchen:** Yeah! Gotta get your power boost. So sex with multiple women would have been highly encouraged, if you could afford it because– and it would have been like a joyful, fun, energetic experience, because you want to get as much out of it as possible. You want to get all that *yin*, so that it could store up and revitalize the male *yang*. However, like, sex for procreation would have been primarily only between a husband and wife, and would have been a more solemn affair– in keeping with its creative purpose as mirroring the creation of the universe.

So what does all this have to do with homosexuality, you are probably asking yourself. Well, according to some scholars, they argue that because *yin* is limitless, things like female masturbation and sapphism would have been tolerated, if not even encouraged. Because the exchange of *chi* energy... like *yin* energy between women was either neutral, meaning that they wouldn't have lost any energy, or it would have been beneficial, meaning that it could make a woman's *yin* stronger... which then would have had the ability to revitalize males even better.

There are actually some sources that argue that female prostitutes have stronger *yin* because they're more experienced. So you have that– It's like a similar idea that: If you allow women to either masturbate, or have sex with other women then you're just like building up the strength of their *yin*. Also sapphism could even lead to acts of devotion and love that would have been highly praised. So there was value in it as a way for women to show devotion and love - and most likely would have been in harems or elite homes with multiple wives or maybe even between wives and other members of the man's household.

For male homosexuality, according to the sources that I've read, the idea was that your *yang* vitality isn't entirely lost when you have sexual contact between two males. And likely it would have been supplemented by sexual contact with women; either later in life or at around the same time because exclusive male homosexuality was– not very common. So a man having sex with another man wasn't considered a, you know, net loss of *yang* vitality and might even be praised if such interactions would have led participants to great works of art or philosophy. But it could have been criticized if done for material or political gain or if it led to criminal behavior.

And to me, a lot of this might explain why there are so few exclusive male homosexual relationships as that would have been perceived as losing your vital

force, because it's not supplemented by yin, by the female *yin*. And it may also explain why egalitarian homosexuality was more tolerated for younger males who still were in the prime of their life and had, in a sense, a larger store of *yang*; who would have been expected to settle down with a wife and have children and been supplemented by their female *yin*. So I thought all of that was super fascinating and I think helps like m set the context for why male and female homosexuality might have been more highly tolerated.

But sex wasn't just about *yin-yang*, especially when it came to males who had sexual relationships with each other. So now we're going to talk about different kinds of sexual relationships between men.

### **Social Context: Different Kinds of Sexual Relationships Between Men**

**Leigh:** Yay. One thread that you'll see kind of throughout this– that there really was no word that corresponded to homosexuality like we have in the Western tradition. As Bret Hinsch says,

*"classical Chinese lacked a medical or scientific term comparable to homosexuality or homosexual. Instead, it was usually discussed using poetic metaphors referring to earlier men or incidents famed for association with homosexuality. Chinese terminology, therefore, did not emphasize in a sexual essence or an identity, but concentrated rather on actions, tendencies and preferences."*

In other words, instead of saying what someone is, Chinese authors would usually say, whom he resembles or what he does or enjoys. So the idea of all of these things is not intrinsically tied to identity, or your internal essence of who you are attracted to, like we would think in modern, Western queer society.

And also, we have paradigms for different relationships between males. They still fall under these dominant and submissive, and active/passive paradigms used for sex between a man and a woman, kind of like you've seen in Greco-Roman societies. So dominant and submissive was based on the social standing of each partner. And it was determined by three different factors: gender, age, and status.

So for gender, women were in general considered inferior -big surprise- which affected the social status of males who were associated with the female gender, like male prostitutes. Age– younger generally yielded to the older.

### **Content Warning: Pederasty Mention**

We have to note here that there is like we said before evidence of pederasty, as with Greco-Roman society, not all of it is an older male and a young boy, but that is present in the source material and we'd be lying if we left that out, though it was more common for an older male and an older teen, or early 20s boy.

However, later dynasties, especially in the Tang and Song dynasties, they actually had rules about rape of children or youth and it applied equally to boys and girls. Which is interesting to note, as there was no distinction made for punishment based on the gender of the child, only their age and the amount of violence involved. So even in these cases, there's a much less judgmental attitude towards same gender sex vs. "opposite" gender sex.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, right. The idea was more just like: Don't have sex with kids at all.,

Leigh: Yeah which I mean...

Gretchen: Yeah, we can all agree on that. Yeah.

### **End Content Warning**

**Leigh:** We can all- just fucking no!. And then the last step, the last factor is status; education, employment, family wealth, other factors that contributed to status. And typically a lower status would yield to a higher status. And then that brings us into a linked concept, which is the active and the passive. So Gretchen...

**Gretchen:** Yeah. Active and passive is based on a sense of hierarchy. But this time, it's for penetration. So the active member is the penetrator and the passive is the one being penetrated. And you can see how this applies to both, you know, male and female relationships as well as male homosexual relationships.

And typically, partners aligned along distinct and consistent roles. There's not much evidence of mutual penetration or sexual effect [stumbling over words]- flexible, flexible sexual roles- if I can say flexible and sexual in order without messing up my mouth.

**Leigh:** It's one tongue twister.

**Gretchen:** But this could be- I know, right- just be a bias of the sources. Meaning that it was common and so it didn't merit notice or at least wasn't unique enough to be mentioned. Because if it didn't play into the social or political aspects of the

sources, they were left out as we said earlier. Things that were noted were things that were unusual, so it could just be so common that, you know, no one talked about it. Or it could be that the sources that we have weren't necessarily concerned with the idea of mutual penetration, unless it played into the larger story that they were telling.

But, I mean, from what we know, typically partners would take consistent roles throughout their relationship. If someone was the active partner then they would stay the active partner for as long as the relationship lasted, for example.

And all of that to say, that socially dominant males were frequently the sexually active male and the institutionalization of prostitution, particularly male prostitution, solidified sexual roles along those lines and many of the passive participants, i.e. the prostitutes took on more and more feminizing clothing, makeup, appearance, as a kind of way of visibly substantiating their role as the passive participant, more along the lines of, a female within that particular relationship.

**Leigh:** Yeah, you would even see that extended into art. So, erotic art in the Ming and Qing dynasties even reinforce this difference in these social and sexual roles by going so far as depicting the active and passive parties with different skin colors. And you'll see that on our website, we've got a whole bunch of fun, [joking voice] not quite safe for work images. So if you're going to check out our blog post after listening to this episode, you might not want to do it at work. Just a heads up.

**Gretchen:** Right! Yeah, there's a lot, a lot a lot—

**Leigh:** There's a lot of porn. [laughter] We're just going to become a porn podcast—

**Gretchen:** Right? What another interesting thing to note is that a man's sexual role could actually change throughout his lifetime. Typically, you might see them being more the passive participant as a youth with an older and active male partner. And then, once they were older, they would take on the active role with a younger male or other women in their life. Thus exclusive male/male relationships for a single man would have been highly unusual, based on the above use of sex in social roles.

Bisexuality, like that in Greece and Rome, would have been more common. But when we use that term in this context, we're not trying to, again like, we're not trying to say anything about attraction. This is more to say about obligation, versus social expectation involved in any of their acts or relationships. So by bisexuality, we just mean someone who, who actively has sex with both men and women, rather than us

trying to say like: Well, they were attracted to both men and women. They're just someone who participates in sex with men and women.

**Leigh:** Yeah, Hinsch notes that marriage was seen as the bonding of two lineage groups, not the romantic union of two individuals. So a lot of times, marriage was kind of divorced from any sort of romantic element. And with romance banished from marriage, a husband was free to look elsewhere for romantic love and satisfying sex. So often men would be free to pursue any and all sexual interest they wanted, but there was still a social obligation to eventually marry. And within that you can still continue extramarital sexuality, in order to align with the established Confucian ideals of social order. So, it, like we were saying before, what this does is, it prevents the emergence of a self-identified homosexual lifestyle- that's independent of eventually settling down and marrying,- as we have here.

In addition to the religious and social importance of procreation and continuing family lines, I thought it was interesting, because, heterosexual sex had a large economic significance, especially for the poor. I mean, if you're a poor peasant, working, you know, tending agricultural fields, like, without a bunch of children to help you with that, it would make for a very, very hard life. So, again, Hinsch says,

*"The indispensability of children, to rulers and peasants alike, helps account for the prevalence of bisexuality over exclusive homosexuality."*

**Gretchen:** Right, exactly. So we just wanted to point those things out, because they're interesting. Yeah, so let's get into some stories.

**Leigh:** Yeah. [sing song voice] Y'all want to hear about some homo-lovin'? Some great homo-lovin'? So we're going to mostly focus on male homosexuality. And then we'll have a little addendum near the end to talk about female sexuality. But like we said, this is the majority of our sources.

### **Examples:**

So we claim to have a record of homosexuality going back to the Shang dynasty, so 16th to 11th centuries BCE, or even further, to the fabled, "Yellow Emperor", which was a way of adding legitimacy. Like [imitating]: This has happened before, everything's fine. It's great! And so likely, it really was something that they knew had occurred since then.

But we start seeing actual, written down records and, and stories and fables in the Zhou Dynasty, which is 1122 to 256 BCE. And these stories are primarily focused on

court favorites and their aristocratic lovers, establishing the very strong pattern of class-structured homosexuality. So any man who could obtain the sexual favor of his lord, could rise significantly in power and privilege. These relationships are usually framed by very strong emotional bonds and deep attachments based on filial loyalty.

We get a poem from the *Classic of Odes*, which is China's earliest surviving poetic anthology, expressing the intimate camaraderie between two warriors. [sing song] I like this one. It says:

*How can you say that you have no clothes?  
I will share mine with you;  
The king raises his army, we put in order our  
dagger axes and mao lances;  
I will have the same enemies as you.*

*How can you say that you have no clothes?  
I will share my trousers with you;  
The king raises his army, we put in order our mao  
lances and ji lances;  
Together with you, I will start (on the expedition).*

*How can you say that you have no clothes?  
I will share my skirts with you;  
The king raises his army;  
We put in order our mail-coats and sharp weapons;  
Together with you I will march.*

**Gretchen:** I feel like that's like, the male version of the whole Naomi and Ruth scene where she's like: "Where you go, I will go, and where you die I will die." [excited whisper] It's so great! Which is also gay, we're going to talk about that.

One of the most famous stories from the Zhou Dynasty is *The Story of the Bitten Peach* of Mizi Xia and the Duke Ling of Wei. So this is recorded in the philosophical writings of Han Fei Zi from 233 BCE and "bitten peach" or -

**Leigh:** "shared peach," "the love of the shared peach,"

**Gretchen:** Yeah, this is one of those really common metaphors for male homosexual love. And Mizi Xia is one of the prime examples that is used in later history. People will talk about like, "being like Mizi Xia," "being as beautiful as Mizi Xia," yeah, it became a catchword for referring to male homosexual love.

So Mizi Xia was the court– Was a favorite of the Duke Ling of Wei, and when Mizi’s mother was ill, he used the imperial carriage. Which was a big no-no, you got your feet cut off if you did that. And the Emperor, instead of punishing him, actually praised Mizi for his filial love for his mother. Because even in the face of extreme punishment, he was still willing to steal the carriage so that he could go visit his mom.

On another day, Mizi bit into a peach that was so delicious that he wanted to share it with Duke Ling, and Ling declared:

*"How sincere is your love for me, you forgot your own appetite, and think only of giving me a good thing."*

However, this story does not have a happy ending. When Mizi’s looks had faded, the Emperor turned on him and accused him of stealing his carriage and giving him a half-eaten peach as a sign of his lack of love. And this is frequently used as a tale to warn about the dangers of favoritism. Because favoritism can be a threat to the ruler, if he overlooks things deserving of punishment, which, you know, threatens imperial stability. And it's also a danger to the favorite if he loses imperial favor by growing old, becoming less beautiful or less interesting. So interesting to note here, is that the homosexuality, again, that's not being condemned. It's just like: "Hey, just so you know, being a court favorite is a precarious position."

**Leigh:** Yeah, it emphasizes the kind of fickle nature of some of these social elites. And also, yeah, how precarious it was for you, if you were the recipient of these favors. It could change at any moment.

**Gretchen:** Right yeah, yeah. It could change at any moment.

The next one is my favorite. I love this one. So the story of Zhuang Xin and Xiang Cheng. And Zhuang was a junior official, and he had a big old crush on his Lord Cheng–

**Leigh:** So cute!

**Gretchen:** – and asked if he could hold his hand. And, Cheng– this was really forward. Typically the junior official would not approach someone higher up to initiate a relationship. It was typically initiated from the position of the social superior. So it says that Cheng's expression changed but he didn't answer, so Zhuang told him the story of Lord E:



*"Has my lord ever heard of Lord E? He rode in an aquamarine boat carved with avian images and drew upon azure coverlets. Men of Yue rowed to the sounds of bells and drums, singing:*

*What a fine evening is this,  
that I have come to this islet midstream!  
What a fine day this is,  
that I share a boat with you, my prince!  
Unworthy that I'd be so desired,  
when have I ever felt such shame?  
My heart's perplexed to no end,  
that I've come to know you, my prince!  
There are trees in the mountain, and branches on trees.  
I yearn to please you, and you do not know!"*

Lord E, hearing this story of one of his courtiers being in love with him, then reciprocated that courtier's love and raised him up.

So, hearing this story, Cheng took Zhuang's hand and promoted him. Which I think is great! This super awkward courtier's, like: [High pitched voice] "I want to hold your hand, but I don't know how to tell you I like you. So he's like: There's a story of this other guy who had a courtier who liked him, and when he heard about it, he was totally okay with it."

**Leigh:** [High pitched voice] "Can you hold my hand?"

**Gretchen:** [High pitched voice] "Can you hold my hand?"

**Leigh:** "I know that it's irresponsible. And I'm not supposed to ask you. But [High pitched voice] please?"

**Gretchen:** Right? I think it's great!

**Leigh:** I love it! I like, I like Long Yang and the Emperor of Wei. This one's one of my favorites because he's, [excited] he's so nervous!

So, Long Yang is another one of the prime examples used in later history that comes from the Zhou Dynasty. So these two were on a fishing trip. And after catching several different fish, Long Yang suddenly burst into tears, and he's hysterical! And the Emperor asked him what is wrong.

[Telling the story in exaggerated high pitched voices] And he's like: "I caught a fish! I caught a fish!" and the Emperor's like: "Why, why are you crying? That's a great thing." And Long Yang replies [laughter]:

*"When I've caught the fish, at first I was extremely pleased. But afterward, I caught a larger fish, so I wanted to throw back the first fish I had caught. Because of this evil act I will be expelled from your bed!"*

*There are innumerable beauties in the world. Upon hearing of my receiving your favor, surely they will lift up the hems of the robes so that they can hasten to you. I am also a previously caught fish! I will also be thrown back! How can I keep from crying?"*

So he's, he's nervous that the Emperor will find someone more beautiful than him and will throw him back. He's like: [high-pitched]"How do I know that you will like me the best? There are prettier boys!" And so the king reassures him and makes a proclamation forbidding anyone else from mentioning anyone more beautiful than Long Yang. He's basically saying, like: "If anybody says that my beloved is not the most prettiest boy in the land, you will all die."

Um, so yeah, it again speaks to the precarious position of favorites, as well as the possibility of extreme devotion from their Emperor. I just love like how hysterical Long Yang is about this. [Exaggerated] This is like: "I am also a previously caught fish!" -

**Gretchen:** [Wailing dramatically] "You're going to find someone you like more than me- "

**Leigh:** God! I mean, that's relatable! Is that not all of our anxieties in being in a relationship? [Dramatically] You're gonna find somebody you like, better-

**Gretchen:** Right, totally.

**Leigh:** "You're gonna throw me back in the river!" I love it. [Dramatic whisper] It's so relatable.

**Gretchen:** So relatable. The final story is that- Oh, it's, it's beautiful. It's the story of Wang Zhongxian and Pan Zhang. When Pan Zhang was young, he had a beautiful appearance and bearing. And so people of that time were exceedingly fond of him. Wang Zhongxian of the state of Chu heard of his reputation and came to request his

writings. Thereafter Wang Zhongxian- wanted to study together with him. They fell in love at first sight and were as affectionate as husband and wife, sharing the same coverlet and pillow with unbounded intimacy for one another.

Afterward, they died together, and everyone mourned them, and they were buried together at Luofu Mountain. On the peak, a tree with long branches and curly twigs, suddenly grew. All of these embraced one another. At the time people considered this a miracle. It was called the "shared pillow tree". Which is just so beautiful and sad!

And at the time- the intertwined tree had been a symbol of tragic and deep love between men and women. So it's really important and interesting that this tree that grows up with the intertwining branches marks their grave. It's the symbol of eternal everlasting love, embodied in this tree. So it's the earliest analogy made between homosexual love and actually heterosexual marriage because it says that they were intimate as husband and wife, [agreeing noises] or as affectionate as husband and wife. So it's just a beautiful story of two dudes who love each other and they die together and the world is like: [cutesy voice] You guys love each other so much, here, have a tree.

**Leigh:** [cutesy voice] Have a tree! Yeah, and at the end of each of these- kind of dynastic sections we want to talk about the language that was being used at the time. So a lot of times in Zhou Dynasty stories you'll see the ambiguous term *chong* referring to love, patronage, favor or respect, and it was applied equally to heterosexual relationships, and platonic friendships in general. So there was a continued importance on describing homosexual acts in terms of social relationships rather than that erotic essence.

And like Gretchen mentioned before, you'll also see the term *mei* as "beautiful," which is used in the tale of Pan Zhang. And to the ancients, *mei* was- applicable to both men and women describing beauty and goodness. It's similar to the Greeks' concept of unisex beauty, *kallos*. I think it's really interesting because you see a shift later in dynastic history- *mei* actually gradually lost its general applicability and became primarily associated with effeminate and sexually passive men and boys, especially in regards to like prostitution and its connection with the theatre.

**Gretchen:** So with that, we're going to move to the Han Dynasty, which is from 206 BCE to 220 CE. And interesting to note, 10 of the 13 kings of Han took male lovers, as well as wives and concubines, so that's like two centuries of bisexuality.

**Together:** Woo hoo!

**Gretchen:** We have Emperors: Gao, Hui, Wen, Jing, Wu, Zhao, Yuan, Cheng, and Ai.

It is recorded in the official histories of the time called *Memoirs of the Historian* [Correction: *Records of the Grand Historian*] by Sima Qian and *Records of the Han* by Ban Gu. That's where you can find all of these stories.

There are actually separate sections where they would talk about court favorites. They would have like the court histories and then they might have a separate section on favorites of the Emperors.

So according to Sima Qian:

*It is not women alone who can use their looks to attract the eyes of a ruler. Courtiers and eunuchs can play at that game as well. Many were the men of ancient times who gained favor this way.*

Now the works of Sima Qian and Ban Gu also show an expansion of vocabulary used to describe homosexuality. It's the introduction of the term *ningxing*, meaning "those who obtain love and favor through flattery."

**Leigh:** Yeah and so here's where we get our big one, our big, big story that is probably the most famous, and most referenced example used in later history. Perhaps even more than Mizi Xia and Long Yang, which we have the story of Emperor Ai, who was the last emperor of the Han Dynasty, and Dong Xian.

So first off, I love that this story basically starts off with the quote:

*"By nature, Emperor Ai did not care for women."*

[laughter] Just flat out!

So he was sleeping beside his favorite/lover Dong Xian, and when he was called away to a meeting he didn't want it to disturb his sleeping lover, so he cut off his sleeve. Like he just cuts it right off. And the tale says "*his love and thoughtfulness went this far.*" When he appeared in public wearing the cut sleeve, his courtiers praised his love and thoughtfulness and many actually cut their own sleeves to celebrate it.

You want to talk a little bit about Dong Xian?

**Gretchen:** Yeah, it's just interesting to note that like Dong Xian, as many of the men in these stories are, was married– and actually his wife and children were honored as well as he was by the Emperor. His sister was actually made an imperial consort as well.

That's actually fairly common– in many of these stories, where it wasn't just like the male favorite but the whole family would be honored and potentially even family members would also join the court harem. This is just to say you can have these stories of like strong male devotion to each other alongside, the males being married and having children.

Emperor Ai was actually so devoted to Dong Xian that on his deathbed he attempted to hand over his empire to him [laughing] instead of to his son, which upset the social order and Dong Xian was forced to commit suicide by Ai's political enemies and a usurper took the throne. Which is why this is– he's the last member of the Han.

**Leigh:** Yeah, it's sad, but also like, he went so far as to flagrantly throw aside expected social mores and said: "No, I want my male lover to continue my legacy," and everybody else was like: "Um, you can't do that, you have to give that to your son."

I thought, I love this story in and of itself, but mostly just for how prevalent it became in describing this tradition. And, for centuries and centuries later, male/male love was referred to as "The passions of the cut sleeve." And I, I just really want to emphasize how much I love this.

This is a really, really great quote from the Hinsch book, which is:

*"Men of dynastic history did not feel alone in having affectionate feelings for other men. The complete integration of homosexuality into early Chinese court life, as recorded, was alluded to repeatedly in later literature, and gave men of subsequent ages a means for situating their own desires within an ancient tradition. By seeing their feelings as passions of the "cut sleeve," they gained a consciousness of the place of male love in the history of their society."*

And I wrote in my book: [Impassioned] Like, if only we had that luxury, this exact thing is what I think about with the need and want to do a podcast like this. That's exactly what we're getting at. How different would Western queer society be, and feel like, if we had this long tradition in all of our literature, to go back on and say: "Hey, here's how I can contextualize these feelings". And that just makes me even

sadder, that this is something that like modern Chinese queer people don't really have access to.

**Gretchen:** Right, they've lost this tradition as well, because of the government has blocked access to that.

**Leigh:** And I know, you know, if there are any people listening to this, currently in the People's Republic of China, we would love to hear from you. And, you know, if you want to talk to us about any of this, we would love to learn more from the perspective of somebody, who is living there. And, I mean, I assume most of the people listening to this podcast are, [joking] probably of the queer persuasion.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, I think that's a safe bet.

**Leigh:** Yeah. So with that, we're gonna move on from the Han Dynasty. There are more stories, if you want to read more of them, you should check out the Bret Hinsch book, there are more than we could have time to go into.

**Gretchen:** Right, it's stuffed full.

**Leigh:** Stuffed full. But we're going to move on to the Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties period, which was all sorts of stuff going on, and very unstable in terms of rulers and moving things around all the time.

**Gretchen:** Official records of the Liu Song Dynasty say, "From the Xianning and Taikang reign periods, which is 275 to 290CE of the Western Jin Dynasty onwards, male favoritism flourished considerably, and was as extensive as attraction to women. All the gentlemen and officials esteemed it. All men in the realm follow this fashion, to the extent that husbands and wives were estranged, resentful, and unmarried women became jealous. And there's a parallel idea expressed in a poem of Liu Xiaozhuo who lived from 481 to 539, which describes a woman's anxiety over being ignored by a man in favor of another man. Quote:

*"She dawdles, not daring to move closer, afraid he might compare her with leftover peach."*

So note that reference to Mizi Xia and the peach.

**Leigh:** I also like that in the context of a woman having anxiety over this, it's not called the shared peach. It's called the leftover peach. I don't know, just an interesting translation in there. Yeah, it's possible that as these authors' observation

suggests, that bachelors in this time who preferred men may have even delayed taking a wife for as long as possible.

You also get in this period, the rise of many military men as favorites for the Emperors due to the violent chaos of this age. And we get a new kind of metaphor for male/male love or relationships in this period. That's not nearly as prevalent, but I still thought it was really interesting.

There's a lot of talk of this metaphor of linked jade disks, or just jade in general. A "man of jade" was considered a paragon of physical beauty, and in general is a comparison to beautiful men and things in nature. This was, I wrote some fun notes on this-

**Gretchen:** Oh yesss!

**Leigh:** Men in this period valued good looks, and some actually attempted to improve them by artificial means. So we got the rise of male cosmetics and jade powder, and according to the aesthetic of the day, a man could improve his appearance by applying this white powder. Bret Hinsch has a quote in here that I love that is, quote:

*"Oiled hair, powdered face, and small gleaming buttocks described the ideal man."*

**Gretchen:** Yeeaaaah!

**Leigh:** Small, gleaming buttocks.

**Gretchen:** Right? Yep!

**Leigh:** Who doesn't love some small, gleaming buttocks? The part about the powder is really interesting, too, because it was in this time period was highly esteemed, but later, it again, kind of shifts and is associated with male prostitutes, and actors and sexual passivity. So we see these larger trends in a [emphasized] lot of different ways, coming up.

**Gretchen:** One of my favorite stories from this time period is *Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove*, which is a story about seven famous scholars who at one point or another, all have sexual relationships with each other. So two of these stages Ji Kang and Ruan Ji were visiting a third, named Shan Tao and his wife spied on them making love.

When Shan Tao asked his wife what she thinks, her reply is that: He clearly only compares to them at an intellectual level, because they have greater sexual prowess together than he has ever had with her.

**Leigh:** Ooooh, is there some ointment for that burn?

**Gretchen:** Oh, man, that story is fabulous. She's basically just like: Oh, they only like you for your brain.

**Leigh:** Yeah, kinky. I think I literally wrote in my notes, in the margins of my book to that story. Just "kinky" when she's just peeping on him. There are a lot of stories of peeping.

**Gretchen:** A lot of erotic art too.

**Leigh:** Yeah, it's a very common motif. Also, when you move into humorous sources; there's a lot of scatological humor. Which I mean, from a Western perspective, I don't necessarily get. Although, there is a lot, in Elizabethan history, and Renaissance history, and Shakespeare, there's a lot of scatological humor, so it's more of a common thread.

**Gretchen:** Yep, yep. So nine members of this time period had opened male lovers, one of whom was named Emperor Jianwen of Liang who lived from 503 to 551CE, and the court poet, Xu Ling, records the following poem which was written by Emperor Jianwen:

*"Charming boy, you look so handsome!  
You surpassed Dong Xian and Mizi Xia.  
Our feather curtains are filled with morning fragrance...*

*Our curtain bed is inlaid with ivory.  
Your face is more beautiful than rosy red dawn clouds...*

*Deep in your heart, you probably suspect you're not my latest catch,  
But your intimate love for me is still like that of the "former carriage".*

[which is a reference to Mizi Xia].

*You're enough to make the girls of Yan envious,  
And cause even Zheng women to sigh."*



So you can see a lot of those coming up you have the latest catch, you have explicit references to Dong Xian and Mizi Xia. So you can see how they're building on this tradition and using these stories as a way to situate their own experiences.

**Leigh:** And you wouldn't have needed external references too. Everybody would have just known what they were talking about with the names Mizi Xia and these references. I think it's so great to just have that intrinsic knowledge.

Another note on language: *Records of the Han* gives examples of the use of a new term to describe homosexual attraction to men, which was *nanfeng*, literally meaning male wind. Or more loosely, kind of transcribed 'male custom' or 'male practice'.

I thought it was interesting that this is actually the first time a term started to describe the homosexual tradition based on the homosexual act itself, rather than in the context of social rules. And it actually still remains in use today as a literary expression for male homosexuality.

**Gretchen:** Right, we also get just seeing this time period, a bit of a shift toward seeing elements of the homosexual tradition like male prostitution in a less glamorous light, highlighting some of the contradictory elements. You have poems about how difficult it was to be a prostitute and how vulnerable they were. So in this time period, these illusions reinforced both the beautiful and the pathetic aspects of male love, rather than just strictly focusing on the beauty of it.

**Leigh:** And that leads us into the Tang Dynasty from 618 to 907CE. So Hinsch says official histories have few references to homosexuality compared with earlier history, so it was a little bit less prevalent. He suggests that perhaps male favorites found themselves more removed from positions of power, or maybe male love was starting to fall out of favor among the Tang elite, relative to the earlier rulers. But there are still sources and examples of them.

There's the *Poetical Essay on the Supreme Joy* by Bo Xingjian. So it's a poetical text on the art of promoting health and longevity via sexual activity; so the *yin-yang* of sex. And male homosexuality gets its own section of the work, although sadly, the text is very badly corrupted.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, it's crumbling in places. But it is interesting that then this entire work, which, many would think of as being primarily about heterosexual sex, there's actually a it's own section on male homosexuality. So even if we may not have as

many court records, this is still something people are writing about and experiencing.

There is also Emperor Xizong,

*"who favored the inner garden boy Zhang Langgou, and could not sleep peacefully without him".*

So you have discussion of male entertainers from Imperial gardens still being important. And it may be that there was a shift from political favoritism to more entertainment side of things, you know—

**Leigh:** Entertainment and prostitution, yeah.

**Gretchen:** Which leads us to the Song Dynasty from 962 to 1279CE. Now the Song Dynasty we see the rise of Neo Confucianism, which leads to belief that sexual excess outside of marriage had been what led to the breakdown of the Empire prior to and after the Tang, and as a consequence, favoritism fell out of favor, as it was believed that any sex outside of having sex with their spouse would have cosmic repercussions. So, they weren't just decrying male favoritism, but also female favoritism within the court.

**Leigh:** Isn't this when the Yangtze River flooded?

**Gretchen:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** But even in that story, even when it's getting decried, right, it's still quite light in nature. It compares like: "Hey, having sex with people outside of your spouse is what could be causing things to cosmologically get out of balance. But it's also the same as gambling and doing all these other things." So it was placed in this larger context of everything else. It wasn't like: "Homosexuality is the worst sin ever and the world is going to die."

**Gretchen:** It's more just like: "Hey, stop thinking with your dick and maybe, stop gambling and stop having excessives in all these other areas as well." It was situated along the lines of: "Oh, hey, maybe we should not be so pleasure-oriented, maybe let's have a stronger focus on moral action and right order." Even the sex itself, whether homosexual or heterosexual, outside of marriage, is situated within this larger movement towards: "Let's get back to the basics of rightly ordered society."

There was also, in this time period, a rising aristocracy and middle class, and rejecting favoritism, as a structure, was a means for this rising aristocracy to exert more control, because they believed that favorites are being given undue favors in court. So, again, it wasn't so much sexual or moral, as it was political. So you could say things like: "Oh, yeah, you shouldn't have favorites, because I want to have more power in the court."

The court and political favoritism and patroness of patronage, interestingly enough, evolved into the system of prostitution. And there were, even in this time period, legal codes that banned male prostitution, though they were rarely enforced. And again, we have to situate that in terms of the larger social context. There was a degree of morality to it, but not: "Sex is a sin". It was just: "Hey, maybe don't go to prostitutes, because that might have repercussions for the kingdom."

It could even have a classist bent to it, because prostitutes would have been considered lower in the social structure. So having legal codes banning prostitution, I mean, can be used as a way to keep lower classes seeking social mobility from attaining that social mobility. So there's that level to it as well, because prostitution was a means by which you could gain social mobility, because then you have more money. So if you ban prostitution, you're essentially banning social mobility in a certain regard. So, always just important to, situate these situations in terms of the larger context.

**Leigh:** Yeah, in this period too, in the Tang Dynasty and the Song Dynasty, we also see a large trend of poetry proclaiming deep affection for friends. So the emergence of a literati class in the Song Dynasty, especially, meant more accessible writings and poems on your established friendships would be the mark of a sensitive gentleman. And a poet from this time period Bai Juyi recounts many stories of romantic friendship, and he exchanged poetry sharing intimate feelings with his friends. There are lots of them, but one of the most prominent ones is his greatest affection with his classmate Yuan Chen. They made an agreement referred to as the Green Mountain Pact to retire together and live as a pair of Taoist recluses.

**Gretchen:** Awwwww! It's like our monks from last time!

**Leigh:** Yeah, it's so cute! There's actually a lot of overlap too, with monastic communities in like, Buddhist monastic communities here, too, which is really interesting. It's a long story, it's a long poem for this. So we'll put the whole text on the website because it's real cute about the Green Mountain pact, but I just love it. There's also, at this point of time, overt sex was banished in poetry. It was deemed unsuitably vulgar for refined literary discourse, which is really interesting, because as

you'll note, as we get into the next dynasties, this sort of went away with all of that, and everything just became real erotic in the art and the fiction and everything. So at this point, again, we're left wondering as to the specific nature of these friendships. But, as we learned last episode, with all of our love letters to their special friends. Uh, still gay though, still gay.

**Gretchen:** Just a note on language in the Tang and Song dynasties we also actually have the first first introduction of a derogatory term for homosexual acts, *jijian*, which is translated as "sodomy." This term is related to chicken, lewdness–

**Leigh:** Very weird.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, it's a very interesting, linguistic phenomenon, but the character depicts a man being like a woman, implying sexual passivity, and starts to trend on any sort of derogatory thought towards homosexuality being directed at the sexually passive partner, rather than the active men. All that to say, when there is what looks more like what we would consider homophobia, it's typically directed toward the male who is taking the sexually passive role.

**Leigh:** It's like: "You are a man, why are you not acting in this expected social role of being dominant, being an active partner?"

**Gretchen:** Right. But that's not to say that there's no evidence of homosexuality, according to Hinsch, even in this atmosphere of decreased tolerance, homosexuality still continued to be practiced pretty openly, enough to catch the attention of writers. And it's even debatable how much the laws against male prostitution were actually even enforced. So just because they existed doesn't mean that they were consistently enforced throughout China at this time period. Which brings us the Ming Dynasty. The Ming Dynasty is a treasure trove of lots of things–

**Leigh:** [Laughing] Mostly porn.

**Gretchen:** Mostly, yeah, mostly porn and erotic fiction. And this is from 1368 to 1644. And here is actually where we finally are starting to get Literary Sources beyond court documents, as prose fiction starts to become more popular. So not only does this give us insight beyond the Emperor and elite social classes, into the lives of middle class, and even lower classes, we also get more stories of female homosexuality included in prose fiction and plays. We also start to see funny stories, like our favorite, which is the story of a man and wife, [Leigh giggles] who get very confused on their wedding night. I'm going to read it–

**Leigh:** You're going to read it.

**Gretchen:** Story time!!! So

"On the wedding night, a man nestled up to his wife with his buttocks, and his wife grabbed them and accused him saying, 'How come you don't have one?', whereupon the man also grabbed his wife pudendum and accused her saying, 'And how come you don't have one?'

**Leigh:** I love this! It's so great!

**Gretchen:** They're like: "How do we do this? How do we do the sex? We don't know!"

**Leigh:** There's even an illustration of this. Bret Hinsch, he believes it comes from the Qing Dynasty. We'll put it up on the website. But there's literally an illustration of this joke where you have a woman standing behind this man, and she's wearing a dildo and he's looking back at her like: "Whaaaat?" And she's looking at him like: "Whaaaat?" [Gretchen laughs]

Yeah, there's another one too. Another funny story that is along kind of the same realm of, not quite knowing exactly what to do once these men entered into heterosexual marriage situations.

*"A man got into bed on his wedding night and immediately seized his wife's buttocks and wished to do it that way. 'You're wrong!' said his wife. 'I've been doing it that way since I was small, why am I wrong?' well, the way I've been doing it since I was small isn't that way, replied the wife."*

So like- [Leigh laughs] I love this, he says:

*"The strong woman figure drolly contrasts her own sexual worldliness with her husband's heterosexual ignorance." And if that's not if that's not indicative of just the concept of a beard, I don't know what is."*

**Gretchen:** Right. Pretty great.

**Leigh:** Yeah. [Laughs]

**Gretchen:** Well, it's important to note that this is one of the first times where there's not a separate section for male favorites. Though there are mentions of favorites from many of the Emperors in the official records, they're not listed as their own separate "these are the favorites of the Emperors."

The Ming Dynasty also sees a continued flourishing of male prostitution and prose begins to focus more erotically, also more humorously, as we just been just been reading. There are changes in terms used to label male sex love, that indicate that their cultural emphasis actually was shifting from social relations to the erotic act itself.

So the terminology is shifting at this time period, which is an interesting thing to note, which fits within the overall sense that the Ming Dynasty was much more open in terms of eroticism in general. It's also a time of intense awareness of the long tradition of male love. And as the reading public group, they would have had access to almost 2000 years of written accounts, which like–

**Leigh:** I wonder what could cause that? That, like 2000 years of written accounts. I mean, well, that's basically what we're getting into in this podcast. But we have to, we have to scrounge and search for it, instead of like: "Let me just go back on everything that we have."

**Gretchen:** Right? "Oh, hey, look, I can read now. And I also have these relationships with men. Oh look! There are stories for me to read that helped me understand myself, Jesus that night," and they could point just they could proudly point back to the antiquity of the Joe and Han Dynasty as a righteous model for their own sexual practices, which again, wouldn't that be super cool. Do you know how nice that would that be?

**Leigh:** So we have play called *The Peony Pavilion* by Tang Xianzu that we can, from this play, we can discern that, despite distaste for male homosexuality present in the Buddhist traditions of the time, the Chinese tended to view it as no different from extramarital heterosexual relationships.

The play includes a court scene from hell, where the punishment for homosexuality is no different from someone who goes to female prostitutes or another who enjoys singing, or a fourth who uses fragrant wood in the construction of his house, all of these things. The Buddhist sensibility was concerned with people's attachments to sensuality. So hence the sex things being kind of on the same level of like: "You are enjoying nice smells, you're supposed to not to be connected to anything naturally

earthly." So this was a comedic scene. So the point is that these are not serious offenses.

**Gretchen:** Right, right. Like: "I like to sing" is the– the guy who likes singing is punished the same as the guy who has homosexual relationships. And the whole point was that it's absurd.

**Leigh:** Even in that story, two have the men who were being punished are currently having sex with each other, too, so it's kind of like, well...

**Gretchen:** Yeah, what's interesting is that Fujian Province, as part of the Ming Dynasty, was actually famous for male marriages in Ming and Qing Dynasties. The older man, the *qixiong*, or adoptive older brother– interesting, interesting brotherhood... Guys, guys, it's almost like terminology can be cross-cultural. So the older man would pay a bride price, literally a bride price for the younger man, who is called the *qidi*, the adopted younger brother. And the two men would go through a full formal wedding ritual with the feast, and it's basically the exact same ritual as a marriage between a man and a woman.

The younger male would then move into the *qixiong's* household in exactly the same way that a Chinese bride enters her husband's family's home. They could adopt young boys to raise and they typically lasted about 20 years before they were dissolved, so that the younger man could marry and raise a family of his own, typically with a woman. But it is interesting that they actually have something that was equivalent to marriage, or is equivalent. They had marriage between men, it was just, they would then dissolve it so that the younger man could marry a woman and have kids.

I just think that's so cool that as far back as the Ming Dynasty they had marriage.

**Leigh:** They even had a patron deity of homosexual love, which is *Tu'er Shen*, So, this is also in the Fujian province of the 17th century. The name means The Leveret Spirit or "rabbit god," as rabbit was a slang term for male homosexuals in late Imperial China. And a man named Hu Tianbao fell in love with a very handsome Imperial inspector in Fujian, and when caught peeping on the inspector, he confessed his love but the inspector sentenced him to death anyway.

A month later, he appeared to a man in his hometown in the dream, declaring that... And he appeared in the form of a rabbit. Declaring that as the quote "crime of peeping" was one of love, the underworld Gods had declared him the God of homosexual love. The man created a shrine to him, and the following was so large,

that during the repressive period of the following Qing Dynasty, the cult actually ended up getting targeted for extermination. So this was widespread enough that there was [exaggerated] a cult of homosexual men praising this this patron deity.

**Gretchen:** Right? Yeah, you had– they had so many pilgrims and followers that the Qing emperors were like: “Maybe we should get rid of that.” Speaking of the Qing Dynasty... So this is from 1644 to 1912. And overall, this is a period of perceived as, a reaction to what they would have called Ming libertarianism. So it's more socially conservative, homosexuality is brought under increased regulation, there are more rules, especially regarding rape, especially of children. This is actually where we get those laws about the assault of male and female children. And again, there's no distinction made between the gender, but about the age of the victim and the amount of violence involved. However, popular literature still shows that homosexuality was spanning all social strata and was still considered widespread, especially if you talk to outsiders visiting China.

It's only actually toward the end of the Qing Dynasty, when we start to see contact with Western societies, that the views of homosexuality begin to change, and the perception of homosexuality becomes more negative with this contact with Western societies.

The one thing to note that is really interesting at the time, is you have a writer by the name of Chen Sen 陳森 who created this taxonomy of homosexual love, which shows that he did not prejudge based on whether someone's affection was for men or women, but rather how they manifested their desire.

So, passions of the cut sleeve are no different from heterosexual love, and that they could be extreme, shrewd, tasteful, pure, virtuous, impetuous, straightforward, drunken, voluptuous, or seductive. So what mattered was how one loved not whom one loved.

The form of love written about in this period took on more of a didactic function to teach a virtuous life by positive and negative examples, whether they were homosexual, or heterosexual. So you could have a homosexual story being used to talk about virtue, or have a heterosexual story being used to talk about an undesirable kind of relationship. So the one thing to– even though there is the increased pressure and by the end of the Qing Dynasty is when we really get the instrumentation of homophobia– which then transitions into the current system of government. But, it is still fairly widespread, and you still have people in this time period who are looking at homosexual love as no different than heterosexual love. What matters is how you're behaving not with whom.



**Leigh:** This dynasty also kind of, finally, we see a little bit of introduction of female homosexuality, and it was portrayed as common and often inevitable. It could also give rise to beautiful acts of love, self sacrifice, and devotion. It was celebrated, but excess should be avoided, as with male homosexuality. Which brings us to our fun segment, our word of the week.

### **Word of the Week**

**Gretchen:** Word of the week! Woo! It is the term: *dui shi*. Which means "shared eating." [Both laugh] Actually, this term goes back as far as the Han Dynasty, where Yang Chao says: "When the palace women attached themselves as husband and wife, it is called *dui shi*. They are intensely jealous of each other." Records of the Han also mentions the love of two slave women as *dui shi*. So, *dui shi*, shared eating, that sounds familiar. People have been– we've been eating out for millennia.

**Leigh:** Yeah, yeah.

**Gretchen:** Literally always been– I just love– I just love that that's a euphemism in other languages. I think it's great.

**Leigh:** I also like the "intensely jealous of each other". Like– [Stammers] what–

**Gretchen:** Yeah, I don't really know how that's applied.

**Leigh:** I don't get that but it's pretty great.

**Gretchen:** Oh, they're eating each other out. So yeah, um, yaaaay!

**Leigh:** There's also group marriages. So, as far back as the Tang, there are records of groups of women joining together in a community wedding ceremony, usually it's a lot of women and women who were concubines in harems. In the Qing there's a record of one such group, the Mirror Polishing Gang, who reject men and only take female lovers.

**Gretchen:** Can we get t-shirts that say "Mirror Polishing–

**Leigh:** – "Mirror Polishing Gang?" Oh my God please! [Gretchen laughs] 'Cuz "mirror polishing" was also another euphemism, right? I mean, you see, as we talked about in the last episode, there's a lot of military metaphors, especially in Arabian literature. But there's also this refrain of "mirror polishing" in a lot of different places.

Which, if you want to read about some of that stuff, again, I'm going to recommend *Sapphistries* by Leila J. Rupp.

There was also the rise of the Golden Orchid Society in the— there you go— Guangzhou area of economically independent women, because of the silk trade that kept women safe from machinations of society. So within it, women could undergo a traditional marriage ceremony and adopt daughters who could inherit. Yeah!

**Gretchen:** So I mean, it's basically the equivalent of male marriage in the Fujian Province. You can have women getting married, who could raise daughters together, and their daughters could inherit all of their stuff from them, and I just think it's great. So most of the stories that we have of female homosexuality come from the Ming Dynasty, simply because we have more access to different kinds of literary works, like fictional and didactic poetry. However, the degree of praise and acceptance with which it's spoken about, should speak to it not being an uncommon practice or wrong, the fact that the latest, the Ming Dynasty, they're talking about women loving each other, and without any kind of negative stigma attached to it doesn't mean that women weren't doing it earlier. I would actually say that, to me, that implies that this has been fairly common, because these are stories being used to teach people about love, or teach people how to be moral or virtuous. And the fact that they're using women who are in relationships with each other to me, speaks to it being fairly common, even if we don't have records from earlier.

So yeah, there are a lot of stories we recommend, again, if you want to read more of them. There's Bret Hinsch's book, there's also a book called *Sex in China*, and it actually has a much more extensive list of stories that you can read about female homosexuality. My favorite story is called *Loving the Fragrant Companion*, which is by Li Yu, who's a very famous writer of the Ming Dynasty. He's got lots and lots of erotic stories, both of the male and homosexual female homosexual variety. So this one is about the wife of a man named Cui so I'll call her Mrs Cui for now.

So she visits a temple where she meets him, falls in love with a young woman named Yunhua. They fall in love with each other, and Mrs. Cui promises to do what she can to make Yun her husband's concubine so that they can always be together forever. After many trials, Mrs. Cui succeeds and Mr. Cui is delighted with his new concubine, and the two women are delighted with each other and get to be together for the rest of their lives. Aw, I love it!

**Leigh:** I love it! Oh, there's also *The Flower Shadow Behind the Curtain* by Ko Lien Hua Ying, which is the explicit description of two 16-year-old girls peeping on their

mothers having sex with an old man, and then they both become so aroused that they have sex with each other, then continue to do so every night.

It's interesting for its explicitness, which was new in this kind of literature, and also for the exchange of roles, each one taking turns as the passive and active partners to each other. I think it's, I think that specifically is pretty interesting. And that it might have something to do with the fact that yin was limitless. And so it doesn't matter whether you're the active or passive partner because it's just kind of a net zero, which is interesting.

**Gretchen:** Right? So there seems to be much more willingness to have the roles there be flexible, rather than to have this idea of a strict active and passive partner.

**Leigh:** Yeah, um, there's also one more which reminds me of the one that Gretchen said, which is *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, which is an autobiography biography by Shen Fu, which is talking about how Shen's wife, Shen Yun, becomes infatuated with a singing girl and wants to get her as Fu's concubine, much like in the last story. But this one's a little sadder. His family objects to the match due to the girl's low social status. So we still have that enforcement of social strata, and the girl is forced to marry someone else. And then Shen Yun falls into a deep melancholy and gets ill and dies. She died of love.

**Gretchen:** Right? She loved the girl so much that she died.

**Leigh:** Yeah, relatable.

### **Takeways:**

**Gretchen:** Right? Yeah, hashtag relatable. Yeah, to kind of wrap this all up, we wanted to draw it all together and talk about some takeaways. Things that we can just kind of say about the history in the social context, something we want to do more along these episodes where we— where they're focused on a historical time period rather than a particular person. So things like, we can't really delineate clearly using modern terminology as sexual roles and partners could change throughout your life. So there's no real clear way to really call this gay or straight in our modern terms, especially because sex was based on practices and behavior rather than primarily on an essence of attraction. Exclusive male homosexual relationships were rare as men and women would have been expected to marry and have a family.

**Leigh:** Many relationships would fall under the umbrella of poly, as men having multiple partners would have been expected. And it's quite possible that sapphism

would have been encouraged among women in the same household or in the harem, alongside their duties to their husband.

There was even one story that we didn't get a chance to get into where a man and his beloved, his favorite, have a long relationship and the wife is involved in it with it as well. And then when the man passes away, the wife and the favorite continue to have a relationship. So if y'all want an ancient Chinese equivalent of Professor Marston and the Wonder Women, there you go.

**Gretchen:** Right, right? More than anything, Chinese thinking prior to the 19th century has an openness to homosexual relationships as a valid expression of human desire, so long as one's filial and social obligations are also fulfilled. So there was no moral value placed upon negative moral value placed on homosexual relationships. Relationships were primarily just based on how when acted within the relationship, and what the effects those relationships could have on the politics of the realm, or cosmic repercussions, rather than specifically the gender of the partner. And that's something that is so beautiful, and something really lacking in our society nowadays. This idea that it doesn't matter who, but how. I think that there's something we as a Western American society can learn how to bring that more into our discussion of relationships, no matter what the genders. It doesn't matter who. It matters are you healthy, are you happy, is it consensual. Not saying we adopt the whole philosophy, but just that's something that we can think about, and really value about this tradition as we're thinking about reclaiming our own history.

How Gay Were They:

**Leigh:** So that then, then brings us into our ranking section. So Gretchen, how gay were they?

**Gretchen:** I gave this a 10 out of 10. To me this is this— this is pretty damn gay.

I'm definitely on the, this is clearly same gender attraction rather than just power grabbing or institutionalized abuse or or any of the other ways one could potentially frame this. Even if there were relationships where manipulation was involved there's clearly some degree of preference being exerted, even if the larger context is outside Western ways of thinking about exclusive attraction. I mean male Emperors didn't have to have sex with their subordinate, nor did the women in harems have to have sex with the other women. There's no social obligation for it. So to me, even though it may not be gay, in the western sense of exclusive attraction, it clearly has relevance for the queer experience, because these are people who are still

expressing, I think, some degree of preference, even if they are also at the same time fulfilling their social obligation.

**Leigh:** Yeah, I'm gonna, I'm going to even go beyond. Call this in 11 out of 10, right? [Gretchen laughs] It's nothing that we have– [Stammers] it's nothing that we have a comparable tradition for. And I'm jealous, I'm jealous of it. I'm jealous of the ability to look upon thousands and thousands of years of history and contextualize your own feelings, which is something that is kind of foreign to us. And that's why we feel so elated when we hear these stories. That's why there are those of you listening to this podcast. It's so prevalent, it's so important to us to have that cultural history at our fingertips. Like you were saying, Gretchen, they didn't have to have sex with their subordinates. And also, as you saw in some of these examples, right, it was the subordinates who were going after the older or higher status men. And one could say that that was for political gains. But clearly, the language surrounding these describes such a deep affection and the fact that heterosexual marriage was available to everyone, but didn't preclude or exclude the the ability to have these extra marital homosexual relationships, I think says a lot. The homosexual relationships were safe, there was no chance of accidental pregnancy and having an unwed mother running around. There was the ability for these men to have emotional bonds and attachments that they weren't able to get in a relationship that was usually arranged, and usually– because they were arranged by the male head of the household for filial and lineage reasons. So, yeah, it's 11 out of 10.

### **Where to Find Us Online:**

**Gretchen:** I'm down with that. Yeah. So, that is it for today's episode. You can find us online individually. As I said at the beginning, I'm Gretchen. And when I am not talking about historical queers, I am drinking tea and writing geeky analysis of *Star Wars* books, LGBT YA novels, *Song of Ice and Fire*, and *Wonder Woman* for the [TheFundamentals.com](http://TheFundamentals.com), and my personal website [gnellis.com](http://gnellis.com), or you can find me on Tumblr and Twitter at [gnelliswriter](https://twitter.com/gnelliswriter).

**Leigh:** And I'm Leigh. And when I'm not nerding out out about old timey queer folks, I usually can be found sticking my head in a comic book, or these days, more books about old timey queer folks, when I'm not talking about them I'm reading about them, and usually gushing about some sort of queer TV. I'm really excited for *One Day at a Time* to come back on. And so y'all can find me over at Paradox in Flux on Twitter, or sitting on my couch, crying about fictional gay ladies. It's my general status.

**Gretchen:** That's a mood, that's a big damn mood. [Leigh laughs]

*History is Gay* podcast can be found on Tumblr at [HistoryIsGayPodcast](#), Twitter at [HistoryIsGayPod](#). You can always drop us a line with questions, suggestions, or just to say hi at HistoryisGayPodcast@gmail.com. We've gotten several lovely fan letters!

**Leigh:** Y'all are so great!

**Gretchen:** Y'all are amazing, we love you! This is so much fun to do!

**Leigh:** I keep them coming, this warms our heart.

**Gretchen:** Right? Seriously. We've had a couple of phone conversations where we're like: "Did you read the email? Oh my God!" We love you guys, we're so happy that you guys are just as happy and enjoying yourselves as we are doing this.

**Leigh:** Mhmm. And speaking of, if you're enjoying the show, please remember to rate, review, and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Rating and review doing especially helps us get up in the rankings and helps more people find the show. And that way we can expand our awesome community and get more folks to talk about our sweet, sweet gay love throughout the times.

**Gretchen:** Right. That's it for *History is Gay*. Until next time...

**Leigh:** Stay queer.

**Gretchen:** And stay curious.

[Theme music plays]