

## Lesbianism in the Chinese of Hong Kong

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*Some historical and literary background regarding lesbianism in China is given. The demographic data, family background, and behavioral characteristics of 15 Chinese lesbians are described and compared with a matched group of married women. More lesbians were adopted, reported unhappy childhoods and hostile family atmospheres, had parents who preferred them to be boys, and attended sexually segregated schools. The subjects differ from their Western counterparts in having a closer relationship with their mothers and in the absence of oral sexual practice.*

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**KEY WORDS:** Chinese; lesbianism; behavior; literature.

### INTRODUCTION

Studies of lesbianism have been done almost exclusively on the population in the Western hemisphere; Oriental studies are prominent by their virtual absence. This does not imply that lesbianism is not practiced in the East, but rather it serves to indicate that social taboos on sexual matters are still very strong. The Chinese have always considered sexual matters to be private. Homosexuality has been tolerated as long as it is engaged in by adults. There are no moral or religious sanctions against homosexuality. The practice has only been denounced when a partner abused the emotional ties or when it led to criminal acts. According to Taoist beliefs, male homosexuality, because it is a relationship between two yang elements, is considered not harmful to health. However, the writer Chiang Sin-Tai claimed that for women not to wed and to engage in homosexuality could be harmful. He considered this practice as against the laws of nature.

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Although lesbianism is known in China, the literature is scanty. On the other hand, the literature on male homosexuality is considerable. The *Chan-kuo-Ts'ê (The History of the Warring States)* mentioned that Lung-Yang-Chün, a minister of the Prince of Wei, had a homosexual relationship with his master. From then on his name, Lung-Yang, was used to denote male homosexuality.

*Tuan-hsiu* (the cut sleeve) is another expression used to denote male homosexuality. This term originated toward the end of the formal Han dynasty. It was reported that the Emperor Ai-ti (6-1 B.C.), in order not to disturb the sleep of his favorite lover, cut off his own sleeves rather than pulling them out from under the head of his lover. Much later in the seventeenth century, a treatise entitled *Tuan-hsiu-pien (Records of the Cut Sleeve)* described 50 cases of male homosexuality from Chinese history. It has also been documented that the first three emperors of the Han dynasty, Kao-tsu (the founder of the dynasty, 206-195 B.C.), Hui-ti (194-188 B.C.), and Wên-ti (179-157 B.C.), were all bisexuals.

Chinese chronicles and historical sources reveal two areas in which lesbianism was common: the harem and certain provinces in Canton. In ancient China keeping concubines was a privilege of the emperors or the wealthy. A man's wealth was measured by the number of concubines he kept. "A duke can take nine concubines at one time, an emperor can take twelve concubines at one time," is a passage found in the *Kung-yang Tsuen*. The *Li-Chi (The Book of Rites)* states that until the age of 50 a husband should enter the pleasure pavilion of his wife once every third day, of his concubines every fifth day. But the number of concubines made this prescription a physical impossibility. The lack of sexual outlet, the social isolation, and the close proximity of women made the harem a fertile ground for the development of lesbian relationships. Van Gulik (1961) and Humana and Wang (1971) have described such practices in detail. In addition to pudendal contact, clitoral stimulation, and cunnilingus, the use of artificial penises was also favored. The existence of various artificial penises made of polished ivory or lacquered wood serves to illustrate the degree of sophistication of lesbian practice in China. In a Ming period painting, such a dildo is illustrated in a lesbian love scene. A double-ended dildo with two loops of silk cord in the middle was also used to enable both partners to obtain simultaneous pleasure.

Lesbian practice was also encouraged by the husband in order to help him conserve his sexual energy. The legendary Yellow Emperor, in his chapter called *Hsüan-nü-Ching*, described the following posture:

Lady Precious Yin and Mistress White Jade lay on top of each other, their legs entwined so that their jade gates (genitalias) pressed together. They then moved in a rubbing and jerking fashion against each other like fishes gobbling flies or water plants from the surface. As they became more excited, the "mouths" widen and

choosing his position carefully, Great Lord Yang thrusts between them with his jade root (penis). They moved in unison until all three shared the ultimate simultaneously. The triple flow of essence will strengthen bones and sinews as well as the breathing. It will also assist the Great Lord Yang to avoid the Five Overstrainings and the Seven Sex-injuries.

In the harem, women turned to lesbianism because of social isolation. In the provinces of Canton, on the other hand, women who were free and economically independent formed lesbian relationships. Chen (1928) described the practice of lesbianism among women employed in the silk industry in three provinces: Shun-te, P'an-Yü, and Hsi-Ch'iao. The *Gazetteer of Chinese Customs* (1935) documented the formation of the Golden Orchid Association in these provinces. The members of this association were exclusively females. Whenever two members of the association developed deep feelings for each other, certain rites of "marriage" were performed. For such a "marriage" to be permitted, one partner was designated the "husband." The first step consisted of offering to the intended partner a gift of peanut candies, honey, and other sweets. Once this was accepted, a night-long celebration attended by mutual female friends followed. From then on the couple would live as "man and wife." Sexual practices like genital contact called "grinding bean curd" or the use of dildos were described. The couple could also adopt female children and these children could inherit the property of their "parents."

Although none of the literary sources gave any reason for the practice, it was probably due to the advantages of being economically independent, a distaste for heterosexual relationships, and the nonacceptance of the traditional marriage arrangements. Topley (1975) reported a religious explanation for lesbian relationships: "A woman may be predestined to marry a certain man over and over again in different incarnations; even if her predestined husband should in one incarnation be born a female, she is nonetheless attracted to her predestined partner."

Lesbian relationships are also celebrated in Chinese literature, the best known example of which is the play, *Lien-hsiang-pan (Loving the Fragrant Companion)*, written by the Ming writer Li Yü (1611-1680). The theme centers around the love between a young married woman called Mrs. Shih Yün-Chien and a young, talented girl, Yün-hua. To ensure that they will be together, Mrs. Shih plots to make Yün-hua her husband's concubine.

Because most theatrical groups were composed solely of women, who assumed male and female roles, lesbianism was also common among actresses. The famous novel *Dreams of the Red Chamber* mentioned two actresses, one specializing in male roles and the other in female roles, who were passionately in love with each other both on and off stage. The death of the female partner was deeply mourned by the "male" partner. The hero of the novel, on learning about the tragedy, offered his incense pot for her

to burn incense in commemoration of her partner. This gesture serves to illustrate how well lesbianism was accepted by the ancient Chinese.

Up to the present, all the descriptions regarding lesbianism in the Chinese were from literary sources and oriental erotica. This paper is an attempt to study the phenomenon from a clinical point of view and to compare it with some of the studies done in the West.

## METHOD AND SAMPLE

This study was conducted in Hong Kong. A total of 15 lesbians were interviewed. The criteria for inclusion in the study were that subjects be adult females whose primary sexual interest is directed toward the same sex and who show repetitive homosexual activity. Of the 15 subjects, three were referred following attempted suicide resulting from broken lesbian affairs, and two consulted us for symptoms of anxiety and were subsequently diagnosed as suffering from generalized anxiety disorder. The remaining 10 subjects were contacted through mutual acquaintances.

All the subjects were given a semistructured interview. The nonpsychiatric subjects were seen for two additional interviews after the initial contact. The two psychiatric subjects had an average of 18 follow-up sessions.

The questionnaire was also administered to a control group of 15 married women whose rating on the Kinsey scale was 0. This group was taken at random from the Obstetrics and Gynecology ward. The control group and the subjects were matched for age, social class, educational attainment, and religion.

## RESULTS

### Social Data

All the subjects except for one, who was born in Canton, were born in Hong Kong. Their ages ranged from 19 to 61, with a mean of 34. The age distribution of the subjects is summarized in Table I.

The figures for the marital status of the subjects are given in Table I. Of the married subjects, the average duration was 6 years. The divorced patient was married for 4 years prior to divorce.

Data on religious background are also given in Table I. Of those who had a religious affiliation, two of the Catholics considered themselves devout, the Buddhist subject was a nun, and the rest were inactive.

Table I. General Data

Demographic data	Number of subjects (total $N = 15$ )
<b>Age</b>	
20 or younger	3
21-31	5
31-40	5
41-50	0
Older than 50	2
<b>Marital status</b>	
Married	4
Never married	10
Divorced	1
<b>Religion</b>	
Buddhist	1
Roman Catholic	4
Pentecostal	1
None	9

The various occupations of the subjects are shown in Table II. The lawyer, the university teacher, and the advertising executive received further education in the United States or United Kingdom and can be considered fairly "Westernized."

Eight of the subjects had tertiary education, while four finished secondary education, and three had primary education.

#### Family Background and Childhood Experiences

Since the inclusion of psychiatric patients might have distorted our findings in this area, they were rated separately, while the remaining 13 subjects were compared to the control group.

Table II. Occupation

Occupation	Number of subjects (total $N = 15$ )
Lawyer	1
University teacher	1
High school teacher	1
Prison officer	2
Advertising executive	1
Nurse	2
Midwife	1
Skilled factory worker	4
Buddhist nun	1
Fashion designer	1

Three of the subjects (23%) were adopted before the age of 4, one by an elderly Buddhist nun (subject) and the other two by conventional families; the other 10 subjects (77%) were brought up in their own homes. All of the control subjects were brought up by their own families. One of the psychiatric patients was adopted by a lesbian couple and the other was shuttled between her own family and that of her aunt.

When asked to rate their home atmospheres, 6 subjects (46%) described them as warm, 5 (38%) as hostile, and 2 (14%) as indifferent. Of the controls, 10 (77%) described their home atmosphere as warm and 3 (23%) considered it indifferent. One of the psychiatric patients rated her home atmosphere as warm, the other as indifferent.

The subjects who had a father were asked to describe their relationship with him; 4 (33%) rated their relationship as good, and 8 (66%) rated it as poor, whereas 11 (85%) of the controls reported a good relationship with their father and 2 (15%) described their relationship as poor. Only one of the patients had a father, and her relationship with him was poor.

The majority of the subjects described their relationship with their mother or adopted mother as good, while one had a hostile relationship with her adopted mother. This was not significantly different from the control group. The patient adopted by the lesbian couple reported an ambivalent attitude, and the other patient had a good relationship with her mother.

Of the 10 subjects who grew up in their own home, 7 (70%), compared to 5 (35%) of the controls, reported that their parents would have preferred a boy, but only 3 subjects felt that there was any overt attempt to bring them up as boys.

All the subjects and all the controls reported that sex was never discussed at home.

Six subjects (46%) described their childhood as being unhappy, and 7 (54%) described it as being happy. Only one (7%) of the controls described her childhood as being unhappy. Both patients reported an unhappy childhood.

Only 3 subjects (23%) attended coeducational schools, while 10 (77%) attended schools for girls. Only one (7%) of the controls attended a sexually segregated school. All the subjects and controls claimed that sex was not adequately taught at school.

### **Sexual Experience**

All the subjects and controls indicated that their primary sources of sexual information were friends, books, and newspaper articles. They

**Table III. Age of First Physical Homosexual Experience**

Ages in years	Number of subjects (total <i>N</i> = 15)
Less than 15	0
15-19	9
20-24	4
25-29	1
30-34	1

described their parents as either inhibited or embarrassed about sexual matters. Regarding a history of homosexuality in the family, none of the controls or normal subjects had a positive history, while one of the patients was brought up by a lesbian couple. The majority of the subjects and controls were repeatedly cautioned by their parents against being with men. They were not given any definite reasons for this but were warned that men would get them into trouble.

Up to the time of the interview, 9 subjects reported having had no heterosexual experience. Of the 6 that had heterosexual experience, 4 reported feeling indifference or disgust, and 2 reported being satisfied. Only one of the subjects reported having been sexually assaulted.

The ages at which the subjects first experienced physical homosexual contact are shown in Table III. The majority of the subjects were first aware of homosexual feelings before the age of 20. The number of homosexual partners ranged from 1 to 5, with an average of 2. The duration of the relationship with each partner ranged from 6 months to 30 years. All the subjects were initiated into homosexuality by an older partner.

The most preferred sexual technique was body rubbing. The next favorite was mutual masturbation. No subject reported employing cunnilingus, and only one reported using a false penis.

The current Kinsey ratings of the subjects are reported in Table IV. At the time of the study four of the subjects were in a stable homosexual relationship similar to marriage. They practiced mutual masturbation or genital contact one to two times a week. Eight subjects described themselves

**Table IV. Current Kinsey Ratings**

Kinsey rating	Number of subjects (total <i>N</i> = 15)
1-3	2
4	2
5	2
6	9

as being more masculine in orientation and taking the active role in their sexual relationships.

All the subjects reported that they would prefer a lesbian relationship and that their conflicts were with society rather than with their partners. They all reported that women were in a better position to understand the physical and emotional needs of women.

## DISCUSSION

Despite the absence of moral and religious sanctions against lesbianism amongst Chinese in Hong Kong, there exists no formal organization like the Daughters of Bilitis. There are also no clubs or popular meeting places for lesbians. In Hong Kong, lesbianism is still very much a private affair. The gay liberation movement of the West does not seem to have stimulated an equivalent movement here. However, the reluctance of Chinese lesbians to "come out of the closet" must not be construed to be the result of social disapproval against lesbianism in particular but rather to be the result of social constraint on sexual matters in general. As a result of these pressures, we have not been able to collect more than 15 subjects over the past 2 years despite vigorous efforts.

Compared to the control group, significantly more of the female homosexuals were adopted, came from disturbed families, and reported unhappy childhoods. The majority of the lesbians and controls reported good relationships with their mothers, while significantly more lesbians rated their relationships with their fathers as poor. Significantly more lesbians reported that their parents would have preferred them to be boys. More lesbians than controls attended sexually segregated schools. These differences seem to indicate that a hostile attitude toward fathers and unhappy childhoods and families, coupled with attendance at sexually segregated schools, may have contributed to the development of homosexuality in our series.

An attempt to compare Chinese lesbians with those in North America and the United Kingdom shows many similar characteristics but also some significant differences. The average age of the subjects does not vary a great deal from the studies of Kenyon (1968, average age = 36.3) or Rosen (1974, average age = 34). In a city where Buddhism is the dominant religion, it seems to be underrepresented in our subjects. The overrepresentation of Roman Catholics and those without any religious affinities is similar to the findings of Kenyon (1968). The educational level of our subjects is similar to the sample of Kinsey *et al.* (1953) in that there are more subjects with tertiary education. Our study showed more of the subjects engaged in high-



level jobs. This agrees with the observation of Saghir *et al.* (1970). The majority of our subjects, however, described good relationships with their mothers, a characteristic that differs from Kenyon's (1968) study and also that of Wolf (1971).

Most Western studies report that lesbians come from a sexually repressed family atmosphere, but the complete censorship at home concerning sexual matters seems to be the norm in Chinese families. This is supported by our finding no difference in family attitude toward sexual matters by families of lesbians and controls. This is also the impression gathered by talking with medical students and also from our study on abortion applicants (Lieh-Mak *et al.*, 1981), as well as our experience in obstetrical clinics. It is also not uncommon for parents to caution their daughters against being intimate with the opposite sex, as virginity is still valued in Chinese society, and illegitimate pregnancy results in a tremendous loss of face for the family. The absence of heterosexual experience in our single subjects may be a result of being reared in such an atmosphere.

Kenyon (1968) reported that a significantly greater number of lesbians indulged in masturbation as compared to controls. All the subjects in our study also practiced masturbation, a practice of a minority of married subjects in our abortion study (Lieh-Mak *et al.*, 1981).

The majority of our subjects were first conscious of their erotic response to other women before the age of 20. This finding corresponds to that of Kenyon (1968). The mean age of first physical homosexual experience was 20.8, a result that is close to Kenyon's (1968) finding of 21.4. Most studies on lesbianism report subjects having fewer than five partners in their homosexual career, a finding which is similar to the present study.

The use of exotic objects like lacquered dildos and Burmese Bells are extensively dealt with in Oriental erotica, but only one of our subjects employed a false penis. The most popular sexual technique employed was body rubbing. Bell and Weinberg (1977) reported that cunnilingus was the most preferred technique in their series, but none of the subjects in our study practiced cunnilingus.

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