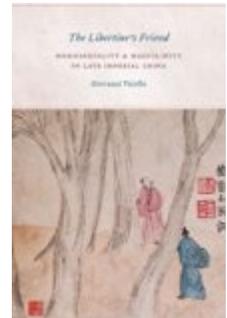




Giovanni Vitiello. *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. xii + 296 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-85792-3.



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In this rich and original study of male homoeroticism in late imperial Chinese fiction, Giovanni Vitiello focuses on how interlinking and shifting discourses of masculinity and sexuality manifest in the depictions of male protagonists, including the chivalric hero, the romantic scholar, and the sexy libertine in late Ming to late Qing pornographic and non-pornographic works. His detailed readings cover relatively unknown works and some of China's most famous novels, spanning the period from the publication of *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*) in 1550 to the appearance of *Precious Mirror for Ranking Flowers* (*Pinhua baojian*) in 1849. He demonstrates that the changing notions of masculinity over this period shaped attitudes toward male homosexuality, suggesting that attention to models of masculinity is crucial to understanding representations of homosexual relations. In doing so, his work is an example of the growing theoretical commitment of scholars of historical Chinese (and other Asian) homosexualities to take into account historical ideas and practices of masculinity, as is evident, for exam-

ple, in Wenqing Kang's *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900-1950* (2009), and which is central to Jonathan D. Mackintosh's *Homosexuality and Manliness in Postwar Japan* (2010).

Vitiello takes the reader through connoisseurial ideals of male beauty; chivalric friendship and romantic love between men; the shifting forms of libertine masculinities in pornographic works; the emergence of martial scholar "hybrid heroes" in eighteenth-century novels; and the "sublime love" of dreamy, late Qing, male romances that transcends earthly pleasures. Vitiello's many sources, such as the late Ming homoerotic collections *Forgotten Stories of Catamites* (*Longyang yishi*) (1632), *Fragrant Essences of Spring* (*Yichun xiangzhi*), and *Cap and Hairpins* (*Bian er chai*), depict socially widespread male homosexuality: the normative model consisting of a wealthy patron, belonging to the class of "decent folk" (*liangmin*), and a teenage boy servant or prostitute (possibly also singer and actor), legally belonging to the class of "vile people" (*jianren*). In principle, the boy played the receptive role and

the older man the insertive role, but there are representations of relations that do not fit this pattern, such as those between two “decent folk” that are legitimated by the mutual love of both men. Indeed, Vitiello argues that the very concept of love in late Ming culture, regardless of the gender of the lovers, is strongly imbued with the chivalric (*xia*) ideal of friendship between men; and that love between men is generally respected throughout late imperial fiction, as distinguished from sex between men, which did come to be depicted unfavorably in some mid- to late Qing works.

The late Ming period, up to the fall of the dynasty in 1644 to the invading Manchus, is often characterized as having a relatively open-minded attitude toward sexuality, as seen in the tolerance and relative popularity of homosexual relations, including male prostitution; and also in its fictional wealth of erotic tales, stories of male love, and a tendency toward softer, feminized male characters. Yet such liberal attitudes also gave rise to anxiety among some of the literati that “all men have turned into women.”[1] After the Ming fell to the Qing armies, a growing chorus of scholars attributed the very collapse of the dynasty to the “feminization” of the literati.

It is commonly thought that the advent of the Qing dynasty brought an end to the late Ming hedonism, including the flourishing of pornographic fiction. Vitiello shows, however, that many works of pornographic fiction were still published until the mid-Qing period. The Qing’s concern to regulate gender and sexuality is shown by their introduction of antisodomy laws in the 1720s and 1730s, which also had its effect in fiction. Vitiello detects around this time a diminution of the libertine’s homoeroticism and the increasing prominence of syncretic “hybrid heroes” that conflate the models of the romantic scholar (*caizi*) and the chivalric hero (*wuxia*) to produce scholars with martial arts abilities, in response, he argues, to the “crisis” of literati masculinity. This new hero,

at his most evident in the eighteenth-century novels *Nonsense (Guwang yan)* (1730) and *An Old Rustic’s Humble Words (Yesou puyan)* (1760s-70s), is “an energetic, hypermasculine Confucian scholar who redeems the male kind, if not the whole empire” (p. 133).

Through the changing depictions of libertine heroes in different groups of pornographic novels, Vitiello reveals how the shifting boundaries of masculinity affected attitudes toward male-male sexual relations. He shows in detail the varying characterizations of a “bisexual yet impenetrable” male model in late Ming and early Qing works (p. 96); a bisexual, even penetrable model in some early Qing novels, at no loss of masculinity to the libertine himself; and a libertine hero in later Qing works who expresses distaste for homosexuality, where it becomes associated with servants and rogues. In an interesting epilogue, Vitiello discusses how premodern gender models continue to influence modern masculinities: for example, how “chivalric masculinity” underpins the model of the anti-intellectual communist fighter, and how homoerotic echoes potentially accompany the resurfacing of the female impersonator in Chinese opera.

An undoubted strength of this book is Vitiello’s innovative mining of works of pornographic fiction from the late Ming onward, which allows him to provide a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the sexuality of male gender models than has previously been presented in Chinese masculinities studies. In terms of limitations, Vitiello himself acknowledges that his fictional sources “tend to portray the lives of the literate elite, and even when we encounter representations of the sexual culture of the lower strata of society, it is safe to assume that they are still colored by the values of the class typically involved in literary activities, the scholar-gentry” (p. 5).

Vitiello’s use of queer theory is sparing but apposite: he employs Eve Sedgwick’s argument that new discourses coexist with preceding ones

rather than replacing them, and he justifies his use of the term “homosexuality” in the context of theoretical debates about its deployment in non-European, premodern settings. Those partial to queer theory will perhaps feel unsatisfied that there is not more, but its influence is clearly felt in the book’s unfailing attention to subtle, discursive shifts in representations of homosexuality. Overall, Vitiello has significantly advanced the understanding of both homosexuality and masculinity in late imperial China in this well-resourced, pioneering study.

Note

[1]. Martin W. Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 85.

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