



Abstract

I analyze the unique viewpoint that Imperial Chinese poetry presents regarding LGBTQ+ issues during that time period. Drawing on a selection of poems from across Imperial China's history, I argue that poetry imparts the perception that Imperial China (1600 B.C.E—1912 C.E.) was accepting of certain LGBTQ+ groups to varying degrees. I then contrast this perception with historical and factual evidence, and describe what a modern audience can learn from the project's analysis.

Question

What viewpoint does poetry present about LGBTQ+ issues in Imperial China?

Transgender People

The bodhisattva Kuan Yin, an avatar of compassion and mercy, is one of the most popular figures in the Buddhist pantheon. They are also historically a transgender figure, as Kuan Yin started out in the first century as a male figure but transitioned to a female and/or asexual figure over the years. Poetry from *Chien Tung*, a traditional divining system, conveys a deep spiritual respect for not just what Kuan Yin represents, but for the bodhisattva themselves (Karcher 21-23). This leads to the conclusion that transgender people must have been respected equally in Imperial Chinese society.

Male Homosexuality

The majority of Imperial Chinese poetry related to LGBTQ+ issues is on the theme of male homosexuality. Notable poets such as Chen Weisong, Bai Xingjian, and Han-shan examined male homosexuality in a variety of forms. The general consensus, however, is one of celebration in the same way heterosexual themes were celebrated. Xingjian, for instance, in his popular and influential "Poetic Essay Of The Great Bliss," celebrated the act of gay sex alongside numerous forms of heterosexual sex (Yao 213). Meanwhile, Weisong's affair with the performer Xu Ziyun inspired him to compose breathtaking love poems, and likewise inspired his peers to celebrate the pair's love in verse (Cuncun 71). This suggests that homosexuality was accepted by Imperial Chinese society.

Lesbianism

In contrast to the widespread celebration of male homosexuality in Imperial Chinese poetry, there is almost no poetical reference of any sort to female homosexuality. Various sexist factors contribute to this apparent lack of recognition. The literary world of Imperial China was dominated by men, and while women were not prohibited from learning how to read and write, social constraints kept nearly all from becoming authors or poets (Hinsch 174). Women were also kept inside the home for much of their married lives, and as in many ancient and modern cultures, women in Imperial China married extremely young. This prevented them from forming many meaningful connections with other women (Hinsch 174). Finally, men were typically disinterested in the affairs of women, and as such lesbian relationships were not represented in the male-dominated field of poetry (Hinsch 174). In essence, the lack of representation of lesbianism in poetry, when compared to male homosexuality, suggests that Imperial China ignored lesbian relationships and lesbians themselves.

Conclusion

The viewpoint poetry presents of Imperial China's attitudes on LGBTQ+ issues is only partially accurate. While it is true that male homosexuality was widespread and accepted in Imperial China, so was lesbianism. Historical records show lesbian marriages and couples were commonplace in Imperial China, in contrast to poetry's view that lesbianism was overlooked. Unfortunately, this is not the only inaccuracy in poetry's viewpoint; transgender people were treated with far less respect than poetry claims. Male-to-female people, for example, were often treated as no better than prostitutes for use by the elite (Huang 316). The reverence and respect for Kuan Yin thus appears to be an outlier rather than the norm. Luckily, this inaccuracy allows modern readers a chance to apply history to their perception of society. By understanding the flaws of Imperial China's treatment of LGBTQ+ people, modern readers can examine the way their societies treat LGBTQ+ groups and work to enact change.

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