

PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY



5 0110 01970631 2

Introducing the

NEW SEXUALITY STUDIES

Second Edition

Edited by
Steven Seidman,
Nancy Fischer
and Chet Meeks

ROUTLEDGE

12

Sexualizing Asian male bodies

Travis S. K. Kong

UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

What comes to your mind when you think about Asian men? The Kung Fu masters Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, famous for their martial art skills? Or those who excel professionally such as Yo Yo Ma (a cello player), Michael Chang (a tennis player) and Yao Ming (a basketball player)? What about Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* who plays the grumpy, almost hysterical Japanese landlord who constantly shouts at Audrey Hepburn? Or William Hung, the infantile and non-threatening (sexually and physically) Chinese boy who jumps and sings with "no regrets" in *American Idol*?

More likely, when you think of Asian males, you will have pop into your head the image of a pragmatic and money-driven Asian man working in a laundry or restaurant in Chinatown, or of an intelligent, hardworking, nerdy-looking professional wearing (thick) glasses!

Sex and Asian men? Hard to imagine these two things could go together. But if you look at Leslie Cheung in *Farewell My Concubine* (a sad love story which depicts a Beijing Opera gay actor who always played the feminine role on stage and fell in love with his lifelong stage partner who was a straight man), or John Lone in *Madame Butterfly* (a true story which tells of a French diplomat who "mistakenly" fell in love with an opera singer who was actually a Chinese spy and a man), these two actors might have gained some "sexual currency" for Asian males. They were praised for dragging-up as women, as they "passed" the test of behaving like women with their elegant performance and delicate sensitivity.

From the above examples, you can see that Asian male bodies, hard or soft, whether their owners are Kung Fu masters, talented professionals, Chinamen or nerds, are almost always sexually neutered or asexual unless these men behave like a woman or a gay man. If we consider that an Asian female body always embodies excessive sexuality (for example, Lucy Liu in *Charlie's Angels* and Sandra Oh in *Sideways*), then we could say that an Asian male body is always devoid of sexuality.

Why are there such limited representations of Asian male bodies? Do these representations reflect social reality? To what extent is the male body shaped by nature or social forces? For example, are Asian male bodies genetically smaller than Western ones? Do Asian males learn to behave like white men? And regardless of the genetic or social construct, why does a smaller male body occupy an inferior position? Why is the Asian male body always aligned with

Travis S. K. Kong

UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

male bodies? Do these representations
shaped by nature or social forces.
than Western ones? Do Asian males
genetic or social construct, why does a
Asian male body always aligned with

These ideas of the body, gender, and sexuality are the lens through which we can understand how an Asian male body – small, smooth and hairless – is being structured in a white-dominated society as “the other,” “the feminine,” “the homosexual,” or “the asexual.”

The struggle over the sexualization of Asian male bodies

The US treatment of Chinese men could serve as an example. The depiction of Chinese men, or "Chinamen," was characterized in the mid-nineteenth century by their inability to speak perfect English. Due to their perseverance, their independence from whites, and their willingness to help each other, they established their own shops, laundries and restaurants. They were then depicted as economic competitors against whom a series of immigration laws was enacted to restrict and limit their rights. However, these "Chinamen" were also described as "bachelors," even though most of them were married in their homelands. The term "bachelor" not only had the connotation of viewing these Chinese men as "boys" (and thus "infantile") but also carried the hidden meaning of homosexuality. The implication seemed to suggest that their sexuality was always "repressed." So these Chinese men seemed to be a potential threat (both economically and sexually) to white society. Although the situation is different now, the image of Chinamen in contemporary Western mass culture still shifts between a workaholic figure and a Kung Fu master. They are "sometimes dangerous, sometimes friendly, but almost always characterized by a desexualized asceticism" (Fung 1996: 183).

Second or third generation Asian-Americans tend to reject these stigmatized images of Asian masculinity. Many contemporary American men try to act masculine. A large number of Asian-American men have a daily workout routine. Bodybuilding or even body modification can be considered as a political act to reject the derogatory stereotype of the "timid, infantile, yellow body" which is always assigned to Asian men living in a white society.

Conforming to the Western, hard-pumping body (and thus reinforcing the Kung Fu master at the expense of a timid body) might be one option. Another way Asian men challenge the stereotypical Asian male image is to reassert the *wen* ideal of Chinese masculinity without equating muscle with masculinity. Chinese masculinity has been constructed around two intertwining ideals – the *wen* ideal ("cultured behavior, refinement and mastery of scholarly work") and the *wu* ideal ("martial prowess, strength, and mastery of physical arts"). The *wu* ideal has always been devalued because Confucian culture devalues physical power. An ideal man is one who has a strong personality with high moral standards – a result of harmony and unity between human nature and knowledge. A strong man is never a man with superior physical strength but one with an excellent moral personality (Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002). Think about the new modern martial arts classic movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The legendary sword-master Li Mu Bai (played by Chow Yun Fat) is glorified not because of his martial arts power but his moral personality (though he also has a suppressed sexuality).

A third way Asian men challenge stigmatized images is to sexualize their Asian-ness. Movies have begun to picture Asian men as sexual beings. For example, set in colonial Vietnam in 1929, the French film *The Lover* tells a story of a white French teenage girl who befriended a rich Chinese man so as to escape her lonely experience in boarding school. The Chinese man, played by Tony Leung Kar Fai, was portrayed in such a sensual and sexual way that the Asian male body became an object of erotic desire and fantasy. Moreover, a number of artists (such as Troy Philips, Ken Chu, and Michael Joo) have examined the complicated relationship between sexuality and race. Through their artwork (e.g., photography, installations, painting), these artists criticize the desexualized Asian men and the myths that equate Asian men with femininity, homosexuality, asexuality, or passivity (Kee 1998).

When golden boy meets white men

The historicity of gay images in Western societies has changed from "camp," to "gay," to "super-macho." It is argued that masculinity has been claimed, asserted, or re-appropriated by

male homos
the all-Amer
body, in wh
look is more

Gay cultu
class, race, a
youth-orient
and have mo
elderly bod
gay variants

In terms
gay bars. Y
predominan
dominantly
masculine i
potato que
signifies a y
golden boy
of Chinese
For exampl
(i.e., the ro

Some A
entry to th
fetishism o
of "servitu
"West," th
seems to s
political do
also "a site
straight so

The pro
passively a
or third ge
the Wester
yellow bo
writers ha
images of
*Conversatio
Forever Bo
1998; for*

Conclus

Although
shaping th
of male i
heterosex
behavior

lies

depiction of Chinese men, by their inability to speak from whites, and their will-dries and restaurants. They ies of immigration laws was men" were also described as elands. The term "bachelor" "boys" (and thus "infantile") cation seemed to suggest that emed to be a potential threat situation is different now, the l shifts between a workaholic ometimes friendly, but almost 83).

ese stigmatized images of Asian line. A large number of Asian-even body modification can be of the "timid, infantile, yellow society.

reinforcing the Kung Fu master r way Asian men challenge the of Chinese masculinity without been constructed around two ement and mastery of scholarly y of physical arts"). The *wu* ideal physical power. An ideal man is – a result of harmony and unity ver a man with superior physical el and Wasserstrom 2002). Think ger, *Hidden Dragon*. The legendary ied not because of his martial arts ssed sexuality).

ualize their Asian-ness. Movies have olonial Vietnam in 1929, the French riended a rich Chinese man so as to nan, played by Tony Leung Kar Fai, an male body became an object of Troy Philips, Ken Chu, and Michael ality and race. Through their artwork e the desexualized Asian men and the y, asexuality, or passivity (Kee 1998).

changed from "camp," to "gay," to imed, asserted, or re-appropriated by

male homosexuals: "a moustached 'clone,' the tattooed 'leather man' or 'biker,' and more recently the all-American 'jock'" (Forrest 1994: 97). This super-macho look seems to focus entirely on the body, in which the male athletic masculine body is being glorified. Of course, this super-macho look is more pronounced among those gay men who are young, in-the-scene and in large cities.

Gay culture in most urban cities, like society at large, is stratified along the lines of gender, class, race, age and body. Generally speaking, the commercial gay scene is highly class-specific, youth-oriented, and fashion conscious. The ideal for gay men is to be young, fit and muscular, and have money to spend on clothes, travel, and home decoration. The hyper-feminine body, the elderly body, the disabled body, the poor body and many others are all regarded as subordinate gay variants, or as "failing bodies" (Kong 2004).

In terms of race, it is common to see a mixed crowd of white and Asian men in most local gay bars. You might hear terms such as "rice queen" (a Western or Caucasian man who is predominantly sexually interested in Asian men) or "potato queen" (an Asian man who is predominantly sexually interested in Western or Caucasian men). In terms of the hegemonic gay masculine ideal, the term "golden boy" seems to be the best euphemism to characterize the potato queen in this inter-racial gay culture. "Golden boy" in traditional Chinese literature signifies a young virgin boy who is innocent, infantile, feminized and even androgynous. The golden boy – infantilized (age), feminized (gender), and golden (race) – signifies a representation of Chinese (and also Asian) gay men which seems to appear in many different disguised forms. For example, one scholar argues that Asian men are always designed to play the passive part (i.e., the role of "bottom," "houseboy," or "servant") in gay pornography (Fung 1996).

Some Asian gay men use their "exotic" attributes as a survival strategy to help them gain entry to the Western world. They consciously control their bodies and benefit from the white fetishism of colored bodies (Kong 2002). There is nothing wrong with "passivity" or the image of "servitude" *per se*. The problem seems to lie in the fact that whenever the "East" meets the "West," the "East" always adopts the role of servant. The absence of other possible scenarios seems to suggest that the uniformity reflects real social hierarchy, economic inequality and political domination. The gay community can be a place of sexual freedom and comfort, but is also "a site of racial, cultural, and sexual alienation sometimes more pronounced than that in a straight society" (Fung 1996: 190).

The problems facing Asian gay men living in Western countries have not gone unnoticed or passively accepted. Many young Asian gay men, especially from the middle class and the second or third generation of immigrants, reject the "houseboy" scenario as the only way of entering the Western homosexual world. Some of these men work hard at the gym to refute the "timid yellow body" myth, while others deliberately eroticize Asian male bodies. Many artists and writers have challenged Asian male gay stereotypes, while advancing more positive and diverse images of being gay and Asian (for independent films and videos, see *The Queen's Cantonese Conversational Course*, Wayne Yung, Canada 1998; *China Dolls*, Tony Ayres, Australia, 1997; *Forever Bottom*, Nguyen Tan Hoang, USA, 1999; and *Yellow Fever*, Raymond Yeung, UK, 1998; for academic studies, see Leong 1996; Eng and Hom 1998).

Conclusion

Although biology sets the potential for how we can act, social forces play a significant role in shaping the meaning of our bodies, emotions, and identities. The male body, as the cornerstone of male identity, is governed by social expectations and pressures to be masculine and to be heterosexual. To be a "man" is to exhibit a cluster of attitudes, forms of self-presentation and behavior that are different from women and convey an emphatic sense of heterosexuality. Our

society constructs a hierarchy of male bodies which privileges certain bodies (e.g., white, middle-class, able, young, heterosexual, etc.) while often stigmatizing others (e.g., Asian or colored, disabled, aged, homosexual, etc.). However, the attitudes and behaviors that are associated with masculinity can and do change. We have the ability to challenge masculine norms and ideals. Although Asian male bodies are alleged to be effeminate, asexual or even homosexual, a newly-emerging Asian masculinity is evident in societies like the UK, US, Australia and elsewhere. Some Asian men conform to the Western masculine ideal by working out. Some redefine masculinity without equating it with muscle, while some sexualize Asian male bodies.

The gay world, like the straight world, also operates according to a hierarchy of gay bodies in which colored, disabled, aging or hyper-feminine bodies are less valued. In terms of race, the "silent golden boy" seems to be a dominant image for Asian gay men in a white-dominated gay world, and is sometimes embraced by Asian men as a way to gain entry into the white-dominated gay world of Western societies. However, more diverse representations are being created by Asians, which view Asian gay men as full sexual and social agents who can be desiring as well as objects of desire.

In the still-dominant culture of Western societies, white men seem to express the norm and the ideal of "masculinity," the point of origin and reference for what it means to be a man. Asian or other nonwhite men always seem inferior – poor imitations or undesirable deviations. How can such race logic be reversed? What could Asian men tell us about men in New York, London, or Paris, rather than vice versa? Without viewing Asian men as "other" or as inferior, how can we describe their uniqueness and simply think of them as men in their own right? Instead of questioning how Asian men fall short of "normal" masculinity, what can Asian men tell us about our assumptions of masculinity in general? How can Asian men offer us new positive ways of being men? Maybe this is the time when we should take sexuality and race (among other factors such as class, age, gender) seriously and be more sensitive to the hierarchy of bodies, identities, and genders in both the gay and the straight worlds.

References

- Brownell, S. and J. N. Wasserstrom (eds) 2002. *Chinese Femininities and Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Connell, R. W. 1995. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Eng, D. L., and A. Y. Hom (eds) 1998. *Q & A: Queer in Asian America*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Forrest, D. 1994. "We're Here, We're Queer, and We're Not Going Shopping", in A. Cornwall and N. Lindisfarne (eds), *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*. London: Routledge.
- Fung, R. 1996. "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticised Asian in Gay Video Porn", in R. Leong (ed.), *Asian American Sexualities*. London: Routledge.
- Gerschick, T. J. 2005. "Masculinity and Degree of Bodily Normativity in Western Culture", in M. S. Kimmel, J. Hearn, and R.W. Connell (eds), *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*. London: Sage.
- Kee, J. 1998. "(Re)sexualizing the Desexualized Asian Male in the Works of Ken Chu and Michael Joo", available online at <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v2i1/Kee.htm> (accessed 10.3.2006).
- Kimmel, M. S. 1994. "Consuming Manhood: The Femininization of American Culture and the Recreation of the Male Body, 1832-1990", in L. Goldstein (ed.), *The Male Body*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Kong, T. S. K. 2002. "The Seduction of the Golden Boy: The Sexual Politics of Hong Kong Gay Men", *Body & Society* 8 (1): 29-48.
- (2004) "Queer At Your Own Risk: Marginality, Community and Hong Kong Gay Male Bodies", *Sexualities* 7(1): 5-30.
- Leong, R. (ed.) 1996. *Asian American Sexualities*. London: Routledge.
- Seidman, S. 1996. *Queer Theory/Sociology*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

On a warm su
center in north
white-haired v
work, I just se
man, and the
erupted in che
their own sex

As this stor
In the Viagra
men of a bro
Raphael Palm
senior man, th
era, nobody s
sexual desires
were eager to

I met senio
social club an
and Sally are
sixty-seven to
approximately
American cit
Viagra, other
reporting or
At the time o
All names w
October and

Research

Before inte
women. Ur