Reyes, Raquel A.G. and William G. Clarence-Smith (eds.)


This collection of well-researched studies of several aspects of the wide range of non-heteronormative sexualities in Asia interrogates both the Orientalist imagination which fostered the idea of the East as a place of promiscuity and licentiousness, and recent scholarship which focuses on transgendered specialists who performed same-sex acts in a ritual context. The authors use a wide range of sources, including legal and medical texts, colonial records and official and private correspondence. The resulting case studies are examples of the kind of critical scholarship that the study of the meanings given to particular sexual practices in non-Western contexts requires. Like other scholars before them, the authors illustrate the great historical, religious, and cultural complexity of Asia, and they question the use of terminology developed in the west, such as sodomy, and ultimately of sexuality itself.

This anthology destabilizes the Orientalist fantasy of an Asia in which same-sex acts were widely tolerated. Though a wide range of same-sex practices have been recorded, these always have to be read within their social, political, and religious contexts. Acceptance of non-reproductive and non-heterosexual sex acts was not general but always embedded in numerous regimes of prohibitions and constraints. Age, social status, gender, and religious orientation were important factors which in some cases provided a certain legitimacy to same-sex and other non/procreative acts. In other cases, however, such practices met with intolerance and could even result in capital punishment. Compared to women or men of lesser status, elite men were allowed a much wider range of behaviours, including oral sex being performed upon them or being the inserting partner in anal sex, both with catamites and male servants or with their wives and concubines. Marital obligations had to be honoured, however, and procreation ensured.

The book is divided into three parts that deal with texts, people, and sins, respectively. In the first part, non-normative pleasures are explored in various discursive contexts. The first chapter, by Lo and Barrett, draws on medical discourse in pre modern China. They discuss anal intercourse, both male-male and male-female, on tomb texts from the second century BCE to erotic writing of the Ming period. The medico-spiritual and legal texts they analyze, locate anal sex in contexts of changing socio-sexual power relations in which the male penetrator is seen to cultivate good health, potency, and a long life. In
the next chapter, Daud Ali deals with medieval India. His sources range from Sanskrit texts to architecture, particularly temple reliefs and sculptures. He demonstrates that oral sex was considered more problematic than anal sex in certain texts such as the Kamasutra. In the thousand years covered by his research, gradually conjugal procreative sex comes to be privileged. The third chapter moves to a different Asian region and religion, focusing on same-sex relations and transgender identities in Islamic Southeast Asia. Drawing primarily on Wahhabi sources, this author, too, notes shifting discourses on same-sex practices and behaviours. Interestingly he also refers to female same-sex acts, a topic left mostly unexplored in the rest of the book. This is a particularly rich chapter demonstrating that not only Western colonial administrators, but also Islamic reformers were responsible for the shift towards a gradual repression of same-sex practices in the region.

In the second part of the anthology the attention shifts from texts to people; again the focus is on high class males. Loos’s sensitive study of male homoeroticism and politics in Thai history details the fall and execution of a high ranking prince. This prince’s exclusive fondness for male anal intercourse, to the neglect of intercourse with his wives and concubines, was ultimately construed in political terms, as a betrayal of the monarchy. In the process, Loos gives the practice of sodomy a history in Thailand, countering contemporary claims that same-sex desires are a recent phenomenon. To the growing literature on the history of male same-sex love in Japan, Screech adds an interesting case study in the fifth chapter. His word is an example of the careful reading required to uncover near-silences, desires, and relationships. It is also a unique tale of the attempts at seduction by a male high ranking Japanese bureaucrat of a young European colonial servant. The changing climate of relative acceptance of male homosexuality in Japan is contrasted with the harsh repression in Holland at the time. This is a topic also covered in the last chapter of the book, by Peter Boomgaard. He details colonial attitudes towards sodomy, pederasty, bestiality, and incest. As in the Philippines, Reyes in the preceding chapter outlines how sodomy was strongly denounced by the colonial authorities, while it was well known in indigenous society.

The careful attention to details and context makes these micro-histories interesting to a wide range of scholars, including regional specialists, anthropologists, political scientists, and gender specialists. However, the title of the book is too wide ranging; these case studies do not provide a comprehensive overview of sexual diversity in Asia for over 13 centuries. Instead, they point to the kind of detailed scholarship that is necessary to produce such an overview. The book’s introduction provides a concise overview of some of the literature
and discourses within which this collection must be viewed. However, it does not provide a justification for the selection of case studies, nor of the absence of any study dealing with female same-sex practices.

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