



# Performing Yin/Yang: Male-male Relationships in Qing China

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**Abstract.** The exploration of same-sex desire in pre modern China has emerged as a compelling subject, garnering considerable scholarly interest in recent times. Researchers have unearthed distinctive aspects of gender identity within Chinese culture, notably the yin (feminine, soft)/yang (masculine, strong) and wen (civil)/wu (martial) dynamics, offering insights that starkly contrast with contemporary Western perceptions of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Therefore, this essay chooses Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai Zhiyi* in Chinese) as the research subject, and uses three typical stories of “Huang Jiulang”, “The Hermaphrodite”, and “Male Concubine” for specific story analysis, aiming to deepen people’s understanding of the emotional landscape of pre modern Chinese society by revealing the multifaceted emotions and social complexity of male-male relationships in the Qing Dynasty, and explore the diversity of human sexuality and its significance in transcending the limitations of modern sexual identity binary. The research suggests that the unique and vibrant emotions depicted by *Liaozhai* challenge the conventional tenets of Confucian ritual propriety, representing a return to personal inner desires, which reveals the emotional panorama of pre modern Chinese society.

**Keywords:** Yin/Yang; *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*; Male-male relationships; Emotion.

## 1 Introduction

The concept of “Yin/Yang”, derived from the I Ching, depicts two opposing yet complementary forces in the universe (Fang, 2011)<sup>[1]</sup>. This concept is not simply about opposites like black and white but represents a dynamic balance of interpenetration and interdependence. Yin and Yang symbolize contrasting properties: Yin (feminine, soft, passive) and Yang (masculine, strong, active). In ancient times, “Yin” and “Yang” symbolized hierarchical power relations, with “Yin” often being the subordinate, dominated element, and “Yang” being the dominant one (Ibid). This Yin-Yang relationship was deeply rooted in the power structures of pre-modern society. In literature, male-female relationships were often imbued with specific power dynamics, with males traditionally seen as dominant.

Extending this to same-sex relationships, narratives of male-male relationships in the Ming and Qing dynasties still adhered to the “Yin and Yang” framework, characterized by distinct social roles and power dynamics (Woodland, 2018)<sup>[2]</sup>. The more dominant partner, often due to differences in status and position, assumed the masculine role, while the relatively subordinate partner, dependent on the other for sustenance and protection, assumed the feminine role. This clear division of roles contributed to the stability and longevity of these relationships.

In this context, characters in Ming and Qing novels exhibited a unique form of “gender fluidity” within the “Yin and Yang” framework, challenging the binary concept of male and female genders. Dong Zhongshu (BC 179-BC 104), a Confucian scholar, used the “Yin/Yang” concept to regulate the social hierarchy of the “Five Relationships” (Righteousness between Ruler and Subject, Affection between Father and Son, Distinction between Husband and Wife, Order between Elder and Younger, and Trust between Friends) in his idea of a unified state (Tan, 2016)<sup>[3]</sup>. This politicized “Yin/Yang” identity was characterized by relativity and fluidity. In other words, “male/female” were encompassed within “Yin/Yang”, but “Yin/Yang” was not synonymous with “male/female”. As mentioned earlier, both same-sex and different-sex relationships could be integrated into the hierarchical “Yin/Yang” framework without contradiction (Song, 2009)<sup>[4]</sup>.

## 2 Literature Review

In fact, Bret Hinsch’s seminal work, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* (1990), revolutionizes people’s understanding of Chinese sexual practices, debunking the stereotype of a monolithically puritanical Confucian society<sup>[5]</sup>. Hinsch’s meticulous reconstruction of China’s homosexual history unveils a diverse tapestry of male relationships, transcending social hierarchies from emperors to the common folk, thus dismantling modern Chinese assertions of homosexuality being a Western import.

Wu Cuncun’s *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China* (2005) delves deeper into the subject, challenging the marginalized view of homosexuality in that era<sup>[6]</sup>. Wu’s examination of primary sources such as poetry and fiction underline the integral role of male homoeroticism in the cultural fabric of the literati elite, linking it intricately to notions of status and power. This analysis offers a profound comprehension of the integration of male homoeroticism within the elite’s cultural life.

Amidst this rich historical backdrop, *Liaozhai* by Qing dynasty (1644-1912) author Pu Songling (1640-1715) stands out as a pivotal work for analysis. This anthology of classical Chinese stories presents an unparalleled perspective on the complex nature of male-male relationships during that period, challenging and expanding our understanding of gender fluidity and same-sex dynamics in late imperial China (Luo, 2009)<sup>[7]</sup>.

## 3 Interpretation of the Novel

*Liaozhai* is a collection of classical short stories written in literary Chinese by Pu Songling. This compilation, based on Pu’s extensive collection of folk tales and legends

about the supernatural, primarily consists of records of unusual and extraordinary events. It focuses mainly on themes of love and societal critique. Stories such as “Huang Jiulang” and “The Hermaphrodite” reflect Pu’s ideological rebellion against pre-modern Confucian ritual teachings. This work celebrates emotional connections between people, depicting male-male relationships that differ from modern concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality, highlighting how ancient Chinese conceptions of “Yin/Yang” transcended traditional gender boundaries.

In *Liaozhai*, the transcendence of gender boundaries in the realm of emotions plays a significant role. In traditional Chinese literary theory, “emotion” (qing) has always held a prominent position, encapsulated in the longstanding tradition of “restricting emotions with inherent nature” (Song, 2009). During the Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD), a distinction was made between “nature” (xing) and “emotion” (qing), positing that “nature is the manifestation of Yang, and emotion is the transformation of Yin” (Ibid). Here, “emotion” is starkly contrasted with “nature” Since “nature”, associated with “Yang” and thus superior, is linked to reason and represents virtuous existence. In contrast, “emotion”, aligned with “Yin” and thus inferior, embodies human desires and wants.

Consequently, people of that era advocated the notion of “inherent nature being good and emotions being evil”, emphasizing the constriction of emotions by one’s inherent nature (Ibid). In other words, human emotions were expected to conform to societal norms and rituals, embodying a balance and moderation in line with universal human nature. This is reflected in the Confucian view of literature and art as “emerging from emotions and restrained by propriety and righteousness” (Chan, 1955)<sup>[8]</sup>. Neo-Confucianism during the Song and Ming dynasties (when Confucian culture in China underwent inheritance and innovation) also emphasized the suppression of emotions, advocating the restraint of personal feelings and desires by reason (Song, 2009).

However, this tradition evolved in the middle and late Ming Dynasty, leading to the belief that human emotions should not be constrained by external “rituals” and “reason”. Li Zhi (1527-1602), for instance, argued that “ritual” should not be an imposed dogma but rather a natural emergence of personal consciousness (Ibid). Imposing the will of others in this manner was considered a violation of natural law. Pu Songling greatly revered emotions, and in many stories of *Liaozhai*, he fervently extolled true human emotions (Luo, 2009). His narratives of emotions transcending gender and species, to a certain extent, broke free from the traditional Confucian constraints on emotions, representing a form of rebellion against Confucian culture.

This paper selects three stories in *LiaoZhai* for specific analysis, including “Huang Jiulang”, “The Hermaphrodite”, and “Male Concubine”, with a focus on exploring the dominant “Yin and Yang” structure of Chinese society beyond the dual opposition between men and women in “Huang Jiulang”, as well as the unique gender mobility in male-male relationships.

### 3.1 Huang Jiulang: Intersecting Gender and Power In Chinese Narratives

“Huang Jiulang”, a representative story in *LiaoZhai* depicting male-male relationships, vividly illustrates the “Yin and Yang” relationship within the context of the cultural

structure of pre-modern Chinese society. In Huang Jiulang's tale, scholar He Zixiao met and fell in love with Huang Jiulang, a free-spirited and kind-hearted fox spirit. But due to entanglement with the fox spirit, He fell ill and passed away quickly. It was miraculous that he recovered his soul by borrowing a corpse who was forced to commit suicide by a high-ranking official, so that He was involved in disputes with the official. Considering He's health, Jiulang designed a marriage between He and his cousin. As a result, the cousin proposed to offer Jiulang to the official to resolve their grievances. Jiulang, deeply in love with He and feeling guilty towards his cousin, decided to help He by transforming into a beautiful woman and luring and killing the official (Pu & John, 2006)<sup>[9]</sup>.

In terms of character portrayal, Huang Jiulang is introduced with distinct feminized characteristics, as described: "Jiulang's elegance surpassed that of a maiden... His face was gentle like a virgin's, yet his words hinted at playfulness, causing him to blush and turn towards the wall. He spoke in a soft voice... dressed in women's attire and danced the celestial demon dance, looking every bit like a beautiful woman" (Ibid). This gender inversion solidifies Huang Jiulang's role as the "Yin", the subordinate element in the "Yin and Yang" dynamic (Song, 2004)<sup>[10]</sup>.

In terms of the plot, "Huang Jiulang" portrays He's infatuation with Jiulang – "Upon seeing him, He Sheng's spirit left his body; he watched eagerly until Jiulang disappeared and then returned home" – and his simultaneous attraction to Jiulang's beautiful cousin – "Casting a glance at the girl, her beautiful eyebrows and graceful demeanor seemed truly celestial" (Pu & John, 2006). This relationship deviates from the binary oppositions of heterosexuality or homosexuality in modern intimate relationships, where exclusivity in a tripartite relationship is a primary characteristic. He's repeated obsession with Jiulang, and his readiness to offer Jiulang to a higher authority, "the Governor", to repay a debt of "a thousand taels of silver", illustrates the narrative. Even the plot involving the cousin's scheme is necessary for He to reluctantly plead with Jiulang. This narrative highlights male chauvinism, where women are tools for men to maintain their "dignity". The cousin's scheme and Jiulang's agreement suggest that as subordinates, they are compelled to conform under this hegemonic power.

The youthfulness of Jiulang in the story reflects younger males under the resource dominance of older men, making them more susceptible to exploitation of their living space and interests. This story uses "Pederasty" to describe the male-male relationship in pre modern Chinese society, which can actually be seen as a manifestation of emotional worship in a male-dominated society. In the power dynamics, "emotion" becomes almost the sole potent weapon for the dominated to rebel, yet it is also the most easily discarded aspect by the dominators for maximizing their self-interests.

The twists in the story of "Huang Jiulang" culminate in Jiulang's deceitfully "marrying" his sister to He. Both He, the dominant lover of Jiulang, and the higher-ranking official, obtain their desired partners in various ways. This convoluted narrative reveals two aspects of same-sex relationship in premodern China: firstly, the nature of the male-male relationships under the "Pederasty" tradition in the Ming and Qing dynasties is essentially a gimmick of male chauvinism. Its uniqueness lies in highlighting the "gender fluidity" in emotional relationships and the dominance-submission dynamics in power relations. Unlike modern relationships marked by clear gender boundaries, it is

this vague “gender fluidity” that constructs a male-male relationship distinct from modern homosexuality and bisexuality. In the initial interaction between He and Jiulang, their relationship brims with mutual affection, hinting at a modern homosexual undertone. However, the actions of He’s reincarnation mercilessly erase this undertone, emphasizing the narrative of “Yin-Yang” power relations instead.

Pu’s closing statement in the story, “Men and women cohabiting symbolize the great order of husband and wife” (Pu & John, 2006), alongside the novel’s plot, indicates his rejection of male-male sexual relationships while acknowledging the occurrence of “Yin-Yang” relationships transcending gender. More directly, the “male-male relationships” in modern homosexuality are based on an egalitarian, at least seemingly, premise of identity, but the “Pederasty” relationships depicted in the story exist under the control of the dominant “Yang” and the passive, choiceless position of the subordinate “Yin”, essentially manifesting as an act of male chauvinism.

### 3.2 The Hermaphrodite: Power Dynamics in Gender Ambiguity

“The Hermaphrodite” from *LiaoZhai* presents a starker portrayal of male-male relationships under the lens of desire compared to “Huang Jiulang”, emphasizing the “Yin and Yang” dynamics within the power structure through both physiological and social gender fluidity.

In the narrative, the character Wang Erxi undergoes a transformation of both his social and biological gender. The narrative recounts the scheme orchestrated by Ma Wanbao and his wife, Mrs. Ma. They cunningly lure a “girl”, who was residing at their neighbor’s home, to their abode under the guise of providing Mrs. Ma with a massage. In the cover of night, Ma Wanbao stealthily took his place in the bed, harboring the illicit intention of assaulting the “girl”. However, in an unforeseen twist, this “girl” was revealed to be a man masquerading in disguise, harboring similar malevolent intentions to exploit the “massage” opportunity to violate a virtuous woman. However, struck by Wang Erxi’s physical allure, Ma Wanbao subjected Wang Erxi to castration and subsequently rechristened him as a woman “Wang Erjie”. Ma Wanbao retained Wang Erjie for nocturnal intimacies. By day, Wang Erjie was relegated to domestic servitude and performed chores akin to those of a maid or a concubine (Pu & John, 2006).

Initially appearing in women’s clothing, Wang is described as “having a certain charm”, attracting the attention of Ma Wanbao (Ibid). This act of cross-dressing, a unique cultural behavior, enables Wang Erxi to adopt a female social gender. He exploits this disguise to molest respectable women, successfully deceiving sixteen of them. This is a deliberate and conscious choice by Wang Erxi, using the guise of a socially subordinate female to gain personal benefits, thus positioning himself as the actual dominator in those relationships. This temporary shift in social gender serves as a tool for Wang Erxi, who is biologically male, to reinforce his own position of power and control.

The story thus highlights how gender fluidity, both in its social and physiological aspects, can be manipulated within the confines of a patriarchal society, with Wang Erxi’s initial actions representing a strategic subversion of traditional gender roles to assert dominance.

In “The Hermaphrodite”, the narrative delves into the complexities of male-male relationships through the lens of desire, shedding light on power dynamics and gender fluidity. Ma Wanbao, initially attracted to the beauty of Wang Erxi disguised in women’s clothing, intends to rape him, believing him to be a woman. Upon discovering Wang’s true male identity, Ma’s initial inclination is to hand him over for legal punishment. However, captivated by Wang’s beauty, Ma decides to castrate him instead, effectively altering both Wang’s physiological and social gender roles.

After castration, Wang becomes “The Hermaphrodite”, inherently assuming a subordinate position in his relationship with Ma, rooted in sexual desire. This transformation from “Wang Erxi” to “Wang Erjie” signifies a shift from a male deceiver of women to a marginalized and exploited eunuch. His role in relation to Ma is one of complete subjugation. Additionally, in his interactions with Mrs. Ma, Wang assumes a subservient role, performing domestic tasks and being fully subjected to her control. This process leaves Wang, representing “Yin”, without any choice or agency.

From Ma Wanbao’s perspective, as the embodiment of “Yang”, he maintains a position of dominance. Despite his initial hesitation upon discovering Wang’s true gender, he accepts and exploits Wang, indicating that his attraction to Wang’s beauty transcends the traditional male-female binary opposition. This acceptance and the ensuing relationship dynamics can be viewed as a challenge to traditional cultural norms.

The story, therefore, not only exemplifies the complexities of male-male relationships in ancient Chinese society but also extends these dynamics to heterosexual relationships. Fundamentally, these relationships are underpinned by a power structure characterized by dominance and subordination, “Yin and Yang”. The narrative thus reflects the societal norms and constraints of the time, where gender roles and relationships were heavily influenced by power dynamics and societal expectations.

In the conclusion of “The Hermaphrodite”, author Pu Songling provides a critical commentary, stating, “The historian says: Ma Wanbao can be considered adept at using people. Children like to play with crabs but fear their claws, so they break off the claws and keep them. Alas! If this principle is understood, it can be used to govern the world.”(Ibid). This metaphor, comparing the act of castration to the breaking of a crab’s claws, elevates it to a political strategy. This passage reflects Pu Songling’s high regard for Ma Wanbao’s manipulative tactics, acknowledging the effectiveness of such measures in maintaining control and order.

This metaphor and the subsequent praise for Ma’s actions serve as a commentary on the power dynamics in traditional Chinese society, particularly the dominance of “Yang” (masculine, active force) over “Yin” (feminine, passive force). The crab analogy implies a strategy of removing potential threats or opposition to ensure compliance and control. By admiring such tactics, Pu Songling indirectly endorses the prevailing social norm of the strong dominating the weak, a reflection of the broader societal context where power and control were paramount. This perspective, while highlighting the cunning and strategic aspects of leadership and control, also underscores the gendered power imbalances inherent in traditional Chinese society. It suggests a world where the powerful manipulate and reshape the powerless for their purposes, echoing the broader themes of dominance and subordination explored in the narrative.

### 3.3 Male Concubine: Challenging Gender Norms and Emotional Bonds

In “Male Concubine”, the plot shares similarities with “The Hermaphrodite”. A woman who sells concubines dresses a handsome boy as a young girl to profit from his sale. The gentleman who purchases the boy is initially shocked upon discovering the truth, facing a dilemma of “indecision” (Ibid). This reaction is akin to that of Ma Wanbao in “The Hermaphrodite”; despite his hesitation, the gentleman’s pursuit of beauty transcends gender boundaries. The eventual removal of the male concubine by a friend suggests that such a pursuit of beauty beyond the binary concept of male and female was relatively common at the time. Treated like a commodity, the male concubine is freely bought, sold, and given away. Although biologically male, his social gender is fluid, and he occupies a submissive, “Yin” position in emotional relationships.

In the conclusion of “Male Concubine”, Pu offers a poignant commentary: “If one encounters a kindred spirit, even the beauty of a South Wei is not to be exchanged. Why should the unknowing old woman create such a false situation?” (Ibid). This statement highlights Pu’s admiration for the concept of a kindred spirit, a bond that transcends the binary opposition of male and female. This kind of connection, according to Pu, is so profound that it surpasses even the beauty of the most attractive person. Pu emphasizes that such a bond would endure even without the disguise of femininity, implying that genuine emotional connection is more valuable than physical appearance or gender. The articulation of such emotions signifies a spontaneous interaction between souls and individuals, surpassing the confines of social ethics and conventional norms.

In this way, “Male Concubine” serves as a powerful testament to Pu’s exploration of the multifaceted nature of human relationships, beauty, and the ever-evolving societal constructs surrounding gender. His narratives continue to challenge conventional norms, showcasing the timeless relevance of his works in understanding the complexities of human emotion and connection.

These narratives from Pu reveal the complexities of gender and emotional relationships in historical Chinese society. They explore themes of beauty, desire, and power dynamics, often challenging traditional gender norms and societal expectations. Pu’s writings not only provide entertainment but also offer insightful commentary on the human condition and the societal constructs of his time.

## 4 Conclusion

In summary, this study explores the dynamic flow of “yin and yang” power and the rich expression of emotional culture in pre modern China through a detailed interpretation of the plot, language, and meaning mapping of three stories in *Liaozhai*. The prominence of the “Yin and Yang” power dynamic within pre modern Chinese society underscores the significant role it played in reshaping gender norms and fostering a sense of gender fluidity. This framework not only challenged traditional gender restrictions but also paved the way for distinct characteristics in male relationships of that era, setting them apart from modern-day gay and bisexual relationships. Likewise, these relationships offer a window into the bold expression of emotions. These sentiments, remarkably distinct and vibrant, challenge the conventional tenets of Confucian ritual

propriety. They represent a return to the intrinsic desires of the individual, thus unveiling the emotional panorama of pre-modern Chinese society. These historical dynamics offer a unique lens through which we can examine the intersection of power, desire, and societal expectations in ancient China, enriching our understanding of the multi-faceted nature of human relationships and their evolution over time.

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