

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### REVIEW ESSAY

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#### **Historicizing Queer Stories from Asia**

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Lucetta Yip Lo Kam. *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013. 152 pp. \$45 (cloth), \$25 (paper).

J. Keith Vincent. *Two-Timing Modernity: Homosocial Narrative in Modern Japanese Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2012. 248 pp. \$40 (cloth).

Two recent studies in queer cultural criticism, Lucetta Kam's *Shanghai Lalas* and J. Keith Vincent's *Two-Timing Modernity*, offer contrastive accounts of the formation of queer subjectivities, identities, and historical memories in East Asia. These two works treat different societies and come from disparate disciplines: whereas Kam's qualitative ethnography employs interviews with twenty-five *lala* (lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) women in Shanghai, Vincent's contemplative account offers insight into such topics as the betweenness of the homosocial and the homoerotic, the heterodiegetic tendencies of naturalism, and the Girardian triangle of internal mediation. While Kam and Vincent bring their own disciplinary approaches to generate powerful readings of incommensurable archives of evidence (oral history and fiction), both authors are ultimately more interested in reading society as a text. Kam and Vincent, then, embody two different approaches to writing queer historiography, with important disagreements on the transition from a premodern culture of homoerotic richness to a self-conscious gay and lesbian identity in East Asia. The juxtaposition also reveals the fortunes of queer "theory" in a field that was, until recently, impervious to this mode of inquiry. Reading Vincent's emphatically Sedgwickian study, I cannot help but ponder the vast difference between

the early 1990s, when theories of the “homosocial continuum” were positions one had to argue for, and today, when these positions have become, to borrow a term from Sedgwick, axiomatic, even in East Asian studies. Kam’s work is informed by different kinds of theory that are circulating in East Asia, including the theory of reticent poetics developed by Naifei Ding and Jen-peng Liu, which provides the basis of her critiques of gay normalization.

Based on the participatory ethnography Kam conducted in Shanghai between 2005 and 2011, *Shanghai Lalas* offers a textured portrait of *lala* women’s everyday struggles, adopting a bifocal view of their “public” and “private” experiences. In the public dimension, Kam examines how new technologies (such as the Internet) transformed *lala* community building, identities, and modes of intimacy. Kam also usefully situates the emergence of these new public cultures and discourses within the context of China’s sociopolitical transformations. In so doing, Kam extends Lisa Rofel’s influential analysis of the birth of postsocialist subjects under neoliberalism in *Desiring China* (2007). In the private dimension, Kam examines *lala* women’s strategies for coping with the pressure of marriage. These strategies include cooperative marriage (between two lesbians and two gay men), secret dual life, and heterosexual acting. Kam develops an innovative concept, “the politics of public correctness” (89) to describe these tactics of survival. Kam’s careful readings of the complex negotiations between public and private in the articulations of sexual identity offer an important alternative to popular theories of Chinese homosexual tolerance.

Vincent’s *Two-Timing Modernity* is a beautifully written book that combines ingenious close readings of literary texts (Mori Ogai’s *The Wild Goose*, Natsume Soseki’s *Kokoro*, Hamao Shiro’s *The Devil’s Disciple*, and Mishima Yukio’s *Confessions of a Mask*) with contextual analysis, reception history, and queer theory. The homosocial narrative of the first half of Japan’s twentieth century exhibits a two-timing quality, staging the tensions between the forward-looking time of modernization, which is associated with compulsory heterosexuality, and the backward-looking time of a queer past, which is alternately construed as a melancholic wound worthy of remembrance or quarantined as a queer interlude that has no further claim on the present. Vincent’s work can be seen as a Japanese and male counterpart to Fran Martin’s *Backward Glances* (2010), which argues that contemporary Chinese representations of female same-sex relations are dominated by an analeptic or backward-looking temporal logic that simultaneously frames female homoeroticism in youth as a universal and even ennobling

experience and asserts its impossibility in adulthood. Vincent is interested in two different kinds of temporalities. One is the critical historical moment of the first half of the twentieth century, during which literary texts straddle the homosocial continuum and a cordoned-off identity of male-male sexuality. Here, Vincent finds important clues in mainstream critics' relative disinterest in the question of homosexuality in *Confessions of a Mask*, which allow him to demonstrate that notions such as "gay identity" and "the first gay novel" (175) are always embedded in and mediated by specific cultural scripts. Vincent also considers the narrative or rhetorical structure of the text itself. Through brilliant readings of the narratology of sexuality, Vincent shows how the examined texts construct a particular logic of time within their stories while participating in and facilitating a larger epistemic shift in Japanese culture and values. For Vincent, the proper analysis of sexuality must examine not only the content of a narrative but also its structure of address, ordering of events, and mode of signification—something we learn from narratology. Vincent argues, for example, that *Kokoro*'s narrative structure is haunted by a "primal scene" (90) of Sensei's past relationship with his friend K, which then becomes a "bloody legacy" (86) a homosocial friendship between Sensei and the novel's first narrator that the latter has since outgrown. The ways in which textual objects (such as letters) are transmitted, consumed, and remembered within *Kokoro* enable a larger temporal narrative about the transition from a homosocial to a heterosocial world.

Neither Kam nor Vincent uses the word *queer* to refer to the object of their analysis. Kam keeps the language of her ethnographic accounts of self-identified *lala* women accurate; her analysis is also informed by a political and intellectual need to distinguish Chinese *tongzhi* and *lala* from their Euro-American counterparts. As Kam develops her account of the emergence of distinctive and self-assertive *tongzhi* and *lala* identities and communities in today's China, she also highlights the dilemmas and complexities of sexual subjects to reject the postulation of a tolerant homoerotic tradition in premodern China. By contrast, Vincent's study is premised on the hypothesis that love between men was understood as a continuum and richly represented by cultural artifacts through the Edo (1600–1868) and early Meiji (1868–1912) periods, and that such relations became stigmatized and pathologized only in modern times. Nonetheless, Vincent's thesis emphasizes overlapping temporalities against the assumption of a "rupture" between premodern homosociality and modern homosexuality. Vincent's sensitivity to the internally contradictory senses of time produces important revisionist histories, such as the

argument that *Confessions of a Mask* is not the first gay novel, but the end of a homosocial narrative tradition that paradoxically marks the still-birth of modern gay identity. In my view, these animated debates are the most dynamic aspects of East Asian queer cultural criticism today, to which Kam and Vincent have made invaluable contributions.

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### ***References***

- Martin, Fran. 2010. *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rofel, Lisa. 2007. *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.