

Patricia Sieber, ed., *Red Is Not The Only Color: Contemporary Chinese Fiction on Love and Sex between Women, Collected Stories*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001, 200 pp.

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- 1 This book is a touching co-operative product among the editor and women writers and translators. The stories are well chosen, with a cultural complexity and diversity that is quite remarkable. It is not the typical identity politics-driven coming out stories you expect. The stories move by their intellectual depth and emotional maturity, without hiding the historical complexity, cultural blind spots and social limitations and freedom that they come out of. The originals are chosen from widely acclaimed or seasoned writers from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China.
- 2 Patricia Sieber's translation of PRC writer Zhang Mei brings out very well the tone of the writer. Zhang's "A Record" is an ethnographical search for the disappearing culture of the "self-wedded women" in Shunde, Southern China. Among these self-wedded women were lovers who their contemporaries called "couples of intimates" (*liangxiangzhi*). The female narrator is a self-critical intellectual woman who sees the impossibility of recovering the lost culture of female-female love and sex among working and independent women of the past. She is sceptical and ironic about men and their culture industry's prying fascination with these rebellious women of the past. The story shows love and sex between women as an integral part of an entire place and time. It resists the desire to tokenise the marginal. The observations about capitalism's effects in Southern China, and about the ways of life of women past and present are remarkably avid and condensed, although the nasty side of capitalism seems too easily displaced onto the guy from Hong Kong, China's capitalist alter ego.

- 3 Paola Zamperini's translation of PRC writer Chen Ran is also superb. Chen Ran's "Breaking Open" has a didactic tone bordering towards a feminist manifesto. It is delivered as highly intellectual and soul-searching discussions between two women who are proud of their cultural elitism. It took a lot of philosophising, the threat of death, and the endorsement of the dead mother's spirit for these women to break open their sexually tabooed language and body towards a shy declaration of love and of the desire for sexual intimacy. I find Chen Ran's language and imagination trite. The declaration of love prompted by a dream about an impending air crash is too off-the-shelf. Also, the intellectual elitism seems a bit snobbish. However, she is not alone on this point.
- 4 The long intense conversations and epistolary form reappear in the PRC writer Wang Anyi's "Brothers", translated by Zhang Jingyuan. It is a similar story of three PRC women who are artists and intellectuals. This novella is about three inseparable women artists whose sisterhood gloriously hijacks the language, camaraderie, bodily and intellectual freedom of men. The "brotherhood" of these women turns gradually rough as they one by one struggle with the imperatives of heterosexual love, sex, marriage and children under Communist rule. The endearing emotional intensity and brazen language and thoughts of the women shine through in the translation. Both men and women struggle with and within the blind spots of gender essentialism in the culture. Mother love sabotages women-women love. Jealous husbands are contrasted with the struggles of a liberal husband. It is a story about how far feminist liberation can go within the limitations of this society. It is about how far an intense love between women can go until the family and marriage structure can no longer tolerate it. Rather than awareness of lesbianism and sexual exploration, the story is about intense and exclusive women friendships breaking apart under the pressure of society.
- 5 Unlike the PRC women's intellectually elitist and snobbish position against the inevitable commercialisation of Chinese culture, fabulous and versatile Hong Kong writer Wong Bikwan's "She's a Young Woman and So am I" however, attacks both. She tries a double-edged take on the age-old struggle between intellectual and material aspirations through the story of a closeted lesbian relationship between two college friends living together. Their erotic relationship breaks apart when the butch partner cynically buys into the life of the academic, and is abandoned by the femme who dives into decadent glamour and wealth. The Hong Kong writer, rather than being unselfconsciously elitist like the PRC writers, is more self-aware and ironic about the body-mind split and the pathos of intellectual and artistic talents crushed in a popular culture of mediocre commercialism. However, this does not mean that the story fits into the cliché about Hong Kong as a commercial cultural desert. Its language at once displays and cynically jibes at the representational logic that turns Hong Kong subjects into self-fulfilling prophecies. However, Naifei Ding's translation, perhaps because of her unfamiliarity with Cantonese inflections and turns of phrases, loses some of the subtle irony, cruel humour and uncanny choice of words that Wong is famous for. Where Wong's signature tone is missing, the story may exhume the pretentiousness that the author actually tries to wreck.
- 6 The sexual and social taboos against love and sex between women in the PRC and Hong Kong stories are also found in the Taiwanese stories. He An's "Andante" is translated by Sieber and especially written for this volume. I did not have a chance to compare the original with the translation. It is again a love story about artistic and intellectual women, a category abundant in this volume. A lesbian musician is betrayed and abandoned by her

high-school lover in Taiwan and gradually learns to trust in another lesbian relationship with another lesbian musician in the United States. The difficult sexual coming out in Taiwan, the pressure of having boyfriends, and the homophobia that even the closeted lesbian lovers themselves sometimes display, is echoed also in the story “Lips” by another Taiwanese writer Liang Hanyi, translated by Kimberly Besio. This story brings out most explicitly the pressures of homophobia and mainstream taboo on women’s sexuality. A kiss by a close high-school friend becomes a sexually inhibiting trauma. The outed and stigmatised lesbian dying of tuberculosis is a bit too melodramatic, notwithstanding that death is a common theme in lesbian culture in Taiwan.

- 7 The other Taiwanese stories however, go to the other extreme. Taiwanese writer Chen Xue’s impossible combination of a sexually explicit language and an emotional sincerity bordering on innocence comes out very well in Sieber’s translation. Chen Xue’s story “In Search of the Lost Wings of the Angels” is the most sexually explicit in the collection. It is a discovery of lesbian sexual desire through its entanglement with parent loss, trauma and recovery. The fine struggle between bisexuality and lesbian sexuality stays powerful in the translation. Chen Xue is often credited for inventing the language of women’s eroticism and sex for contemporary Chinese language. Paola Zamperini’s translation of Taiwanese writer Hong Ling’s young vampire femme fatal in “Fever” is also an erotic and melancholic little gem. It is a futuristic mourning of a lost lesbian lover. Hong’s vampires and other uncannies have together, become a genre of her own.
- 8 All in all, I am delighted that the book fulfils its role as a long-awaited forerunner. Its well footnoted introduction shows familiarity with all the important relevant scholarship existing in English as well as certain feminist constituencies in Taiwan. Its cultural and historical contextualisation is fair, except that there is an obvious lack of knowledge of Hong Kong culture and history that borders on the stereotypical. I find the “critical” biographies of the authors very useful. Thus, to celebrate and compliment this book, I would like to announce a collection of first love stories between woman that came out in Hong Kong at the same time in 2001: *Commotion: Her’s and Her’s First Love Stories (Saodong: tata de chulian gushi)*, is edited by Jin Hualu, designed by Jin Peiwei, and published by Hong Kong’s Cultural Act Up. In fact, a lot of stories and even films about women’s sexualities coming out of Hong Kong, Taiwan and the PRC are circulating on the web. I strongly encourage the reader to venture into these works. A lot are surprising and refreshing.