

Queer as Fact – Episode 6 – Queer Love in Early Chinese History

Hamish: Hello, and welcome to Queer as Fact! I'm Hamish.

Irene: I'm Irene.

Alice: I'm Alice.

H: We are a fortnightly queer history podcast, and each episode we talk about a person, event or a topic from Queer History.

[music plays]

H: Just a heads—up. We have some content warnings for this episode. There's lot of political and palace intrigue so we have tales of suicide, murder, poisonings, and if that doesn't sound like something you'd like to hear we have plenty of other content that I'm sure that you'll love.

The three stories that we have for you today are all stories from around the Warring States period, the Qin period and the Han period and they're all used in later Chinese writing to allude euphemistically to earlier homosexuality as a way of referring to homosexuality in their own time or in the history that they've talking about.

In polite society it generally wasn't done to speak about sex of any kind, and so these allusions are used even in heterosexual situations to allude to sex or sexual activity to give a veneer of respectability to the description of carnal acts, because you can't go around saying, 'Wow! The emperor sure did have a penis in his mouth this morning!'

I: [laughs]

H: You have to be a little bit more polite about it, and so you find things like in 18th century Western literature you find people referring to the Sin of Sodom, so that they can refer to a very respectable thing in referring to some very explicitly sexual action.

I: If it had been my penis in the emperor's mouth—

H: You totally would have said, yeah—

I: I... yes.

[laughter]

I: 'Wow, the emperor sure did have a penis in his mouth!'

H: Notably all these stories are about noble men because those are the people who are doing all of the writing at the time, because—

I: Yep.

H: —it's the 1st century CE. It's actually arranged from like, the 3rd century BCE out to the 1st century CE, and so female education is not particularly advanced at this time, and so we unfortunately don't have very many records of queer women.

This is a very exciting period to be alive if you're young and gay, because not only are there a great many avenues for advancement, but homosexuality isn't persecuted in this time at all. It's very conventional for lords and kings to take gay lovers and have them be a public figure in the same way that their consorts and their female wives are public figures, and it's not unusual for lords and

especially for the aristocracy to take multiple lovers of either gender. It does make it a little difficult to find specific mentions to homosexual activity in the time because you find that when a lord is gay it's not really mentioned because it's not exceptional and so you'll find that there are stories about weird things that lords did and if their gay lover comes into in then that's when they get mentioned—

I: Mmhm.

H: —but because we live in kind of a weird paradise in this period—

I: I mean it's obviously not a paradise unless you're a wealthy lord with a gay lover.

H: No.

A: Yeah.

I: But—

H: But if you are a wealthy lord with a gay lover it's paradise; it's amazing and you get silken robes and carriages and everything is fantastic.

But these particular stories have survived and entered language because they were notable from earlier chronicles and histories and in one case a political handbook.

I: [laughs] 'How To Be A Gay Emperor'.

H: Kind of, yes. Actually just 'How to be a good politician' and then the reason that this story comes up is because it's relevant to the point. It's super normalised. Let's just go straight to the story.

This comes from the Book of Han Fei Zi.

I: Yeah, Han Fei Zi.

H: Han Fei Zi. Irene will be doing some of the pronunciation for this episode because she speaks Chinese and I do not at all.

I: Bearing in mind that Irene is also a second language Chinese speaker and her pronunciation is not perfect. I can't speak for the tones. Zi is usually toneless I think.

H: Yes, it's an honorific, it's like 'Master Han Fei'—

I: Yeah.

H: —who wrote a big legal handbook. He's a really important legalist philosopher, which is kind of a misnomer. He's not really a philosopher in the way that we would think of them today. He's not concerned with like, ontology or ethics or—

A: Sorry, what's ontology?

H: It's like, knowing about knowing stuff.

A: Oh, okay, yes.

I: It's all that stuff that philosophers talk about.

A: Yeah.

H: Yeah.

I: —when you're reading them and you're like 'Okay, but why?'

A: Okay.

H: We'd think of him today as almost a political scientist.

A: Mmhm.

H: This work that he writes is written during the Warring States period. Later we're going to hear about a source that is 'The Intrigues of the Warring States Period' and it's incredibly long because the Warring States period was complex and full of about eight or nine warring states vying for control of China where the emperor's power has sort of waned in so far as he can even be called an emperor at all. There are a bunch of small, like, duchy-sized states vying for power.

I: They tend to call them warlords but that seems to be a thing that happens in Asian history where they call warlords things that we would probably call—

A: —lords?

I: Yeah. [laughs]

H: Yeah.

I: Basically.

A: I'm picturing like 'Game of Thrones' here?

H: Yeah.

I: Yeah, basically.

H: Actually this section geographically looks like the maps that you find at the start of a 'Game of Thrones' novel.

A: Yep.

H: But it's actually the third story we get to that really turns into 'Game of Thrones'. It's like thirty years long and is made up of palace intrigue and it's amazing.

But this text is a political manual written during that period, and it's all to do with how to persuade your lord and how to get your opinions heard in court and so forth, and the section that we're interested in is entitled 'Difficulties in Persuading One's Lord'.

I: So, is what this book actually is 'So, if this isn't working, seduce your lord.'

H: No. [laughs] Not quite.

I: Damn it.

H: This is actually just an anecdote that is used to illustrate how somebody's changing affections towards you, how their personal disposition, their likes and their dislikes, affect how your advice is received and how you are viewed. It's the story of Mizi Xia.

I: Mizi Xia.

H: Okay. This fellow, Mizi Xia is - as all of these stories start - an attractive young man who catches the eye of a lord. And when I say 'all of these stories', I mean *all* of these stories that we're going to talk about today are an attractive young man catching the eye of a lord.

And so he becomes very close with the Lord of Wei, who is occasionally called the Duke of Wei, is sometimes called the Warlord of Wei, but he's the king of the state of Wei, which is a particularly unlucky state that ends up right in the middle of all of the warring states with a border with Qin—

I: Oh no.

H: Yes, who eventually take over everything and form the Qin Dynasty. Later they then fall to the Han Dynasty who have a succession of emperors, one of whom is flamboyantly gay who we will get to later.

I: Excellent.

H: It's noted that he particularly doesn't like women, whereas it's normal for a lord to take male and female lovers.

A: Ah, I see. So he was gay as opposed to what we might call bisexual.

H: Yes, exactly.

A: Okay.

H: But that won't be relevant for a while and we should probably have that conversation again in context with the third story.

A: Okay.

H: So Mizi Xia is a young man who is very pretty and catches the eye of the Lord of Wei, and he goes about with the Lord of Wei for some time and they have a law at that time that says 'Whoever in secret rides in the ruler's carriage shall have his feet cut off' which I think is one of those ironic punishments, where it's like 'Oh, you don't want to walk, do you? Well you'll never walk again!'

A: So when they say 'Whoever in secret rides in his lord's carriage—'

H: If he goes and steals his lord's carriage.

A: Oh, okay, yep yep yep. I understand.

I: If he's in there with the lord it's not secret. The lord knows he's there.

H: Exactly.

A: Okay.

H: And then one night his mother falls ill and he receives a letter saying 'Your mother is terribly ill' and so he forges a letter from the lord, and goes down to his carriage, and says, 'Hey, the lord has said I can have this carriage for the night. Give it to me.'

I: Where's the lord? Why doesn't he just ask him?

H: I'm not sure. It's not detailed. The context in which this comes up is just the telling of this story about him stealing a carriage and then there's also an interlude with a peach, so it's not a super detailed account of the history at the time.

I: Yep.

H: It's just a passing anecdote in this political manual.

I: Okay.

H: We don't really know details about what the lord is doing. We know that he existed but apart from that, not very much.

I: Okay.

H: So he rushes down to the carriage, and gives them this letter and nicks off with the carriage, and then the lord finds out about this later and then he's like, 'Oh, my dear boy! Look how devoted and loving and what filial piety he has that he would risk losing his own feet for his mother!'

I: Aww.

A: Mmhm.

H: Yeah.

I: How Confucian.

H: Exactly, yes.

There's another time when the two of them are walking in an orchard and Mizi Xia picks up a peach and bites into the peach and finds it so delicious and sweet that he cannot bear to finish it and must give it to his lord because it's—

A: Aww.

H: Right! Exactly! Because it's so delicious and he thinks that his lord will enjoy it more. And this is where the translation that I have breaks down a little bit; it's not a very idiomatic translation, but the lord then says 'You love me so much indeed that you would even forget your own saliva taste and let me eat the rest of the peach!'

I: [laughs]

H: It should be noted that this translation comes from a man called W.K. Liao who translated it in Hong Kong in 1939 and is also a free translation—

I: Yep.

H: —and a little bit old. It's not as elegant as it could be; it's not in modern idiomatic language because translation was a little bit more literal a little while ago.

I: And did include the phrase 'saliva taste'.

H: And then this is used as an illustrative point in that manual where he then says that as Mizi Xia's looks began to fade and he became older and greyer and the colour went out of his face his lord turned against him and once when he offended him he said, 'This young fellow once stole my carriage without my permission, and he even gave me a half-eaten peach to eat!'

A: Ahh.

I: What a bastard.

H: Yeah, right. And he then is not positively disposed towards Mizi Xia—

I: Yeah.

H: —and so his opinions are not heard at court, and that's the context in which it's used in this manual. But because this manual is so important, in later literature when people refer to love between two men, they speak about 'passions of the bitten peach' —

[laughter]

H: —which always makes me think of somebody biting a perfectly round arse.

A: Yeah that was... yeah. [laughs]

H: Yeah. Which is one of these three stories that's entered into language.

The second story that we have comes from around the same time and exactly the same place. It's also to do with a Lord of Wei, and it's not clear if it's the same Lord of Wei or if it's a different Lord of Wei. There are about six or seven in the time that Wei existed as a state.

A: Can I just ask — so you said before that we knew the Lord of Wei existed, but not much else.

H: Yes.

A: So these stories are just anecdotal.

H: Yes.

A: Yep.

H: So these — this first one was published in the mid-3rd century BCE. So that was still during the Warring States period.

A: Mmhm.

H: But then this second one is published in the 1st century CE and is talking about events some 150 to 300 years prior.

A: Okay, yeah.

H: And they all take the form of like, almost parables—

A: Mmhm.

H: —and anecdotes, except for the last one which has a detailed history.

A: Okay.

I: We could possibly find out. There is a lot of written history of Imperial China.

A: Mmhm.

H: Yes.

I: —but it might not be within our means in terms of obtaining resources in English or—

H: Yes.

We do have — and this is the source that we're drawing from now — we have 'The Strategies and Intrigues of the Warring States' which is a big volume that is compiled by Liu Xiang—

I: Liu Xiang.

H: —who is a notable scholar who compiled and edited the Imperial libraries in the 1st century CE—

I: Mmhm.

H: —and found in them six volumes, or rather six editions, of this same book that were all terrible edited and had words missing and sections ripped out and then cross—referenced the six editions together and came out with these histories of the warring states. We're not entirely sure who wrote them. We think that they were written over a long period of time, and so they're probably contemporary with some of the goings-on in the Warring States period.

I: Mmhm.

H: But they were compiled and edited about a century later during the Han Dynasty, so like, a full dynasty on the other side of the Warring States period. But it does give us some great information about things that were going on, and some political details and so forth, and in it we have full accounts of everything that happened to the state of Wei.

I: Mmhm.

H: In that period. And sandwiched in better 'Wei attacked Guan but did not subdue it' and 'Qin was pressing an attack upon Wei' and a bunch of other really dry things like 'Qin took Ning Yi' and 'The King of Qin sent a messenger to speak to the Prince of An Ling' we have 'The King of Wei and the Prince of Long Yang were fishing in the same boat with rod and line'.

I: [laughs]

H: Which is just this adorable domestic story sandwiched in between these great political movements and machinations.

A: That's good. I have a very good mental image of them just like peacefully floating in a boat on a river—

H: Yes!

A —while war rages around them, like—

H: Hold this peaceful image of them floating in a boat on the river, and then imagine, as the chronicle specifies, that the attractive young man, who is the Prince of Long Yang, but he's also called Lord Long Yang. I should make it clear that this translation, also free, that I picked up was literally typewritten and then scanned.

A: Ohhh.

I: Oh dear.

H: So it's not clear.

A: Mmhm.

H: It's possible that his name was just Long Yang.

A: Okay.

I: I am reminded a little bit in this fishing trip of those letters you read, like the Tsar in Russia writing to the Kaiser in Germany, being like 'Hi Wilhelm. It's looks like our countries are at war. Are you still on for that hunting trip?'

H: [laughs]

A: I love those letters.

H: That's kind of cute. I like that.

A: [laughs]

I: Yeah. They're cousins or something.

A: Yeah, they're cousins.

H: Yes.

A: They're cousins.

H: 'Cause everyone's a cousin at that time.

Anyway, the Lord of Wei is chilling in a boat with his young lover, Lord Long Yang.

A: Mmhm.

H: And Lord Long Yang catches more than ten fish.

I: Wow, he's quite good at this.

H: Yes.

A: With rod and line.

H: With rod and line. It doesn't specify how many fish he catches exactly but it says that he does catch more than ten fish.

A: [laughs]

H: At which point he starts crying.

I: [laughs]

A: Oh no!

H: And the King of Wei turns around and is like, "Honey, what's wrong?" and Lord Long Yang is like, 'I am like a thrown-back fish!' and so the King of Wei says, 'Well that doesn't make any sense at all. You're going to have to explain. I'm sorry.' And Lord Long Yang says, 'Well, in the beginning, I caught small fish, but now I am catching larger fish and I want to throw back the fish that I have already caught. I am like those thrown-back fish because I have achieved such great status; I am like a prince among men because you heap your affections on me; I make people hurry in the palace and people get out of my way on the road. And surely, when all of the other more handsome men of your kingdom see that these affections have been heaped upon me they will pluck up the hems of their robes and come hurrying to your side,' and the King of Wei is like 'Aw, honey, no!'

[laughter]

I and A: Aww.

[laughter]

A: That was very cute.

H: Yeah, it's adorable. And then when he gets back to shore he issues an edict saying 'If anybody dare speak of any other beautiful man to me, they shall be executed along with their entire family.'

[laughter]

A Wow.

H: Yeah.

I: Romantic gestures from emperors.

A: Yeah.

H: Yes. They definitely get a little bit out of hand.

A: Just out of interest—

H: Yes.

A: —which we probably don't, but I kind of want us to - do we have any legal texts from that time, like, mentioning whether this law really existed?

H: I can't say.

A: Okay. [laughs] 'Cause I would enjoy that.

I: Possibly? It would take more research. I'm not sure.

A: Yeah.

H: Hm.

I: But it seems possible.

H: I would believe that that's the reason that this particular anecdote is in there—

A: Mmhm

H: —in the big history of all of these, you know, attacks and defences and messengers sent to kings, that the outcome of that was this edict—

I: Yep.

H: —which said 'If anyone speaks to the king about a sexier man than his boyfriend they shall be put to death.

A: [laughs]

H: And that's why it ended up in the history.

I: This doesn't sound out of the scope of normal king behaviour—

A: Okay.

I: —to be honest.

A: 'Cause I know it's the sort of story that we tell about kings, but I was wondering if it was realistic to the sort of laws they were passing at the time.

H: That is honestly nothing compared to the crazy king behaviour that we are about to get in to in our longest story, story three—

A: Okay, cool.

H: —which is all about Emperor Ai of the Han Dynasty, which is the second dynasty after the Qin Dynasty falls.

A: So Warring States, Qin, Han.

H: Yes.

A: Cool.

H: —which is detailed in great length in the frankly enormous ‘Histories of the Han’ which is incredibly detailed and incredibly long and initially gets its author thrown in prison because people are worried about how they will talk about the rise of the Western and the Eastern Han. There was some political division in the empire which I’m not entirely clear about, but eventually, his brother got him out of prison and then the author, who is a fellow named Ban Gu—

I: Ban Gu. Yeah, that’s fine.

H: —is able to submit his work to the emperor, and the emperor’s like, ‘Hey! This is great!’—

A: Mhm.

H: —and then authorises him to write the enormous history of the Han, which includes the story of the emperor Ai. And then he got to finish his history, which was written based on his father’s research, and then he died and his sister had to finish it because it was so enormous, and then it was published about ten years after Ban Gu’s death.

I: Okay, so his sister had to finish it?

H: Yes.

I: There’s at least one educated woman in this place.

H: Yes! She is, I think, the only one that I heard mentioned in my entire search through these three stories. It’s quite possible that there are more, and there are definitely some very powerful women in this particular story, who may or may not have been educated, but it certainly seems that they were at least writing letters a lot.

A: That suggests they’re educated.

H: Yes.

A: They’re literate. That’s hard in Chinese.

H: Yes.

I: I was going to say, that’s pretty much the whole of education in Chineese.

H: There’s definitely – and you’ll see early in this story – there’s an expectation that people will be educated in politics and in law and in literature, so just having basic writing education isn’t necessarily what you would consider education. There’s a formal education system in place and there’s also a series of examinations for political posts that you are required to know a lot of law for.

I: I was about to say, I said that's the whole of education. I mean that as an exaggeration. There were many things.

H: Yes.

I: They had a very, like, rigorous formal education system. But learning to write Chinese is hard and suggests that you've been through like, years of school.

H: Yes. Quite so.

I: Sorry.

H: And Emperor Ai, before he is emperor, is particularly good at this education. He's not actually the son of the previous emperor, Emperor Cheng. He is a nephew because Emperor Cheng didn't have any children, and he at one point makes a journey to the capital and demonstrates to Emperor Cheng that he has a really good grasp of literature, and he also brings with him not only his teacher, but two other advisors from his state, because he at that time is the prince of his state, because his father has died quite unexpectedly, and made him prince at the ripe old age of four.

A: Mmhm.

I: Aww.

H: And he's grown up being the prince of this state, that he's had to rule over and become quite competent in governing.

A: So the prince is the person who is in charge of the state?

H: Yes.

A: Yes.

H: This is another one of those cases where 'prince' and 'lord' and 'duke' are all translated very roughly.

A: Yep.

H: But in this case it's a different kind of authority to the authority that the kings of Wei had over their state, where they were almost an independent country where in this case the young Emperor Ai is the prince of a small state like you would like of a state inside a modern country. They're—

A: Ah, okay.

H: —like a province—

A: Mmhm.

H: —that his father was given instead of the crown because one of the most important things to remember about this story is that Emperor Ai's grandmother, Consort Fu, has serious beef with the clan of Wang.

A: Okay.

H: Because the clan of Wang managed to get this current emperor Cheng onto the throne instead of her son, who then became the prince of this province, and then died unexpectedly and left the future Emperor Ai in charge.

A: Mmhm.

H: During the reign of Emperor Cheng he promotes a bunch of his uncles to important political posts, and gives them marquisates, a bunch of land, and military commands and a lot of power. In this time the clan of Wang controls a lot of the government and the military and so it's quite a hostile environment for the young Emperor Ai to come in to. Especially given the beef between his grandmother Consort Fu and Consort Wang. These are the wives of the current emperor's father.

A: So Consort Fu and Consort Wang were both consorts of the father of the current emperor?

H: Yes, correct. There's also a third player in what eventually becomes this enormous proxy war for the throne, where Consort Fu, Consort Wang and Consort Feng Yuan, who have kind of a scrap for who gets to have their sons on the throne. This starts originally when the three of them all become consorts of the Emperor Yuan, who is the grandfather of Emperor Ai and the father of the current emperor, Emperor Cheng.

A: Yep, okay.

H: He is known as a moderately competent emperor, and towards the end of his life, these three consorts of his start kind of fighting about who gets to have their child on the throne. Feng Yuan is the Empress of China at this time. She's his main wife.

A: Would it legally be that her son becomes the next emperor? What is the succession?

H: There's a very complex sort of, like, nomination process where the emperor picks one of the sons from any one of his consorts to be the next emperor, has to sort of specify an heir. If he died without specifying an heir I think it would have gone to Feng Yuan's son.

A: Okay.

H: But I don't know that Feng Yuan had a son at this time, or at least not one that was ever in contention for the throne, because the only two that Emperor Yuan considered—

A: Mmhm.

H: —to be his successor were consort Wang's son—

A: Yep

H: —who eventually became Emperor Cheng—

A: Mmhm

H: —and Consort Fu's son, who eventually became Emperor Ai's father, the prince of Dingtao. And these two were the only two who were ever in competition for the crown, and originally Emperor Cheng was named as the official successor to Emperor Yuan.

A: Yep.

H: And then , as Emperor Yuan was dying, Consort Fu came to his bedside—

I: Oh no

H: —and started talking to him—

I: Sneaky.

H: —about how great her son was, and then if it wasn't for the intervention of one particular palace official who only appears once and then completely disappears into the background—

I: [laughs]

H: —and is like, 'Emperor Yuan, I think she's trying to trick you into making her son the emperor.' He's like, 'Oh, right. Obviously'—

[laughter]

H: —and then sends her away. If it weren't for this one palace official, then Consort Fu would have made her son, who became Prince of Dingtao, whose name was Liu Kang, he would have become emperor, but instead he goes away and becomes the Prince of Dingtao; he fathers the man who becomes Emperor Ai.

Also, at this time, Emperor Ai has a different name. I'm not using it because it's already confusing enough and we're going to go through about half a dozen names before this whole thing is over, plus a bunch of side characters that only get mentioned once, so at this point in time his name isn't Emperor Ai, when he's born, but we're just going to be calling him Emperor Ai for the whole time.

I: I did not imagine that his parents sort of named him 'Emperor' when he was born.

H: Yes. [laughs] Yes. Although I would not have put it past Consort Fu to, when he was born, be like 'This one is gonna be emperor' because she was a very ambitious woman and she definitely had plans for him.

[laughter]

A: I can see that happening in this scenario.

H: Yes. Consort Fu was very instrumental in Emperor Ai becoming emperor. When he made his trip to the capital where he impressed Emperor Cheng with his knowledge of law and of literature—

A: How old was Emperor Ai when this happened?

H: It's not clear when the trip to the capital happens.

A: Yeah.

H: He would have been maybe between 16 and 20—

A: Okay. Cool.

H: —because we do have a hard date that says that he can't have been any older than 20.

A: Alright.

H: And at the same time, Consort Fu goes to the capital as well and then starts showering everybody closest to the emperor with gifts and speaking about how good the future Emperor Ai is—

I: [laughs]

H: —so that he is being referred to pleasantly among the companions of the emperor, and the emperor hears a lot about how good this new young man is and so instead of nominating his younger brother, who would have been another of the Wang clan, he nominates the man who will become Emperor Ai, because he feels that he is more competent.

I: Yes.

A: So he's not immediately highly suspicious, being like 'Ah yes, this is Emperor Ai, the grandson of Consort Fu, who is definitely trying to take power away from my family.' That's not the thought process that is obvious there?

H: Not so much. Not so much in his kind of context where he's very much emperor, and that struggle seems like it should be over—

A: Okay.

H: —because they're all kind of in it for the empire, the idea is that the emperor passes on his position to the son or the relative who is the most competent, and obviously it does get passed down to preserve dynastic power and so forth, but in this case he's very sort of patriotic and wants to give the empire over to the man who would be best fit to command it.

A: Good on him.

H: He doesn't have any children of his own. It would normally go to his own children, and he'd choose the fittest amongst them.

A: Yep.

H: But in this case he does a lot of womanising and in fact dies potentially of an overdose of aphrodisiac—

I: [laughs]

H: —administered by one of his consorts.

A: What do they take as an aphrodisiac in—

H: I couldn't find out.

A: Aww.

H: But whatever it is you can take a bunch of it and it'll kill you!

A: [laughs] Good.

H: And he does this unexpectedly and he's one of a string of emperors that 'dies unexpectedly' in inverted commas.

A: Dies unexpectedly of an overdose of a drug—

H: Yes

A: —is also super sus.

H: Super suspicious. After he has named the future Emperor Ai as his successor.

A: I wouldn't put it past Consort Fu to have murdered him.

H: Definitely.

A: Yeah.

H: And so Emperor Ai becomes Emperor Ai at the ripe old age of 20 years old which as someone who has recently been 20 years old—

A: [laughs]

H: —I can say is not a good time to become emperor. You are not fit to be emperor at 20 years old.

A: Nah, I could run China.

H: I'm confident that *you* could run China.

A: [laughs] But it's the extra like, three years of experience

H: Yes, indeed. The first year goes really well. Everyones really keen to have Emperor Ai on the throne; he seems really competent; he is well regarded and well respected, and then everything sort of deteriorates quite quickly. There's a scandal at a dinner in the second year of his reign, where Empress Fu – where, ah.... So now it gets difficult, because during this first year Consort Fu starts demanding that because now her grandson is emperor, obviously his father should be posthumously awarded the title of – not only do you have to understand the title system at the time, but then they make up a bunch of new titles for his father.

A: Okay.

I: [laughs]

H: And then she becomes Empress Dowager Consort of the Prince of Dingtao, which is not a thing that can possibly exist, which leads to the completely unprecedented situation of there being four empress dowagers at once.

I: [laughs]

A: Let's just call her Fu.

H: Yes. I think Consort Fu is probably the best because we've been using it, but from this point forward she becomes Empress Dowager Consort Fu, and then a different type of Empress Dowager that gets a bunch of like, qualifiers removed and this all sort of comes to a head when because of how the titles are arranged she gets put next to Consort Wang who is currently Empress Dowager Consort Wang.

I: [laughs]

A: Oh, they're the two original rivals.

H: Right. Exactly. And they get seated next to each other at a dinner.

A: Ooooh. Surely there's a like, we're talking about a time when they published big books on like, how to make the emperor like you, and surely there's a huge handbook on 'Who Not To Sit Next To Each Other At Dinner'.

H: [laughs] Yeah. Quite possibly. And then because of the way that these titles have bene allocated and all of the prestige that she's been given without proper respect for protocol there's a big scandal and everyone in the court is a little bit iffy, and then Emperor Ai sends his court physician to attend to a cousin of his who is ill and being looked after by the cousin's own mother, who is Feng Yuan, who you will remember as the third consort who didn't have a son in the running.

A: Ohh.

I: Yes.

A: Yes.

H: Exactly.

A: There was Wang and Fu and Feng Yuan.

H: Precisely.

A: Yep.

H: Empress Fu sees her chance and—

A: So Empress FU sees her chance because the doctor is currently away looking after someone....

H: Not quite.

A: No.

H: The doctor goes to this person's house to look after him and then—

A: The cousin of Emperor Ai.

H: Precsely. And Emperor Ai also sends some various court official along with him as a retinue.

A: Uh-huh.

H: And it's unclear if Consort Fu puts one of her own loyal men in with the administrators or if she just takes advantage of a thing that happens when one of them comes back to the capital, but it's a very complex situation but the upshot is smashcut to about a week and half later, seventeen people are dead.

[laughter]

I: Wow, this got out of hand. Which seventeen people?

H: They're mostly people related to the sick cousin and the Consort Feng Yuan who have been tortured on accusations of witchcraft.

I: Oh God!

A: What?!

H: And everybody in the empire has exactly the same reaction that you just had where they're like 'What?!'

A: This escalated so quickly!

H: And from this point on people regard Emperor Ai very suspiciously as kind of a bad emperor because he can't keep a rein on his grandmother.

A: Yeah.

I: [laughs]

H: And also because he's just unjustly persecuted a bunch of people.

I: Yeah.

H: In theory because this happens under the auspices of the palace, but it's not entirely clear if it's actually under his command—

A: Okay.

I: —or if it's just his grandmother acting sort of, implicitly with his blessing?

H: Yes.

A: Under all these titles that she has gained slightly dodgily.

H: Precisely.

A: Yep.

H: Because one of the many ways that his power could be threatened is by the descendants of these additional wives and so she's slowly eliminating her old rivals and there are times when she tries to move against the Wang clan but the Wang clan is very powerful and it doesn't work out.

A: Yes.

H: But this whole proxy war is kind of raging around the poor Emperor Ai with the consorts fighting over who gets to control the line of succession and Emperor Ai is may be being consistently poisoned during this period—

A: Aww.

I: Oh no.

H: —where he has a mysterious and unexplained illness which may just be a mysterious and unexplained illness that is not super medically explainable.

A: Yeah, people are often chronically ill, and thousands of years ago – hundreds? What year are we in?

H: About 4 BCE.

A: Okay, that's about when I thought we were.

H: Yeah.

A: Cool, yeah.

I: Yes.

A: So thousands of years ago we were much worse at medicine than we are now.

H: Yes.

A: So he could just be sick.

H: But the thing that makes me suspicious about it is that later he dies of this illness at a very convenient time.

A: Ah.

I: But—

H: Sometimes people do just accidentally die at convenient times, or they have a pre-existing condition and are then subsequently poisoned.

A: Yes. This is probably a tangent that we don't need to go into, but why would you consistently poison a person at a dose that kind of keeps them ill but functioning and then just knock them off eventually? Was it just to make the sudden death look plausible?

I: Yeah, I was going to say, so that when you knock them off it looks convincing. And also possibly so that they can delegate a whole lot of things to advisors that you've just like, sneakily put in.

A: Ahhh.

H: Precisely. So it's not clear if the same person who may be or may not be poisoning the emperor at this point is the same person who eventually kills him, or may not kill him, because he dies suddenly and it's not clear whether he's actually murdered or if he just dies suddenly, but it certainly happens at a very convenient time.

I: I just have to say, like, five minutes ago we were talking about 'Ooh, the scandal! Consort Fu sat next to Consort Wang at dinner!' and now seventeen people are dead.

H: Yes! Do not mess with the Imperial Consorts.

Into the middle of this complete storm comes the very attractive Dong Xian, who is nineteen years old and the Director of Imperial Equine Operations at the court, which is a very minor official post. There aren't a lot of Imperial equine operations going on.

A: That's such a bureaucratic title, but it also sounds like he should be quite important and in charge of all the horses, and clearly he's not.

H: Yes, he's just kind of alike a minor palace potterer-arounder.

I: Is this one of those situations where they're sort of looking and going, 'Well he's an aristocrat, he needs to be around the palace' and they just kind of create role for him?

H: Potentially, but I think that may actually be a post that exists, it's just kind of low down on the Imperial ladder.

I: Okay.

A: Okay.

H: So I think he probably like, took his exams and became an administrator and ended up in, you know, academic Siberia.

A: Yep.

H: There's no detail of how the emperor meets Dong Xian but at some point he meets Dong Xian and is like, 'That one.'

[laughter]

H: And from that point they are complete inseparable.

I: I like to think that he's just walking down a hallway somewhere and Dong Xian is just walking in the other direction, and he just sees him and he grabs his aide and he's like, 'Who is that man? Send him to my chamber; I must meet him!'

H: And he does come to his chambers, and then he comes to the palace, and then his entire family moves to the palace and he is given luxurious chambers and an estate and Ai lavishes gifts upon him and he is immediately elevated to a position of great significance within the court just by the dignity of his favour with the emperor.

A: I wish I was so attractive the emperor would just give me a job.

H: And a tomb!

I: [laughs]

A: And a tomb.

H: In this case. He builds an enormous tomb right next to his own tomb.

A: Aww that's nice.

H: And yeah, it's cute; it's well-appointed.

A: So now they're in the afterlife together.

H: Yeah, hopefully.

A: Cool.

H: Doesn't work out.

I: Is he still the equine officer now? Is he just an equine officer with a lot of Imperial favour?

H: I think so. It's not actually documented what his official title is at this particular point. He gets another official title a little bit after this, but I think possibly for this period he's still the equine officer.

I: Okay.

H: It's not super unusual for a consort to be given this much favour in the time of Emperor Ai's predecessor Emperor Cheng.

A: Mmhm.

H: He picked out a dancing girl who he just *adored* and he showered her with gifts and built her an apartment that has this incredibly lavish description in the histories with gold and jade and ivory everywhere—

A: [laughs]

H: —and he takes care of her in similar luxury. So becoming infatuated with a consort of some kind isn't particularly unusual.

A: Okay.

H: What is considered unusual enough to be counted in the histories is that Emperor Ai shows absolutely no interest in women and so he takes as his primary lover one man and then has effectively no interest in marrying and producing an heir.

A: So he's expected to be like, it's fine if you take consorts of any gender, that's cool.

H: Mmhm.

A: But you should also have a female wife who bears you a child.

H: Yes, precisely. And Emperor Ai just does not seem at all interested in this.

A: Okay.

H: And it's not that there's any like, moral loading given to this outside his responsibility to the empire.

A: Mmhm.

H: It's just notable enough that it gets mentioned in the chronicle.

A: Okay.

H: It should also be noted that not producing an heir isn't seen as completely catastrophic to the empire; because of the way that succession works he can just pick a really effective nephew and nominate them as heir.

A: Mmhm.

H: And then the line will continue and everything will be fine so it's not like he's completely failing the empire in this duty.

A: So what he's doing is a bit unusual, but it's actually fine and nobody's too put out by it?

H: Yes. For the moment.

A: Okay.

H: But before we get to everyone being completely put out we have to discuss the really cute thing that means that this gets chronicled throughout history and used as a euphemism for any male gay love in the future.

A: It's not used euphemistically for other same-sex love?

H: No.

A: Okay.

H: And there really isn't a set of euphemisms for other same-sex love.

I: This is the perpetual problem of like, researching any kind of sexuality thing is that as soon as you look everybody's like, 'Homosexuality in Soviet Russia! Here is my large book—'

H: '—about men.'

I: 'I mentioned women once. It's on page 131 if you'd care to look. It is a paragraph with two sentences in it.'

A: And the sentences say, 'It's really a problem that nobody covers lesbianism in our history and I don't have the space or the knowledge to address that problem, but I acknowledge that it exists.'

H: Mm.

A: And then we move on.

H: I did brush up against one account of lesbianism in my entire—

A: Oh, okay.

H: —kind of search, which is an excerpt from a novel that's not even a piece of history, it's an excerpt from a novel that is about a woman falling in love with an actress who she plays opposite as the man and the woman in a romantic play.

A: [laughs] Ah yes, this trope.

I: So this is essentially like that 'Our high-school's putting on Romeo and Juliet!' story.

H: Precisely.

A: When you say an excerpt from a novel, do you mean a modern novel or a—

H: No, a—

A: —novel from the period.

H: —an ancient novel that is *the* novel. It's the Tale of the Red Room—

A: Oh!

H: —or the Tale of the Jade something? The Ball? The Jade Sphere?

A: I know the novel you mean, yeah.

H: Yeah. It is the—

A: Cool!

H: —the big work of Chinese literature from the period, but even that is just a fictional account in which two lesbians are mentioned.

A: Okay.

H: And there's about a paragraph where it talks about how inappropriate and kind of over-the-top her mourning for her dead lover is, and that's about it. I didn't find one historical example of a living lesbian.

A: Uh-huh.

H: But this tale that involves Emperor Ai gets used to refer to male gay love—

A: Mmhm.

H: —for hundreds of years afterwards, where Emperor Ai and Dong Xian go and they have a nap together. 'Have a nap' in inverted commas.

A: I was just picturing them just napping and being like 'That sounds very pleasant and romantic. I too would like a nap.'

H: They do end up completely clothed at some point here, where they fall asleep on a bed and Emperor Ai is in his grand Imperial robe that's got all its brocade and everything.

I: Aww.

A: That's cute.

H: And then Dong Xian falls asleep and then he falls asleep on the sleeve of the robe and then when Emperor Ai wants to get up Dong Xian is still asleep and so he takes scissors and cuts off the sleeve of his robe.

I: Aww!

H: And then just goes into court like that—

A: Aww!

I: [laughs]

H: —which is adorable and then all of his courtiers start in expressions of love for their partners cutting off the sleeves of their robes so that they can be like the emperor — becomes a little fashion.

A: [laughs] Aw, that's so cute!

H: And thereafter if people want to allude to specifically sexual male love—

A Mmhm

H: —then they talk about the passion of the cut sleeve as they would the—

I: —bitten peach.

H: —the bitten peach. Or with our second story, or the way of Long Yiang, who was the fellow in the boat.

A: When you said that other courtiers start cutting off their own sleeves to represent their love for their partners is that across all genders?

H: Yes.

A: I mean I assume we're talking male courtiers but male partners and female partners?

H: Yes. At the time and then because it's associated with this passionate homosexual love it becomes a slang for specifically gay love later.

A: Mmhm. Okay.

H: And then after this point a little while after, it's not clear when in their relationship this anecdote happens, a little while after this everyone immediately stops being fine with the emperor kind of courting Dong Xian.

I: is this because seventeen people are dead?

H: No. That happened earlier.

I: Okay.

H: And then he, you know, he gives his lover little gifts, and he makes great shows of affection like imprisoning men who criticise him—

I: [laughs]

H: —which doesn't earn him particular acclaim from the court, and then one of the little gifts that he gives Dong Xian is the entire army.

I: So it's not people aren't fine with him courting Dong Xian, it's people aren't fine with him handing the entire army to like, the equestrian operations official.

H: Yes, precisely. And when he does hand over the army he uses phrasing from an earlier account of a mythical former emperor when he's handing over his throne.

I: Wow.

A: [whistles]

H: He says in his official edict 'Heaven gave you to be the helper for the Han Dynasty. I know your faithfulness and I hope that you can guide the great affairs and follow what is good.' Which everyone looks at and is like 'Mrrrr'.

A: So what do we reckon is happening here? Is his lover manipulating him into this, is he just trusting him, being like 'Yeah, it would be nice if we ran the country together?' Like—

H: From what people say in the future, it seems like this is just the inclination of Emperor Ai. It doesn't look like Dong Xian is actively seeking to rise within the court.

A: Okay.

H: And sometimes he seems kind of reluctant, but Emperor Ai just keeps kind of, shoving favours upon him, like there's a point where he gives him a marquisate and gives him a bunch of land and Dong Xian is like 'Are people gonna like that?' and the emperor's like 'It'll be fine!' and the prime minister's like, 'Dude. *Dude*. What are you doing? He doesn't deserve a marquisate! There are like protocols for this thing!' at which point the prime minister is imprisoned.

I: [laughs]

H: And everything just sort of gets terrible.

I: I was going to say if my lover gave me an entire army I would very much be like 'I'm not prepared for this. Please stop. People will die!'

H: Yes. And there is some evidence to suggest that this is what Dong Xian does.

I: Yes.

H: Where he's like, 'I'm going to leave everybody who is competent to take care of the army. I'm gonna keep hanging on with you' and they keep spending every waking moment together, and that then leads to Dong Xian being criticised for not taking care of the affairs of the army because he's still spending every waking moment with the emperor which is probably a valid criticism but—

I: But—

H: —but at the same time I don't think that he was qualified to take over the army at all.

I: I very much think that he's made the correct choice in going 'I will be a symbolic leader of the army. You guys just keep doing what you're doing please.'

H: Yes precisely. After Emperor Ai makes Dong Xian supreme commander of all of the armed forces he is then one of the three most powerful people in the government underneath the emperor, next to the prime minister and the Imperial secretary, which interestingly – I was thinking about this when I was writing it – probably makes him like, Rome was happening at the time, but in terms of like, size of empire—

A: Mm!

H: —maybe one of the like, 25 most powerful humans in the world at that time.

A: That's probably very true! Yeah.

H: Which I think is a cool—

A: Because he's an attractive man that the emperor wants to sleep with.

H: Yeah, exactly.

A: I mean that may be only part of the their relationship. [laughs]

H: But he certainly is an attractive man who the emperor wants to sleep with.

A: Yeah.

H: At about this time Empress Dowager Fu dies and is buried with Emperor Yuan who is if we remember Emperor Ai's grandfather—

I: Yes.

H: —which pisses off Consort Wang because that means that there's no more space in the tomb for her to be buried with Emperor Yuan.

I: Oh!

A: So there was space for one consort in the tomb—

H: Yes

A: —and Fu got in first.

H: Precisely.

A: Just because Fu died first or...?

H: No, I think it's mostly because Fu was—

I: —is the current Emperor's grandmother.

H: Precisely.

I: Yes.

A: Uh-huh.

H: And then about a year after he hands over the reins of the army and everyone gets incredibly concerned, Consort Fu dies and it's not clear whether she was protecting him or not but quite soon afterwards he dies as well, very very suddenly. He's only sort of 26 and he rules from 7 BCE to 1 BCE and it's a super short reign. He dies incredibly young, and what makes this so suspicious is that after her dies suddenly and unexpectedly Consort Wang rushes to the Imperial Palace, seizes the Imperial seal—

I: Wow, okay.

H: Right? Strips Dong Xian of his position as head of the army and then places her own nephew in the same position as head of the army and head of security for the capital.

I: Is her any better qualified than Dong Xian was?

H: Not really.

I: [laughs]

H: But he does seem to be a much better politician. This guy is a man name Wang Mang who becomes Imperial regent over the head of the very very young replacement for the emperor.

A: Ah, so after Ai dies someone very young is put in, and Wang Mang is actually—

H: Yes.

A: —regent.

H: Wang Mang becomes effectively in all practical purposes emperor.

A: Yep.

H: And starts poisoning all of this tiny young emperor's uncles so that they don't try and take power and then eventually when the tiny young emperor's not so tiny and young anymore poisons him.

I: Ohh.

H: And installs a toddler on the throne.

I: [laughs]

H: And then rules like that until he officially usurps the throne in 8 AD.

A: Okay.

H: but he's very very much a competent and aggressive politician.

A: Mmhm.

I: Good at poison.

H: Excellent at poison, which makes the death of Emperor Ai quite quite suspect.

I: Yes.

H: This is terrible for poor Dong Xian because he no longer has his post, he no longer has the loyalty of the court, which he's lost ages and ages ago by being elevated in his position and as many people do, in fact as almost all of the historians that I mentioned do, he is forced to commit suicide in his estate out at the edge of the capital, and he's buried very very quickly.

A: All the historians you mentioned were....?

H: Yeah, so actually—

I: [laughs] You can't just gloss over that!

H: Two of the three historians who I mentioned here died because they're forced to commit suicide after either one of them has a failed military campaign, one of them gets in trouble for maybe supporting the wrong family but maybe not, and maybe it's just a mistake, and then I think one of them dies in prison, because he refuses to commit suicide.

A: Okay.

I: So don't become a historian?

H [laughs]

I: —is the moral of the story?

H: Don't listen to us, kids.

A: I'm glad being a historian is way less hardcore than it was in the Warring States period in China.

H: Yeah, no, it was a rough time.

So in this position Dong Xian doesn't really have any outs in terms of escaping with his life and the dignified and I suppose shameless way to close off your chapter is to commit suicide nobly and not allow yourself to be imprisoned and tortured and made an example of by your enemies.

I and A: Hm.

H: And this idea of being forced to commit suicide also has a lot of shame culture things inherent in it that I am completely unqualified to unpack, but this is a very common way for disgraced officials to die.

A: Okay.

H: And he is very very quickly interred with his wife at—

A: Wait!

H: Yes, Dong Xian through this whole period has a wife.

I: Who you have never mentioned?

H: Well she never comes up really. She's not at all related to his relationship with the emperor; he carries on his relationship with the emperor despite her and he's expected to. This is quite a reasonable and normal formula that these two men have a love that is not related to Dong Xian's family in any way.

A: So are we imagining more like a political marriage; an arranged marriage with his wife to fulfil his social obligations?

H: it's never really made clear because he as a figure doesn't get as much attention in the chronicles as Emperor Ai

A: Yep

H: And really the only time that she comes up in the chronicle at all is at this time of her death when she and her husband are forced to commit suicide and they're very very quickly buried—

A: Mmhm

H: —to prevent their bodies being desecrated or stolen.

A: Oh yeah.

H: It's another one of those things where these women in history are not given a place or attention in the chronicles and so we don't know very much about them and we don't know very much about her relationships with Dong Xian, which is a shame because I imagine that there is probably an interesting teledrama in there.

I: Yes.

A: [laughs]

I: I was going to say, I just really want to know whether she was bothered by this, whether she was super proud that it was her husband that caught the emperor's eye, whether—

A: Like, 'Yeah, my husband is really attractive.'

[laughter]

A: 'That's exactly what the emperor should think.'

H: —whether perhaps she was jealous of the emperor but he's the emperor so what are you gonna do?

A: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

A: And it's probably like, quite good if her husband is getting all this money and all of these high up positions — I mean to a point, before people start kind of—

I: —killing him

H: Yes.

A: Yeah.

H: And so they are buried very quickly which doesn't work because then Wang Mang has him dug up to make sure that he is in fact dead and then just to make doubly sure he has him reburied inside a prison—

I: [laughs]

A: Okay.

H: —because Dong Xian is perhaps the biggest threat to Wang Mang's power because he still has in theory maybe some claim to official control of the military—

A: Mmhm.

H: —which in terms of coups is the thing you lock down first.

A: Yep. Yep.

I: Yes.

H: And so ends the story of Dong Xian and Emperor Ai which ends very poorly I'm afraid.

A: Yeah.

H: But they do get a degree of immortality in that they are referred to forever more as a prime example of devoted gay love.

I: It's nice to know that their degree of immortality is to do with them being sweet and in love and not to do with putting your lover in charge of the army and then letting the country go to hell.

H: Yes.

A: You talked about the bitten peach and the cut sleeve and the way of Long Yang. Are all those phrases still in use in Chinese today?

H: No, unfortunately not. They're not still in use today. They were used for a very long time in classical literature and it's a very kind of classical way of alluding to sex

A: Mmhm.

H: But they certainly didn't survive the Communist revolution where that kind of traditional literature was suppressed and they haven't survived through to the modern day, where there are a whole host of other interesting ways to refer to gay love in China.

I: There are. There are. My very favourite is that now in China when you are gay, I suppose, you call yourself a *tongzhi* – a comrade. And you talk about your other comrades.

A: I'd really like to know the history of that term.

I: I don't know, but periodically a thing comes up where an elderly man in the Communist Party will be like 'Why don't we all call each other 'comrade' anymore? Where has the solidarity gone?' and the young people in the Communist Party are sort of at their desks looking at each other and sort of... 'Yes.... There's a reason for that.'

H: So I did find this out when I was looking at – 'cause the leaping-off point for this was an article about how like, homosexual love is referred to in Chinese literature, and apparently it's because it has a head rhyme with 'same-sex love'.

I: Yes!

H: Like if you just say 'same-sex' then it's—

I: Yes.

A: Oh, okay! So 'comrade' just sounds like the word for 'same-sex'.

H: Yeah.

A: Okay.

I: Yes.

H: It's a pun.

A: [laughs]

I: The *tong* in 'same-sex' I think is for 'the same'. You use it for like, your classmate or something like that.

H: Okay.

I: The *tong* in 'comrade' I don't remember what it means on its own, but it's a different one. Yes.

A: Okay.

H: Okay.

A: But it does sound the same.

I: it does sound the same.

H: But yes, they've largely been replaced by other forms of address—

A: Mmhm.

H: —and of reference. But for a very long time they were *the* main classical go-tos for anybody trying to refer to specifically trying to refer to sexual same-sex love.

A: Mmhm.

H: Because romantic love gets to be discussed very openly and nobody has any trouble just speaking about that directly in romantic terms, but when it comes to sexual same-sex love

A: Mmhm.

H: —specifically sexual same-sex love between men, you have to use these classical allusions so as not to be rude, which does lead to some very entertaining back-formulations where you find that the anus is referred to as 'Long Yang's spot'.

[laughter]

H: For reasons of anal sex, dear listeners.

A: [laughs]

I: So we weren't the only ones that thought of someone's arse when we saw peaches.

H: No, certainly not.

A: So when you started this you talked about this being a weird paradise for male—male love at the time where it was just fine and no—one had a problem with it.

H: Mmhm.

A: And I don't necessarily expect you to know the answer to this question, but when did that stop being the case?

H: It stops and starts in various patches, so—

A: Okay

I: Jesuit missionaries!

A: Yay!

H: Yes.

A: Jesuits!

H: Also before that there are big pushes by Confucian scholars to establish like a uniform family unit which—

A: Okay, yeah

H: —involves a husband and a wife and they have sex and they use it to produce children and the children are good and dutiful and so there are patches where this particular school of Confucian thought is very popular and at that time homosexual love is spoken of negatively.

A: Mmhm.

H: But then that kind of fades from popularity and it's great again and then it's not great again because the school of thought comes back into prominence and then Jesuit missionaries rock up and everything gets kind of—

I: —bring their Christian feelings about homosexuality.

A: Yep.

H: Ooohh.

[laughter]

A: The other thing I was thinking then is, if — because these terms are referring to very positive moments of same-sex love, like the cut sleeve thing is a super cute story.

H: Yeah, like all of these survive because they're adorable.

A: Yeah.

H: And that's why they get mentioned in history; that's why they're exceptional, because at the time it's not exceptional for a man to take a lover.

A: Yeah, but it is exceptional for a man to cut off the sleeve of the Imperial robe—

H: Precisely

A: —so his boyfriend doesn't have to get out of bed.

H: Yes

[laughter]

H: There's also an anecdote about the Prophet Mohammed where he does exactly the same thing when his cat is asleep on his sleeve and he has to get up to go to prayers.

A: [laughs]

I: I did think about this when you were telling that story about Dong Xian being asleep on his sleeve and I was like 'This is like when people are sitting at their computer and they need to get up and pour their tea but they can't 'cause the cat is on their lap, except instead it's Dong Xian.'

A: [laughs]

H: Yeah, it's—

A: And now it's the Prophet Mohammed.

H: But it's not clear if these two have any connection of if it's just something arises independently—

I: —a universal human experience.

H: —when people have sleeves and adorable things sleeping on them.

I: [laughs]

A: That sounds like a universal experience.

H: Hm.

A: The point I was going to make is that these phrases, if you're using this term you're already putting a very positive slant on homosexual love.

H: Yes, definitely.

I: Yes.

A: Like, I don't feel like you could use these terms while condemning homosexual love without having to put some thought into it.

H: Yeah, these certainly aren't pejorative terms—

A: Mm.

H: —because of the things that they refer to, but also they become so normalised in literature that I wouldn't be surprised if—

A: Okay.

H: —later it becomes possible to use these allusions negatively.

A: Mmhm. Okay.

I: They come I suppose value-free, like we could say now that somebody was gay and you could mean that and condemn it—

A: Yep.

I: —even though 'gay' is 'happy'—

H: Yes.

A: Yeah.

I: —in its like, history.

H: And they survive for so long that they don't have any of that particular loading by the end of their usage and during this period there is an enormous breadth of literature that refers to gay men - specifically some gay women in that one allusion from that novel, and I'm sure there are more if we dig them out - but there's this enormous period where there are a bunch of historical allusions to gay relationships that we are definitely going to dive back into at some point because there's in one chronicle there's just a nice concise list of emperors who have prominent gay lovers.

[laughter]

A: I love chroniclers.

H: Yes.

I: They're so good in China. They're very detailed.

H: It's an amazing period for like, doing really good history.

I: Yeah.

H: And for this reason I think that we are going to have to at least come back and maybe go down that list of gay emperors but also just poke around and see who else we can find because there are a lot of stories that I came across in my research that didn't make it in to language and didn't, you

know, make it to the point here they became adorable allusions, but there are a bunch of – there's one about a poet whose lover spurns him, and he throws himself into a lake and then everyone's really sad and they try and send him food in the afterlife, but then he sends a message and he's like 'A dragon is eating my sandwiches—'

I: Oh!

H: '—when you send them down to me, so you have to put them in a three-cornered packet', and there are a bunch of stories that are just like that, talking about queer figures from history and occasionally dragons stealing his sandwiches, that I think we're going to have to come back to, because it's a really rich period of history, and a really enjoyable one.

A: I really enjoy that dragon story because I know it's not about history but it's something that we talk about a lot when we talk about queer books is I'd like to see more queer books of people that are just queer, and they're not like, dealing with coming out, and it's not like their life that this is really hard for them to be queer, they're just queer and also a dragon is eating their sandwiches.

H: Yes. [laughs]

A: And like this was like, 'Yeah. They're just queer, and also, they've gone fishing today. Or, they're just queer, and also they're trying to run a country, but they're not great at it.'

I: [laughs]

H: Mmhm.

A: And it's really good to hear queer history where it's not a big deal to them or anyone around them that they're queer and it's not making life more difficult it's just like they're living their lives, and also they're in love with someone of the same sex.

H: Yes. Truly a wonderful paradise.

And with that, thank you for listening. We are Queer as Fact. I'm Hamish.

I: I'm Irene

A I'm Alice.

H: We'll be back on the first of July with Eli telling us about Gad Beck, who was the last known queer survivor of the Holocaust. Until then, we are Queer as Fact, and you can find us on Tumblr as Queer as Fact, on Facebook as Queer as Fact, on Twitter as Queer as Fact, and on Podbean, which is our wonderful podcast distributor, as Queer as Fact, and you can also email us at queerasfact@gmail.com and we would love to hear from you. Let us know about any particular points or places or people from history that you'd like to hear featured on the podcast, or just feedback about how to make an excellent blanket fort for us to record in.

A: Also we're on iTunes now, so you can download our podcast there. If you do, please rate us and leave a review, because it really helps us.

H: Thank you for listening, and we'll see you next time.

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