Introduction

Love and Remembrance

On October 31, 1963, the streets of central Taipei were taken over by an impassioned crowd of hundreds of thousands of women, from middle-school students to young wives to grandmothers. In a rare upsurge of popular defiance to the Nationalist Party government's authoritarian regime, the mass of ordinary women brought traffic to a standstill and stretched the crowd control capacity of the military police to the limit. The crowd converged on a gaily decorated tour truck that for several tense moments it effectively held under siege, with police overpowered by the women's sheer numbers and unable to force a break in the throng to allow the truck to exit. On the truck, only just managing to maintain her professional composure, stood Ivy Ling Po, the freshly minted superstar of the Shaw Brothers' smash hit opera film Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai (The Love Eterne, dir. Li Han Hsiang, Hong Kong, 1962; figure 1). In the film, following southern Chinese all-female opera traditions, Ling cross-dressed to play the male romantic lead, Liang Shanbo, to Betty Loh Ti's Zhu Yingtai. Her performance was such a success that many women watched the film scores of times; others were reported to carry pictures of Ling in their purses like a sweetheart's portrait. It was to be the first of a long series of such roles for Ling, and the film's spectacular box-office success marked the launch of her stellar career as screen heartthrob for a generation of Chinese women across East Asia, prefigured by this spontaneous and overwhelming expression of fandom in an otherwise strictly culturally regulated 1960s Taiwan.²

The tragic romance of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai is the best-known popular love story in the Chinese tradition. In the legend, Zhu rebels against
her strictly Confucian father by cross-dressing as a boy to attend school. There she falls in love with her classmate Liang, but the couple’s romance is doomed by class differences, and ultimately both lovers perish from broken hearts.¹ That the definitive modern representation of this classic romance should be emblematized by the screen image of the lovers played by two actors who are both recognizably female is a rather remarkable fact (figure 2). Contrary to the common assumption that romantic or erotic relations between women must, by definition, be culturally marginal, the Love Eternal phenomenon suggests that representations of—and, in the fan response, experiences of—the passionate love of one woman for another may occupy a position of unsuspected centrality in modern Chinese popular cultures.² It is this possibility that this book sets out to investigate.

The continuing topicality of this issue today is reflected in the fact that some four decades after the release of Love Eternal, both the legend of Liang and Zhu and the more recent cultural memory of the Shaw Brothers’ film have been reanimated in a new adaptation of the romance: independent Taiwanese director Alice Wang’s film Fei yue qing hai (Love Me If You Can, 2003; figure 3). The film transposes the tale of Liang and Zhu onto a story of two contemporary Taiwanese young women who reincarnate the star-crossed lovers of the legend. Ying (Ariel Lin), the reincarnation of Zhu, returns to the village where she spent her childhood with her tomboyish cousin San (Alice Wang), the reincarnation of Liang. Remembering her twofold love for San/Liang, Ying tries to make San understand their true identities, periodically singing arias from the original folk opera that punctuate the film’s narrative as a kind of intertextual commentary, their familiar melodies and tragic-romantic sentiment no doubt calling up, for regional audiences, memories of the 1962 film. But San’s memory cannot be awakened, and seemingly unable to entertain the possibility of a female lover, she rejects Ying’s romantic advances. Once again the story ends in tragedy with the death of both lovers. Yet the film’s final scene indicates that death is no obstacle to Zhu’s tenacious, transhistorical love: we see a new young woman arriving in what looks like the same coastal village, telling an unseen interlocutor that she is Zhu Yingtai and that she comes in search of a certain someone (figure 4).

Love Me is a film about love and remembrance; it is about a love that lives on, in, and as memory. On a diegetic level, memory and forgetting play a central part in the narrative development: while Ying remembers both her childhood love for San and her previous incarnation as Zhu to San’s Liang, the film’s viewer is constantly reminded that it is precisely the failure of San’s memory on both of these counts that leads to the ultimate tragedy (figures 5 and 6). On an extradiegetic level, the film reanimates its audience’s memory of the Shaw Brothers’ version of Love Eternal and the collective romantic adulation of Ivy Ling Po by a generation of women viewers—the mothers, aunts, and grandmothers of today’s young viewers. But in addition to its evocation of love and memory in its plot and in its intertextual relationship with Love Eternal, Love Me references the link between these ideas at a more basic conceptual level as well. This book’s central contention is that in modern Chinese media and literary cultures, the topic of love between women has been constitutively linked with a memorial mode of representation: in the contemporary Chinese mass cultures of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, where erotic or romantic relations between women are depicted, one almost invariably finds a preoccupation with memory. In its depiction of the love of


one woman for another in and through a memorial mode, Love Me thus exemplifies a central, structuring logic of modern Chinese female homoerotic representation, one that not only features in self-consciously lesbian texts but is also central to more mainstream depictions of women’s intra-gender relations.

This book is about the epistemology of female homoeroticism—ways of understanding love between women—as it is played out in mainstream Chinese media and literary cultures today. It asks: What are the most common narrative, generic, and ideological patterns in representations of love between women in contemporary Chinese cultures? Have there been recurring themes and structures of feeling in these mass cultural figurations of women’s same-sex relations? If so, what does the persistence of those themes and structures reveal about modern Chinese understandings not only of lesbianism, but, more broadly, of women’s gendered experiences of love, sex, marriage, and intra-gender relations? Is the topic of women’s same-sex love a merely marginal one, as is often assumed, or might it turn out to occupy a more central place than anticipated in Chinese mass cultures? What are the ideological functions of modern Chinese representations of women’s love and desire for each other? Do they serve symbolically to stifle or to enable the public imaginability of love between women?

In response to the first of these questions, through analyses of a wide range of texts from pulp fiction to TV soap opera and from translated Japanese manga comics to teen-pics, this book analyzes the centrality of a temporal logic in contemporary Chinese representations of women’s same-sex love. It argues that a dominant modern Chinese discourse on female homoeroticism has asserted the impossibility of lesbian futures: sexual relations between women are culturally imaginable only in youth; therefore same-sex sexual relations may appear in adult femininity’s past, very rarely in its present, and never in its future. As in Love Me, in a majority of mainstream Chinese literary, filmic, and other cultural production since the early twentieth century, loving relations between women have been represented as temporally anterior to the narrative present and available principally through memory’s mediation. Following this logic, the book analyzes the dominance of an analeptic or backward looking mode of representation structuring the cultural appearance of female homoeroticism in this context.

As in Love Me, what is remarkable in most of the examples discussed in the chapters that follow—examples, let us be clear, that are overwhelmingly not marked out as self-consciously lesbian texts but are integrated into the mainstream of middletwobrow women’s mass culture—is the degree to which they openly acknowledge the pain and lingering regret associated with the forced termination of same-sex love between young women. The typical narrative trajectory of these stories sees socially mandated heterosexual conclusions, often enforced by a concerned mother, school counselor, or other external figure of social authority, superseding the same-sex love plots. Although such straightened-out endings may appear at first glance to be simply a means of de-realizing lesbian possibility, nonetheless the stories tend to cast their conclusions not as triumphant but at the very least as ambivalent and often as openly tragic, suggesting that the stories may have a more complex ideological function. In light of this, one of this book’s key propositions is that the common memorial narrative of young women’s same-sex love, cherished then forcibly given up, has an important critical significance. Specifically, I argue that the markedly mournful cast of these stories’ remembrance of same-sex love as a kind of paradise lost implies a critique of the social imposition of hetero-marital relations upon young women as a condition of feminine adulthood. In Valerie Rohy’s terms, the memorial female same-sex romance might be said to function as a marker of (proto-)lesbian “impossibility,” where impossibility marks “a kind of vanishing point in both discourse and desire—not where these systems cease to exist but where they turn away from their own incoherence, where their success becomes their failure. As a name for an internal resistance, impossibility also describes the unacknowledged contradictions within hegemonic systems of sexuality, which patriarchal culture, in its will to meaning, displaces onto lesbian figures.”

My interpretation of these narratives perhaps has something in common, too, with Judith Roof’s conceptualization of lesbian “configurations”: “Operating as points of systemic failure, configurations of lesbian sexuality often reflect the complex incongruities that occur when the logic or philosophy of a system becomes self-contradictory, visibly fails to account for something, or cannot complete itself.” The incoherence and incongruity marked by the narratives I examine are those that dog the hetero-marital system itself: the narratives represent points of profound denaturalization of that system, points at which the system of adult hetero-marital sexuality recognizes the high subjective cost at which its aim is enforced. But what distinguishes these Chinese examples from Rohy’s and Roof’s accounts of European and American lesbian representation is the degree to which mainstream, middletwobrow mass culture aways the crisis of the dominant sex-gender system. For it is not the case here that the tensions and anxieties of hetero-marital feminine adulthood go unacknowledged in mainstream culture and are displaced
onto the othered figure of the lesbian, nor that mass cultural representation is compelled vigorously to defend itself against the possibility of sexual love between women. Instead, the idealization of women's youthful same-sex love and desire, framed as a universal female experience, is remarkably common, and the pain caused by the renouncement of this love is frankly avowed, not simply papered over to enable an air of triumph in the stories' heterosexual conclusions. The protagonists in these stories do not so much "suffer from reminiscences," in Freud's famous formulation—precisely because their same-sex desires do not seem to be strongly suppressed in the first place; rather, they openly revel in the repeated, mournful narration of their treasured memories. For these reasons, this book's argument is neither about the cultural repression of women's same-sex love nor about a marginal or subcultural resistance to a dominant structure. Instead, I propose that the criticism of the hetero-marital imperative that I read in these narratives is central to Chinese public cultures: the system of enforced adult hetero-maritality coexists alongside its own remarkably candid critique.

Alongside investigations in history and the social sciences, analyses of lesbian representation in the modern cultures of Western Europe and the United States form a central strand in lesbian studies as it has emerged since the 1980s. These studies have been concerned with how love between women has been represented in the modern West and how these representations have both reflected and shaped modern Western understandings of lesbianism. Key works have investigated the formations of lesbian representation and sexuality in literary narrative, popular and avant-garde cinema, and feminist and psychoanalytic theories, tackling both self-consciously lesbian texts and mainstream representations. Too diverse in their approaches and conclusions to sum up simply, these works have addressed a wide range of issues, including questions of classification (what makes a text "lesbian"?), ideology (are particular representations of lesbian subjects conservative or radical?), form (how does narrative or cinematic structure impact on writers' and filmmakers' attempts to represent the lesbian?), philosophy (how is lesbian possibility figured or disallowed in the central theories of modern Western thought?), and historical specification (what is particular about the recurrent structures and tropes of modern Western lesbian representation?). Although a comparatively recent development in the academy and notwithstanding the polyvocal variety of its constituent works, the study of lesbian representation by now constitutes a recognizable subfield within English-language humanities scholarship.

In contrast, lesbian representation and epistemology in modern Chinese contexts have only very recently, and still incompletely, been addressed as objects of study. The major English publication to date in Chinese lesbian studies is Tse-Ian D. Sang's pioneering work, The Emerging Lesbian. Sang's book is a feminist historical study of the transition from premodern to modern understandings of same-sex sexuality in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan, as revealed primarily through elite literary texts between the seventeenth century and the present. This work is groundbreaking not only in the richness of the range of literary representations of love between women that it uncovers, but also in the complexity of its historical argument regarding the gradualness and incompleteness of the transition from premodern Chinese sexual epistemologies to modern sexual taxonomies. Sang's analysis corrects the common view—espoused by writers including Chou Wah-shan and Bret Hirsch—that premodern Chinese societies were "tolerant" of same-sex behavior and that the introduction of European sexology in the 1920s and 1930s served mainly to instill a new homophobic impulse. Instead, Sang shows that the transculturation of sexological science enabled homophobic as well as homophilic alignments by Republican Chinese intellectuals and that sexology's arrival led not to any epochal epistemic break with older conceptualizations of same-sex sexuality but instead to a gradual transformation with diffuse effects. Broadly, Sang argues that although in premodern China homoeroticism between women was a source of some anxiety for the patriarchal power system and typically led to either recuperative or trivializing accounts of such attachments by male literati, it was not until the modern period, when for the first time women showed signs of gaining genuine social power, that female homosexuality became the focus of real and intense male panic. Although she underscores the ideological complexity of the Republican Chinese engagement with European sexology, in the final instance Sang sees sexology in the hands of China's male intellectuals as principally a tool used to demonize erotic love between women. Sang's analyses of contemporary lesbian texts and cultures in mainland China and Taiwan hinge on a similar opposition between an anxious male social power and lesbian relations conceived as a form of proto-feminist resistance to that power.

Although The Emerging Lesbian is dominated by literary textual analyses, the spirit of its approach has much in common with lesbian feminist historical studies, particularly the work of Lillian Faderman. As the above account indicates, the questions that most occupy Sang in her approaches to the texts she analyzes are ideological ones about the politics of gender. And as in Faderman's Surpassing the Love of Men, Sang at times tends toward equating
love between women in general with lesbian feminist politics in particular. In response to her central questions about whether various literary representations of lesbianism imply positive or negative valuations, Sang assumes in advance that when penned by male authors, such representations are negative—belying cooptation, trivialization, anxiety, or voyeurism—whereas when written by female authors, lesbian representations are positive, almost by definition encoding a feminist politics. Without wishing to detract from the genuine importance of The Emerging Lesbian, I think that this approach entails certain risks. First, the same criticism could be made of Sang as has been made of Faderman—that is, that the conceptual reduction of sexuality to gender and of lesbianism to lesbian feminism papers over the actually far messier and more complex sexual and cultural particularities of the various articulations of female same-sex love under discussion. Second, the division of the material into the two neatly opposed camps of “dominant (male) power” and “subversive (lesbian) resistance” risks offering an essentializing vision of the complex relations between gender and sexual identity and between authorship and representations of homosexuality and foreclosing the possibility of textual tensions and ambiguities. As I illustrate in the chapters that follow, mainstream and male-authored representations of love between women visualize its possibility just as much as subcultural and female-authored ones and as such may incite lesbian attachment even when they superficially appear to prohibit it. Likewise, lesbian-identifying women can and do draw upon mainstream discourses (and not always subversively or with a feminist spin) in their elaboration of alternative sexual selves and communities. It may be less useful, then, to imagine modern Chinese sexual culture as riven between sanctioned and repressed discourses than to see the whole tangle as the expression of a complexly interlinked system.

This book does not presume in advance that gender will provide the magic key to the logic of modern Chinese female homoerotic representation—although gender does prove to be an important thematic in many of the examples discussed. The book is less interested in discovering the feminist politics underpinning certain “authentic” modes of lesbian representation than it is in understanding women’s same-sex love more broadly as a topic within mainstream popular culture. Whereas Sang concentrates on textual analyses of lesbian themes in elite literature, Backward Glances shifts the focus to contemporary popular culture, asking how women’s same-sex relations have appeared not just in highbrow literature but also in the more widely disseminated forms of women’s mass culture: school stories, soap operas, the women’s telemovie, pulp fiction, melodrama, women’s autobiography, the teenpic.

Although a central aim of this book is to uncover some of the recurrent patterns and preoccupations in the contemporary representation of women’s same-sex love in Chinese as distinct from Euro-American contexts, the book does not attempt a systematic comparison of Western with Chinese forms of lesbian representation. Rather, it seeks to offer an analysis of some of the central structures and logics of such representations in Chinese contexts on their own historical and cultural terms, approaching contemporary Chinese female homoerotic representation as a semi-autonomous, self-referential system distinct from—(albeit everywhere in conversation with)—modern Western forms. The motivation behind this approach is both general—that is, to contribute to a scholarly appreciation of the multiplicity of sexual modernities coexisting in the world today—and specific—that is, to contribute to the development of the nascent yet fast-expanding field of critical, anti-homophobic Chinese sexuality studies by mapping some of the basic structures that shape the public cultural representation and conceptualization of love between women today. Thus, although selected concepts and theories from work on lesbian representation in Euro-American contexts have proven useful in the analyses that follow, this work is taken up and put down opportunistically, providing elements of a critical tool kit rather than being mined for a unified theory of “the” logic of Western lesbian representation (if this could ever be reduced to a singular logic) as a point of comparison for the Chinese examples.

Schoolgirl Romance and Secondary Gender

The memorial discourse on female homoeroticism that is this book’s central subject can be traced in part back to the indigenization of European sexological theory in China during the 1920s and 1930s. That period saw the introduction of Havelock Ellis’s influential taxonomic division of female homosexuality into the mutually exclusive categories of situational/temporary (a universalizing model) and congenital/permanent (a minoritizing model). Zhang Jingsheng’s Sex Histories, published in 1926 and greatly indebted to Ellis, develops the first of these views by presenting school-era homosexuality in girls as a nonstigmatic, temporary stage on the way to adult heterosexuality. The volume includes a remarkably candid yet unpanicked account of temporary same-sex romance and sexual behavior among schoolgirls by
its sole female contributor, Miss Ban, who writes in detail about the activities of pairs of “intimate friends” in the Jiangsu girls’ school that she attended from the age of fourteen. In addition to falling in love with one another and being subject to romantic pining and fierce jealousy, according to Miss Ban, unbeknownst to the school authorities the lovers also routinely passed the night in one another’s beds, causing “the beds in which the couples were lying [to] shake most severely” for reasons that were not at the time clear to the naive young Miss Ban.26

Although the effects of the minoritizing view on female homosexuality are certainly present in some contemporary instances—notably in mass-cultural “tomboy melodrama” (the subject of chapter 4)—in post-1920s Chinese cultural production it is the universalizing view that Miss Ban’s account exemplifies that is by far most commonly seen. Chinese mass-cultural representations of sexual love between women, both in the modernist fiction of the 1920s and 1930s and in the second wave of female homoerotic representations since the late twentieth century, have tended to dwell on the theme of the “temporary” same-sex love of a conventionally feminine young woman for one of her companions, a love that is forcibly severed by the incursion of socially mandated cross-sex relations, frequently in the marriage of one of the partners.27 The pervasive association of women’s same-sex love with a specific time of life—the remembered past of adult femininity—is bolstered by the prominence of representations of intimate, sometimes erotic, friendships between girls and young women in modern Chinese cultures. Such emotionally intense and physically intimate female friendships, while relatively visible and at times valorized, nonetheless continue to bear an uneasy relation to the modern sexological category of female homosexuality (nǐ-tōngxinglián).28 This unresolved tension between an idealized view of intense and more or less erotic friendships between young women, on the one hand, and the stigmatization of “female homosexuality,” on the other, is expressed in the continuing parallel presence of the two most influential models for conceptualizing female same-sex love in modern China: one based on same-sex romance, the other on secondary gender.29

Lesbian historiography in the West has turned up two central tropes of lesbian epistemology and social practice: the romantic female friendship that emerged initially in eighteenth-century Europe and systems of secondary gender, such as butch/femme, that crystallized in urban subcultural practice after the Second World War.30 Two similar formations loom large in modern Chinese cultural interpretations and practices of women’s same-sex love as well. Astutely, Sang points out the parallel between the social practice of intimate female friendship, as depicted by Republican-era Chinese women writers like Lu Yin, and romantic friendships between nineteenth-century intellectual women in Europe and the United States.31 For both groups of “new women,” as Sang observes, romantic friendships with other women enabled them to distance themselves from women’s conventional roles in the family and advance their struggle for autonomy. Both groups of women were among the first generations to receive formal education; both were influenced by first-wave feminisms; both were drawn from the middle or upper classes; and both were born into societies in which intense and sensual female friendships constituted a culturally viable albeit in some cases also anxiously policed—form of feminine sociality. A major project undertaken in this book is that of tracing the narrative logics and structures of feeling associated with the Republican-era model of romantic friendship through Chinese-language stories, films, and television productions that have appeared post-1970 through the genre that I term memorial schoolgirl romance.32 Notwithstanding the influence of the sexological pathologization of female homosexuality, in Chinese cultural production the schoolgirl romance model has survived on into the present as a dominant strand within contemporary mass-cultural representations of erotic love between women, even bringing along with it a vestigial shadow of the Republican-era romantic idealization of “same-sex love” (tóngxìng’ài) as a sweet and ennobling experience for young women.33

In addition to this dominance of the memorial schoolgirl romance in contemporary Chinese mass-cultural figurations of women’s same-sex relations, what emerges strongly from many (though not all) of the examples analyzed here is the conceptual and experiential centrality of secondary gender.34 Gender in this sense differs from the sense in which Sang invokes gender in relation to lesbian representation. For Sang, gender refers primarily to the principle of social classification that divides men from women and unites women-loving women in their common opposition to patriarchal power. Secondary gender, by contrast, refers to a gendered distinction within the category of women who engage in sexual, erotic, or romantic relationships with other women. Although a majority of mass-cultural representations focus on normatively feminine protagonists, nonetheless in both popular representations and self-understandings on the part of self-identifying lesbians in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong today, the gendered distinction between masculine and feminine women—in its broad outlines comparable perhaps to Western systems of butch/femme—is central. In mass-cultural representations since the Republican era, apparently conforming to an Ellis-style taxon-
omy, this gendered distinction commonly maps onto the distinction between “permanent” lesbianism (presumptively the preserve of the relatively rarely represented masculine woman, or tomboy) and “temporary” same-sex love (assumed to be the experience of the more frequently represented normatively feminine woman). This distinction in turn maps onto the further distinction between minoritizing accounts of lesbianism, commonly applied to the tomboy, and universalizing accounts, usually applied to the normatively feminine woman. I deem that the latter constitute a dominant form of representation because stories, films, and television programs presented from the point of view of “temporarily” same-sex loving, normatively feminine protagonists simply outnumber narratives that focus centrally on the experience of tomboys. Secondary tomboy characters do sometimes appear in the schoolgirl romance genre, frequently as the currently absent yet lovingly remembered school-era sweethearts of the feminine protagonists. However, because these characters do not serve as the focus of narrative attention and indeed tend to disappear altogether prior to the end of the stories, the central logic of that narrative remains one of same-sex love as a temporary stage preceding the feminine protagonist’s reorientation toward adult cross-sex relations. The contemporary Chinese tomboy narrative—a term that I use to refer to texts that present the tomboy as protagonist rather than secondary character—is a distinctive form of representation with its own particular generic structures, notably those of the social problem melodrama (see chapter 4). It stands in contrast to the more common memorial narrative of same-sex love told from the perspective of a feminine protagonist, which tends instead to draw on the generic structures of tragic romance. In sum, while the memorial same-sex love story focusing on a normatively feminine protagonist is relatively mainstreamed and remarkably readily integrated into the broader cultural logic of romance, the tomboy narrative, by contrast, is relatively ghettoized; it is confined to a specific, “social problem” genre and thereby held at a greater distance than the schoolgirl romance from sexual and gender normativity.

Memory and Repetition

In *Love Me*, the final (re)appearance of “Zhu Yingtai” after Ying’s death dramatizes the way in which memory—especially the memory of a tragically unfulfilled love—engenders repetition (figure 4). Since fate (or social convention) always intervenes to prevent Zhu and Liang’s love from being realized, the film seems to say, their story will never be finished and hence must be repeated over and over again in perpetuity. This book proposes that a similar logic applies to the meta-narrative of women’s same-sex romance in contemporary Chinese popular cultures. For the remarkable cultural pervasiveness of tragic-romantic stories of passionate love between young women cherished and then abandoned due to forces beyond their control does not equate in any concrete way to heightened “tolerance” for lesbian relations between adult women in the societies in question. On the contrary, there is a clear link between the proliferation of such narratives and the social prohibition on adult lesbianism. Just as in Wang’s film, where the story of Zhu and Liang’s romance is doomed to eternal repetition by virtue of its being prematurely truncated, I contend that the memorial narrative of same-sex love between young women proliferates endless repetitions of itself precisely because the social ban on adult lesbianism means that this particular love story cannot be granted closure.

This book argues that the ideological effects of the memorial mode of female homoerotic representation are twofold and contradictory. First and most straightforwardly, the persistent coralling of women’s same-sex love and homoerotic desire into the past within Chinese popular texts can readily be understood as a recuperative de-realization of present or future lesbian possibility on the part of a dominant, patriarchal sex-gender system. Indeed, this is a critique that has often been made by local lesbian- and queer-identified commentators. However, representing such relations as confined to the past does not actually confine female homosexual signification to pastness since memory and its narration take place, by definition, in the present. Therefore, I argue that the attempt by the dominant culture of marital heterosexuality to de-realize lesbian possibility by memorializing it is, in a strict sense, doomed to failure. Against the commonsense assumption in popular post-Stonewall gay and lesbian discourse that happy endings to lesbian or gay stories are the sole means by which such stories can manifest critical potential, this book contends that the memorial discourse on women’s same-sex love in these sad-ending love stories does indeed have a critical function, especially for its female consumers. Rather than dismissing the memorial same-sex loving woman and her generic home, the sad-ending same-sex romance, as inherently “backward” formations, the chapters that follow strive to take seriously their ideological complexity both at the textual level and in their consumption by audiences. The apparent backwardness of these narratives turns out to make an important commentary on the present: attending closely to the repeated ideological construction of women’s same-sex relations as an insistently memorable paradise lost, we discover a vigorous critical energy underlying this central theme in modern Chinese women’s mass
culture. The analyses reveal the rich polysemy of the memorial discourse on female homoeroticism; its capacity not only to close down the possibility of a lesbian erotics but also to open it up; its tendency simultaneously to naturalize adult heterosexuality and to foreground the tragedy of its imposition. They show how these complex cultural texts function not simply to seal the same-sex loving woman safely in the past but also to cause her to appear and reappear, ceaselessly, in the present.

Female Homoerotic Imaginary

In framing these arguments about the structural forms and ideological effects of the selected representations of same-sex love between women, this book also makes a broader claim about what I have termed the female homoerotic imaginary in contemporary Chinese public cultures. To clarify the precise valence of this invented term, it may be helpful to break it down into its two constituent parts. First, the phrase “female homoerotic” is intended to signify anything pertaining to sexual, erotic, or romantic love and desire between women. It has been chosen over what might initially appear a more likely candidate for the job—the word “lesbian”—for one major reason. The English word “lesbian,” however carefully or strategically deployed, seems today to trail along with it an almost inevitable implication of self-conscious, minoritizing, Western-style lesbian identity: ways of imagining selves and interpersonal relations that have emerged out of the specific contexts of second-wave feminism and lesbian movements and politics in the United States and Western Europe since the early 1970s. But this book is for the most part less interested in self-conscious, minoritizing lesbian identities and subcultures than in the broader mainstream cultural representation of sexual, erotic, and romantic love between women, a realm indicated in my subtitle by the phrase “female homoerotic.”

Expanding the purview of inquiry to include any representation of love and desire between women, and not only representations staked out in advance as representative of that quite particular, minoritizing category, lesbian (in Chinese, nü tongxing, nü tongxinglian), one finds a vast cultural reservoir of other representations of same-sex love between women. Crucially, many of these representations feature universalizing rather than minoritizing representations of same-sex romance, figuring it as an ephemeral yet powerfully—often troublingly—memorable moment in a woman’s life. The nonidentitarian approach is intended to aid in exploring the distinctive cultural understandings of feminine same-sex love in this context without prematurely narrowing the terms of the inquiry with the a priori imposition of a homo/heterosexual dichotomy.

Second, in using the term “imaginary” to designate the book’s object of analysis, I mean to indicate not a theory of sexuality, not a theory of identity, not a theory of narrative, but rather a theorization of dominant ways of both representing and conceptualizing the female homoerotic within contemporary Chinese public cultures. This book considers the activity of imagining in both personal and collective senses. With its intended implication of structured ways of thinking and feeling that are both embedded in everyday subjective experience and mediated through historically specific representations, my usage of the term “imaginary” perhaps has something in common with Raymond Williams’s notion of the historically determined “structure of feeling” or with Teresa de Lauretis’s concept of the “public fantasy.” The imaginary of the female homoerotic designates both the dominant ways in which women’s same-sex relations are publicly represented and, as a consequence, the ways in which those forms of relationality become culturally intelligible for actual social subjects.

In light of the nonidentitarian approach outlined above, the selection of texts for analysis in the following chapters has not been guided by a judgment of the authenticity of these texts’ lesbian credentials. Rather, I have chosen a range of more or less widely circulated texts that have been recognized as thematizing women’s same-sex romantic and erotic relationships by their readers and viewers, both lesbian- and heterosexually-identifying. Over the years during which the research for this work took place, numerous informal conversations, book reviews, scholarly papers, and Web discussions have thrown up this group of texts as likely candidates for inclusion in a popular canon of modern Chinese female homoerotic representation. The readers and viewers of these relatively widely circulated texts collectively interpret them as thematizing women’s same-sex love; given that collective public judgment, they provide a logical place to begin mapping the hegemonic representational patterns that structure public fantasies on this subject. There is also an intentional focus, in most of the chapters, on texts that are relatively widely circulated and are neither necessarily written by known lesbian authors nor addressed primarily to lesbian audiences. This is because I feel that we need to gain a solid and adequately complex understanding of dominant patterns of female homoerotic representation before moving on to consider how these might be reconfigured by authors or directors with a conscious personal or political stake in producing enabling, subversive, or challenging representations of lesbian subjects. This logic structures the
progression of the chapters, with the final chapter mapping some recent cinematic responses to the dominant modes of representation sketched out in the previous chapters.

Sexual Histories and Geographies

The historical focus of this study is on female homoerotic representations in the contemporary period, between 1970 and the present. While chapter 1 shows that some key elements of these contemporary representations first emerged from the urban cultural and intellectual ferment of the 1920s and 1930s, this material is presented largely as contextualizing background for a study that is principally interested in the post-1970 period. Underlying this focus on twentieth- and twenty-first-century examples is my assumption that the modern period differs decisively from previous moments in the history of Chinese sexual epistemology due to the far-reaching transformative effects of intensified transculturation from Europe, the United States, and Japan from around the turn of the twentieth century. Therefore, this book has not attempted to construct an account of female homoeroticism through the ages of Chinese dynastic history.46

The book’s bipartite chronology, with the initial focus on the Republican period followed by a jump to the post-1970 era, is not coincidental but reflects the contours of the public topicality of women’s same-sex love in twentieth-century Chinese public cultures.47 In mainland Chinese urban cultures in the 1920s and 1930s, the translation of sexological theory, the establishment of women’s educational institutions, and the rise of the modern (heterosexual) romance narrative converged to provide the conditions for the literary emergence of same-sex schoolgirl romance in that period. However, with the political turmoil of the 1940s—the war of resistance against Japanese invasion and the civil war between the Nationalist and Communist armies—Chinese intellectual debates became overdetermined by pressing questions about national defense and political revolution, and the topic of women’s same-sex love faded from view. Following the 1949 Communist revolution, strict political regulation of culture under Mao Zedong effectively kept the topic out of public discussion on the Chinese mainland between the 1950s and the 1970s, although as Harriet Evans observes, the official silence may have masked a widespread public condemnation of homosexuality (tongxinglian) as a violation of the “natural” biological laws of sex and gender.48 Cultural censorship by the Nationalist government in Taiwan resulted in a comparable lack of public discussion during the 1950s and 1960s, aside from a scattering of scandal-mongering articles in the popular press that sensationalized male homosexuality as a monstrous inversion of “normal” gender.49 Jens Damm’s research shows that public discourse on male homosexuality in Taiwan between the late 1960s and the late 1980s, to the limited extent that the topic was discussed in popular journalism and medical publications, was split between pathologizing medical and psychoanalytic accounts and an emergent humanism that called for greater public understanding of homosexuals as an embattled sexual minority.50 As on the mainland, however, very little public attention appears to have been paid to female homosexuality.51 In Hong Kong, notwithstanding the modern tradition of playful gender ambiguity in popular cinema, male homosexual behavior remained illegal under British colonial law until 1991, and the extant studies indicate high levels of homophobic toward both male and female homosexuality.52 The earliest of the late-twentieth-century examples discussed in this book are literary works that appeared in the mid-1970s in Taiwan: the young Chu T’ien-hsin’s schoolgirl romance story, “Waves Scour the Sands” (1975), and Xuan Xiaofo’s pulp novel of the same year, Yuan zhi wai (Outside the Circle), with its sympathetic depiction of a socially beleaguered tomboy protagonist.53 Xuan’s novel responds quite clearly to the then current humanist construction of homosexuality as “misunderstood” gender inversion, while Chu’s story is a now classic contemporary adaptation of the schoolgirl romance narrative. The appearance of both these works, along with Beijing author Liu Suola’s crypto-lesbian novella of 1985, “Lan tian li hai” (Blue Sky Green Sea), foreshadows the late-century “second wave” of female homoerotic topicality that is this book’s principal focus. This second wave coincides with the reemergence of the lesbian topic into public discussions in all three regions. Along with the slackening of previously harshly authoritarian regimes and the gradual reduction in the political regulation of culture in both the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan, the late-twentieth-century reemergence of the lesbian topic can be linked to a spate of new popular and academic sexual studies during the 1980s, notably studies in sexual psychology in Taiwan and sexual sociology in the People’s Republic.54 But even more influential, since the early 1990s local movements and communities have emerged in all three areas responding to the global spread of lesbian identity politics. This factor more than any other underlies the regional “boom” in Chinese-language female homoerotic representations over the past fifteen-odd years.55

This book’s rationale for considering the three distinct geocultural areas of mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong together does not stem from any priori presumption of their inherent similarity. The modern cultures
of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are of course historically interlinked to a certain degree, both in a broad cultural and linguistic sense and through the more recent emergence of the various forms of Chinese modernity through the processes of conflict and reciprocal self-definition among the regimes of British colonialism, Chinese socialism, and Kuomintang party-state capitalism. Leading up to the 1949 Communist revolution, the late 1940s exoduses from China’s cities to Taiwan (the Nationalist army and its followers) and Hong Kong (many artists and other professionals from Shanghai’s then sizable film industry) affected a transplantation of some elements of the urban cultures and intellectual ferment of Republican China to these other locations. Yet despite significant strands of historical connection, the contemporary cultures of the People’s Republic, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are irreducibly plural. It is therefore worth emphasizing that although this book proposes the cultural dominance of a particular, temporal logic of female homoerotic representation and attempts to trace this logic across texts produced in all three areas, this logic does not exhaust the field of female homoerotic representation in any of them. Rather than attempt the impossible task of formulating a theory capacious enough to account for every single instance of such representation in all three geopolitical areas, this book identifies one highly pervasive cultural logic and traces it as it manifests at particular sites and in various ways in each area. One of the central questions addressed in the analyses that follow concerns how the temporal logic of female homoerotic representation is marked by the local historical and cultural particularities of each of the areas in which it manifests. But in addition to localized inflections of this common discourse there also exist forms of representation in each area that are far more strongly marked by local particularity; examples include the all-female Taiwanese opera (ko-ah-hi), with its attendant quasi-tradition of romantic and/or sexual relationships between actresses and between actresses and female fans; the comedic or carnivalesque representation of proto-lesbian characters in popular Cantonese cinema; and the normalization of intimate bonds between women workers under Maoism in mainland China. The high degree of local specificity in such formations prevents them from being slotted neatly into the more general interpretative schema that this book proposes. The gaps that are apparent in the choice of examples analyzed here therefore point to the limits of the model proposed; like any analysis, this is a necessarily partial account, and such gaps indicate areas awaiting further research.

More than from any presumption of deep-rooted cultural similarity, the decision to consider female homoerotic representation across the People’s Republic, Taiwan, and Hong Kong arises from the observation of the intra-regional mobility of popular texts and discourses among these three areas in the present day. Since the mid-1980s, cultural flows between the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong have steadily accelerated. Taiwanese fiction has become an area of major interest to both mainland Chinese and Hong Kong readerships and critics, and indeed some of the Taiwanese schoolgirl romance stories discussed here have been republished by mainland Chinese presses. Likewise, queer-themed mainland Chinese and Hong Kong fiction has sparked the interest of Taiwanese readerships. Short fiction from all three areas is also circulated to readers throughout the region more informally via the World Wide Web. Similarly lively trans-local cross-flows of media products like television programs and films from and to all three areas occur via the Internet and media piracy, as well as by more formal means like film festivals, campus screenings, and commercial theatrical release. The map of contemporary Chinese cultures that emerges from this research thus resembles not so much the “living tree” of Tu Wei-ming’s famous formulation, with its singular trunk of cultural tradition, as a cultural archipelago where media cross-flows—both within and beyond “transnational China”—interact with local histories to create distinctive yet interlinked contemporary cultural scenes.

Black Skirts and White Blouses

This book’s focus on the memorial narrative of schoolgirl romance reflects the remarkably pervasive conceptual linkage of female same-sex love with youth in contemporary Chinese cultural life, from pop psychology and media cultures to popular fiction by young lesbian authors and the experience of ordinary female students in their everyday school lives. By the early twenty-first century, the discourse of “temporary homosexuality” in same-sex schools is frequently enough invoked in Chinese public life that it may be considered a form of cultural common sense. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from an article published in 2001 entitled “Facing the Suspicion of Student Homosexuality,” originally published in the Ming Pao Daily and reproduced on the Web site of the Family Planning Association of Hong Kong:

In a girls’ school, intimate behavior among female students tends to be relatively open; for example, holding hands to demonstrate the closeness of a friendship is commonly seen. Perhaps due to the narrowness of their social circle, adolescent boys and girls tend to develop emotional attach-
love between wide-eyed teenage students; circulating throughout “transnational China” in Chinese translations, these popular manga, which emphasize the youth of the protagonists and fetishized school settings, contribute to the wider cultural association of same-sex love with female students. A similar preoccupation with Japanese-style black-and-white school uniforms, campus settings, and homoerotic possibility is found in the spate of Japanese and Korean girls’ school horror movies that circulate in the Chinese-speaking societies under discussion as part of the late-century waves of Japanese and Korean popular culture throughout the East Asian region. Like the campus-based girls’ love manga, these films figure intense romantic or quasi-romantic relationships between schoolgirls; in distinction to the manga, their dominant note is anxiety and terror, as the girls’ relationships seem inevitably to lead to a downward spiral of jealousy, possessiveness, violence, bloodshed, and even destruction of cosmic proportions. This somewhat conservative tendency notwithstanding, the circulation of these popular genre films in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan contributes to the widespread association of same-sex love with feminine youth.

The familiar popular cultural figure of the same-sex attracted girl or young woman has also recently found her way into materials produced by self-consciously lesbian-identified cultural producers directed at lesbian readerships. This is the case with the new wave of lesbian popular fiction that has arisen since the late 1990s. These novels and short stories are distinguished from earlier, more highbrow instances of “queer fiction” (tongzhi wenxue or ku’er wenxue) by their unapologetic populism and easy readability. They often appear initially as Internet fiction—a major arena of literary production in its own right in Chinese-speaking youth cultures—before being published in book form by dedicated gay-and-lesbian (tongzhi) publishing houses like Jihe in Taiwan and Huasheng in Hong Kong or other popular presses. A major genre of these lesbian-themed stories is the high school campus romance with its open and queer-affirmative celebration of same-sex love in “the era of black skirts and white blouses” (hei qun bei yi shidai).

Recent ethnographic research in Taipei, Shanghai, and Hong Kong also reveals the important place of girls’ same-sex romance within lived campus cultures. Zhang Qiaoting’s aptly titled Xunfu yu di kang (Campus Memory) presents the results of her research at Taipei First Girls’ High School (Bei Yi Nü), Taiwan’s most prestigious girls’ school, established under the Japanese colonial administration on the model of European elite girls’ schools. Zhang’s study of ten lesbian-identifying Bei Yi Nü graduates reveals the existence of an apparent quasi-tradition of same-sex romantic pairings in the face of school authorities’ vigorous policing of students’ sexuality. Sweethearts pair up in couples with one tomboy (t) and one feminine (p) partner; meet for clandestine dates and sex in secluded corners of the campus; write about their romances in thinly disguised form in stories submitted to the school magazine; and copy and circulate well-known schoolgirl romances by other writers, including Chu T’ien-hsin and Cao Liujuan. Pik-ki Leung’s research at the elite mainland Chinese state key school Shanghai Number 3 Girls’ School (Shi San Nu Zhong) reveals a comparable culture of romantic same-sex friendships. Leung’s findings suggest that these students’ views of intimate relations between girls are internally divided. On the one hand, when questioned directly about homosexuality, the students appeal to a disapproving, minoritizing discourse on lesbianism (nongxinglian) as pathology, echoing the rhetoric of current Chinese popular psychology. On the other hand, in their own forms of cultural expression, including creative writing and the narrativization of their autobiographical experience in interviews, the students give voice to an alternative, idealizing and universalizing discourse on the beauty of romantic intimacy between young women. These students’ ambivalent construction of same-sex love mirrors the double vision that this book proposes is characteristic of contemporary Chinese representations of women’s same-sex love more broadly, split as these are between a universalizing view (schoolgirl romance) and a minoritizing view (tomboy melodrama). Lucetta Kam Yip-loo’s and Carmen Tong Ka-man’s studies of TB (tomboy) culture and same-sex romance in Hong Kong high schools reveal similar subcultural formations, as do the findings of the Hong Kong Women Who Have Same-Sex Desires Oral History Project. Such studies demonstrate the degree of social embeddedness of contemporary schoolgirl romance narratives. Manifestly, these stories exceed the boundaries of the texts themselves to produce significant subjective effects for the girls and women who read, watch, write, exchange, reenact, and identify with their narratives.

All these examples demonstrate the high degree of cultural prominence enjoyed by the figure of the same-sex attracted schoolgirl or young woman in the contemporary Chinese cultures under discussion: she appears in both openly homophobic and proudly lesbian-affirmative instances, as well as in examples whose ideological valence is less immediately clear. It is in this context that the stories, television programs, and films analyzed in the chapters that follow have emerged and should be viewed; they are not idiosyncratic depictions of some obscure or marginal figure but reflections of a broader, fully mainstream cultural preoccupation. Far from addressing a merely periph-
eral concern, the investigation of female homoerotic representation and epistemology illuminates central aspects of contemporary Chinese understandings of sex, love, gender, marriage, and the cultural ordering of human life.

**Trajectory of the Text**

The chapter that follows this introduction traces the early-twentieth-century origins of the Chinese schoolgirl romance narrative, or what I call the going-in story (marking an intentional ironic contrast with the Western, post-Stonewall coming-out story), due to its characteristic narrative structure in which adolescent same-sex love is superseded by cross-sex union at story’s end. Focusing on modernist stories written in the 1920s and 1930s by Lu Yin, Ling Shuhua, and Yu Dafu, the chapter traces the literary roots of the universalizing mode of female homoerotic representation in Lu’s and Ling’s stories while also noting the concurrent literary emergence of a minoritizing discourse on the masculine lesbian in Yu’s novella. I frame the emergence of the same-sex schoolgirl romance in the context of both the transculturation of European sexology into China in the early twentieth century and the generic conventions of popular cross-sex romance, which I argue Lu’s and Ling’s stories appropriate to present a markedly utopian vision of young women’s same-sex love.

Chapter 2 charts the late-twentieth-century resurgence of the going-in story, analyzing two contemporary literary examples by Chu T’ien-Hsin and Wong Bikwan. Continuing the generic analysis begun in chapter 1, the chapter demonstrates how each story rehearses in a knowing manner the codes of modern Chinese-language tragic romance fiction. Chu’s story, for instance, stages an ironic citation of the characteristically romantic-melancholic structure of feeling in tragic romance stories like those of Taiwanese “romance queen” Qiong Yao. Comparably, Wong’s story reworks some central themes and aesthetics of the 1940s works of Shanghai/Hong Kong writer Eileen Chang. I propose that it is by means of such generic intertextuality that these stories critically interrupt, rather than merely reproduce, the naturalizing force of the heterocentric, sexological account of adolescent sexual development that also informs them.

The following chapter investigates the form in which the schoolgirl romance reappeared in the People’s Republic of China in the immediate post-Mao era. The chapter frames female rock musician/author Liu Suola’s 1985 novella “Blue Sky Green Sea” in the intellectual context of mid-1980s Beijing, the moment of “culture fever” when Chinese intellectuals were enthusiasti-
lesbian possibility in the lives of young adult women. Further, by unambiguously cuing female spectators to identify with their tomboy-loving protagonists, these programs frame the tomboy as the object of love of women in general. In this regard, they enable a profoundly reparative vision of the tomboy, rendering her lovable and lavishing collective feminine love upon her, in sharp contrast to the broader cultural abjection of lesbian masculinity dramatized in the tomboy melodramas analyzed in chapter 4.

It is only relatively recently that the lesbian subject has begun to be treated directly and seriously by young, independent film directors, and the book’s final chapter focuses on the rise of Chinese lesbian-themed cinema since the late 1990s. This chapter marks a turning point in the book’s focus and argument. We shift from analyzing the contradictory functions of the memorial discourse in more or less mainstream representations of female homoeroticism to exploring resistant responses to this pervasive discourse in some recent independent films that are consciously and clearly self-marked as “lesbian.” This chapter thus shifts the previous focus on recovering the complexity and ambivalence of supposedly “backward” texts toward an attention to the actively “forward-looking” practice of queer filmmaking, with its commitment to forging new forms of representation. Following an overview of the ways in which the memorial mode has structured female homoerotic representation in previous, mainstream Chinese-language cinemas, this chapter reveals how recent films by young, independent women directors, including Chen Jofei, Mak Yan Yan, and Li Yu, are challenging the dominant construction of women’s same-sex love as a memorial condition. In one sense, these directors’ serious, anti-homophobic treatments of love between women reflect the impact of globalizing U.S.-style lesbian identity politics. But while their films undoubtedly respond to such global movements, the specificity of the ways in which they do so also illustrates a continuing preoccupation with temporality that, as the preceding chapters have illustrated, has been the hallmark of modern Chinese female homoerotic representation. These recent films approach this theme in new ways in order to reconfigure the Chinese female homoerotic imaginary away from the familiar memorial logic toward the present and future.

Over ten years ago, Bret Hinsch concluded his argument on the decline of premodern Chinese conceptualizations of same-sex sexual behavior with the gloomy assertion that “The fluid conceptions of sexuality of old, which assumed that an individual was capable of enjoying a range of sexual acts, have been replaced by the ironclad Western dichotomy of homosexual/heterosexual. Instead of . . . terms taken from (Chinese) history and literature, Chinese now speak of “homosexuality” (tongxinglian or tongxingai), a direct translation of the Western medical term that defines a small group of pathological individuals according to a concrete sexual essence.” Despite some scholarly disagreement with Hinsch’s historical oversimplification, the view that modern Chinese cultures conceptualize sexuality primarily in terms of a rigid and indicatively Western dichotomy between the terms “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” remains influential. In the pages that follow, however, I want to propose a different framework for approaching Chinese sexual epistemologies in the context of twentieth-century modernization.

In relation to post-Foucauldian scholarship on the history of sexuality, Eve Sedgwick cautions that “the historical search for a Great Paradigm Shift may obscure the present conditions of sexual identity.” This warning is certainly apposite to the study of the history of sexuality in twentieth-century China; as Sang’s work implies, an analysis like the one made by Hinsch is open to precisely this kind of critique in its simplistic construction of Westernization as effecting just such a radical, total, and irreversible break with “Chinese sexual tradition.” Further, pursuing the implications of Sedgwick’s warning even more explicitly into the territory of cross-cultural sexuality studies, I would propose that the geocultural search for a great paradigm divergence be-