

Pan Guangdan and the Making of “Tongxinglian”: How China Translated Western Sexology

ShuRui Mei¹ *

¹Liaoning Province ShiYan High School, Shenyang, China

*Corresponding Author: msr13066535962@163.com

Advisor: Haiyi Li, haiyiliuiuc@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article reassessed Pan Guangdan’s (1899–1967) foundational role in introducing Western sexology to Republican China through his translation and extensive annotation of Havelock Ellis’s *Psychology of Sex*. Existing scholarship has recognized Pan as a key transmitter of Western sexology, but has not sufficiently explained how his translation practices actively produced a Chinese genealogy of homosexuality while also narrowing the field through male-centered and eugenic assumptions. Rather than a passive transmission, Pan’s project was a strategic intervention that forged a bridge between Western medico-sexological categories and China’s long textual record of same-sex relations. By privileging tongxinglian (同性恋, “homosexuality”) over tongxing’ai (同性愛, “same-sex love”), he shifted discussion from romance to taxonomy, treating classical anecdotes, court histories, and Qing scholarship as indigenous precedents for a Chinese genealogy of homosexuality. At the same time, Pan’s strategy imposed sharp limits. His archive is elite and male-centered, and his phallogocentric premises leave women’s same-sex relations largely underexamined. Moreover, his Social-Darwinist eugenics recast sexuality as an instrument of national utility—population “quality” (suzhi), not private affection—rendering non-procreative intimacies suspect. Reading Pan against Qing legal and administrative materials highlighted by Matthew Sommer and Philip Huang foregrounds coercion, commerce, and unequal power that Pan’s canon minimizes. This article concluded that Pan’s legacy was double-edged: pathbreaking in legitimizing a vocabulary for homosexuality, yet restrictive in its exclusions and utilitarian biopolitics.

Keywords: Pan Guangdan; Republican-era China; sexology; homosexuality; translation and adaptation; eugenics; modernity and nation-building

1. Introduction

This article argued that Pan Guangdan’s translation of Western sexology was not a passive transfer of knowledge but a strategic intervention in the making of a modern Chinese category of homosexuality. Pan’s translation took shape during one of the most troubling—and transformative—moments in China’s long history. European imperial expansion destabilized the Qing dynasty, which after the Opium War signed a series of unequal treaties with Britain, France, Germany, and others. Reform programs such as the Self-Strengthening Movement sought Western-style modernization but fell short, especially in comparison to Japan’s Meiji successes, highlighted by China’s defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War and the loss of influence over Korea. Reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao urged the adoption of Western science and technology to strengthen state capacity. Political crisis and popular unrest culminated in the 1911 Revolution, the abdication of the child emperor Puyi, and the transition from empire to republic (Kuo, 1978, pp. 491–542; Zheng, 2018, pp. 1–23).

The Republican era (1912–1949) thus began as a turbulent and profoundly transitional chapter following the Xinhai Revolution that toppled the Qing. Although the Provisional Government was founded by figures including Sun Yat-sen (the first provisional president), the young republic quickly fractured into competing warlord territories,

exposing the fragility of its political institutions. Internal disunity was compounded by continuing foreign imperialism: treaty ports such as Shanghai and Tianjin functioned as semi-colonial enclaves under foreign jurisdiction, a persistent reminder of China's perceived weakness. Together, domestic fragmentation and external pressure catalyzed the New Culture Movement, which championed "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy" as antidotes to the supposed backwardness of Confucian tradition (Sheridan, 1983, pp. 284–321; Spence, 2013, pp. 279–301).

Within this broader turn to Western "science" as diagnosis and cure, Pan emerged as a pivotal intellectual. A sociologist and eugenicist, Pan translated and interpreted Western sociological and psychological theories for Chinese readers, convinced that a scientific understanding of human nature was essential to national strengthening. His most notable contribution was his systematic introduction of Havelock Ellis's *Psychology of Sex* (Ellis being the renowned British sexologist long credited with the concept of "sexual inversion"). To render Ellis's notion of "homosexuals" as a type of personhood marked by distinct sexual orientation, Pan introduced tongxinglian (同性恋, "homosexuality"), which remains central in Chinese discourse today. Recent scholarship offers sharply divergent assessments of Pan's legacy. In the PRC today, he is frequently celebrated as a leading figure of Chinese eugenics, credited with shaping demographic thinking that later intersected with population policy. On the mainland, scholars such as Liu Dalin and Bi Huanzhou often treat Pan as a major translator of European sexology who introduced new meanings of European scientific thought to Chinese audiences. In the United States, scholars including Wen-qing Kang, Tze-lan Sang, and Howard Chiang read Pan's work as marking a turning point in the emergence of "homosexuals" as a category organized by sexual orientation. However, few have evaluated Pan against China's long cultural tradition of same-sex affection. Without attention to the rich historical context in which Pan wrote, the lasting impact of his work on Chinese society—especially on popular and scholarly understandings of homosexuality—cannot be fully appreciated (White, 2006, pp. 19–41; Bi, 2007, pp. 134–208; Chiang, 2010, pp. 629–657).

Pan's strategic intervention was especially visible in his choice of terminology. By choosing tongxinglian (同性恋, "homosexuality") over tongxing'ai (同性愛, "same-sex love"), Pan shifted emphasis from sentiment and romance to a medico-sexological taxonomy of same-sex desire, linking Western sexology to an extensive Chinese archive and granting homosexuality both cultural legitimacy and scientific standing in Chinese contexts. By framing same-sex behavior as a natural human variation rather than a disease or moral defect, Pan resisted Western pathologization. Yet this challenge remained limited, because his eugenic framework still treated non-reproductive sexuality as socially problematic. The paper also probed other limitations of Pan's project. His archive leans toward elite, male-centered narratives drawn from official histories and canonical literature, which fosters a depoliticized, class-bound depiction of homosexuality. Moreover, his framework is fundamentally phallogentric, rendering female homosexuality largely invisible. Most consequentially, his eugenic priorities—aimed at using marriage selection and reproduction to guide population "fitness"—linked sexual legitimacy to reproductive value, especially in wartime contexts. In short, Pan's influence on Chinese sexology is deeply dual: path-breaking in vocabulary and method, yet restrictive in scope and social imagination (Lü, 2023).

This article used a qualitative historical and textual approach. Its primary focus was Pan's translation and annotation of Havelock Ellis's *Psychology of Sex*, especially the passages where Pan interprets, explains, and expands Ellis's discussion of homosexuality. Rather than treating translation as a neutral transfer of meaning, this paper read Pan's lexical choices and annotations as part of his scholarly method and argument, not merely as explanatory notes. The article therefore combined critical textual analysis with translation studies and the history of ideas, paying particular attention to how Pan selected Chinese historical materials to indigenize the modern category of homosexuality, and how his choices also exposed the gendered, class-based, and eugenic limits of his framework.

2. Pan's positive influence

Born in 1899, Pan came of age in the late Qing and early Republic of China, a period of acute national crisis and introspection. He first studied at Tsinghua College (Beijing), a preparatory school for study in the United States. In America, he earned a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College and a master's degree in biology from Columbia University. These international educational experiences shaped his research methods and intellectual orientation.

Pan's most discussed—and often contentious—ideas revolved around eugenics (then known in China as *youshengxue* 优生学). He published widely on the topic, including *The Family Problems of the Chinese* and *An Outline of Eugenics* (Lü, 2006, pp. 12–73).

This paper primarily analyzed Pan's translation and adaptation of Havelock Ellis's *Psychology of Sex* (《性心理学》) and its influence on later Chinese understandings of homosexuality. Drawing on his American training, Pan sought to provide a scientific foundation for sexual education in China. He chose Ellis (1859–1939)—a seminal figure in psychology and sexology who treated homosexuality as a psychological phenomenon (often discussed under “sexual inversion”) rather than as sin—as a cornerstone. Yet Pan did more than translate: he selectively adopted Ellis's concepts, used annotation as a scholarly method, and retooled the material to serve his sociological and eugenic aims—namely, to enhance public understanding of sexuality in order to promote a healthy and stable society (Grosskurth, 1980).

Today, homosexuality is commonly understood through the framework of sexual orientation, but this is a historically constructed concept shaped by each nation's political and cultural context. For example, *wakashu* traditions in Japan and pederasty in ancient Greece were structured by age and educational functions rather than by a modern notion of orientation: in Japan, roughly sixteen was celebrated as the most beautiful and flourishing stage of a young man's life, while in Greece pedagogical bonds transmitted knowledge from elder to youth through pederastic relationships. Within the Chinese context, Pan, as the first major translator of the discourse on “homosexuals,” introduced a novel conception of homosexuals as a type of personhood characterized by intimate attachment and spiritual love. Notably, accounts of male–male intimacy appear throughout early Chinese sources and later imperial histories, and they were typically not framed as sinful nor as markers of a distinct social identity. Two oft-cited anecdotes illustrate elite same-sex affection (Leupp, 1997, pp. 15–40; Hinsch, 1992, pp. 1–42).

In the Spring and Autumn period, Duke Ling of Wei and his favorite Mi Zixia were remembered through the “bitten peach” anecdote: after Mi offered the duke a peach he had already bitten, the duke praised him for his affection. Later writers treated the story as a shorthand for male–male intimacy at court, where emotional attachment and bodily closeness could be expressed through everyday acts.

In the Qing dynasty, Chen Sen—a disillusioned scholar who abandoned the civil examinations and settled in Beijing—wrote *The Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses* (《品花宝鉴》), drawing on his encounters with opera performers. The novel celebrates *qíng* (情)—love and feeling—between men of letters and boy actors. As Hu Shi observed in *New Youth*, “This book's historical value lies precisely in its unconscious spontaneity—its lack of awareness that same-sex affections should be considered a sin.” From the Spring and Autumn period to the Qing, the general trend moves from terse historical anecdotes to elaborate, romanticized fiction and drama—and, unlike many Western contexts, these materials typically do not cast same-sex affection as sinful or as the mark of a distinct social identity (Chen, 1849; Hu, 1917).

Moving from classical anecdotes to twentieth-century romanticized fiction, Pan sought to fuse indigenous understandings of male–male relations with Western sexology by promoting a new hybrid category, *tongxinglian* (同性恋). In introducing this term, Pan deliberately preferred *tongxinglian* to *tongxing'ai* (同性愛). Both compounds share *tong* (同, “same”) and *xing* (性, “sex”), but the third morpheme matters: *lian* (恋) versus (愛). In early Republican discourse, translators and essayists often rendered “homosexuality” as *tongxing'ai*—literally “same-sex love”—to contrast it with “love between a man and a woman” (男女之戀愛), “love between the opposite sexes” (異性之間的愛), or simply *lian'ai* (戀愛, “romance/love”). Attraction between the two sexes was presumed to be the default mode of romantic and sexual attachment, so Republican intellectuals did not translate “homosexuality” as “same-sex desire” or “same-sex intercourse,” but as “same-sex love.” As Tze-lan Sang notes, this neologism foregrounded sentiment, autonomy, and romance, differing from earlier Chinese categories that emphasized carnal pleasure and hierarchical patronage (e.g., *luan* 變 rather than a stable sexual identity). On the other hand, Pan pointed to the classical interchangeability of *lian* (恋) and *luan* (變) in certain contexts; the latter appears in *luan* (變, “catamite”), historically tied to beautiful boys serving men's sexual pleasure. “Compared with the word *ai*, *lian*

has a stronger meaning of sexual love,” Pan writes, adding that luan could be used interchangeably with lian in classical usage. By translating “homosexuality” as tongxinglian—rather than tongxing’ai or tongxing lian’ai—Pan linked China’s rich documentary record of male same-sex relations to a modern medico-sexological category, shifting the discourse from sentimental “love” to a taxonomy of desire and behavior. In this way, tongxinglian did double work: it reached backward to indigenous terms (through lian/luan) and forward to Western sexology, creating a category legible to both traditions while subtly moving emphasis from romance to sexuality (Sang, 1999, pp. 276–304; Ellis, 1942/1997, pp. 296–345).

Building on the shift from tongxing’ai to tongxinglian, Pan recast homosexuality as a natural—yet changeable—feature of human emotional development. Through extensive annotations in the 1942 edition of *Xing Xinlixue* (*Psychology of Sex*), he framed homosexuality as a psychological/biological variation rather than a moral failing. As he notes in school-age cases, “homosexual behavior in school might vanish after those students grow up; same-sex behavior is an expression of inner love, which ends up [in] heterosexuality”. In other words, variation could be both natural and mutable (Ellis, 1942/1997, pp. 224).

Pan then used the modern label tongxinglian to reread Chinese history and organize scattered accounts of male–male intimacy into a recognizable Chinese genealogy of homosexuality. He buttressed this move with annotated examples from indigenous sources—citing Yuan Mei (1716–1797) and Ji Yun (1724–1805). Both were Qing scholars famed for poetry and for recording folklore. Ji Yun’s remark that “catamite does not stem from the people’s hearts once they [are] born” and Yuan Mei’s observation that “people all have their own temperament just as trees have distinct leaves; it is better for some men to become a concubine of a noble” helped Pan rationalize tongxinglian as neither a wholly Western import nor a disease, but a long-standing, natural human variation entrenched in Chinese tradition. By “rediscovering” same-sex behaviors in Chinese historical texts, Pan reassured readers that homosexuals had always been part of Chinese society, thereby reducing pressure to fully pathologize the phenomenon (Ellis, 1942/1997, pp. 214).

In late imperial China, many men were selected for close service in the imperial palaces. From the Han dynasty onward, a substantial portion were castrated and served as eunuchs. Because of this unusual bodily status and their proximity to power, traditional historians often portrayed eunuchs as unfilial, sly, or effeminate. Pan, however, rereads palace intimacy through a Western-informed lens and recasts it within his modern category of tongxinglian. He proposes a court-centered typology that distinguishes favored non-eunuch male courtiers from eunuchs—castrated palace servants whose roles and access to the ruler could foster distinctive forms of intimacy. Pan then anchors this scheme in canonical episodes: Deng Tong’s devotion to Emperor Wen of Han, even “sucking the pus” from a pustule, and Emperor Ai of Han’s extraordinary favor toward Dong Xian, including preparations to pass the throne to him. In a traditional Confucian context—where only kin or spouses should taste another’s medicine or tend a wound—such acts signaled an intimacy that breached ordinary etiquette; and in imperial politics—where emperors sought to concentrate power to prevent rebellion—exclusive favorites were viewed as dangerous. Consequently, these records were long read as political cautionary tales, warning that emperors might lose sacred authority or trust traitors. Pan’s reinterpretation, by contrast, treats them as early examples of male–male relationships between emperors and non-eunuch subjects, historically obscured by moralizing court rhetoric. By pairing Western sexological vocabulary with Chinese court history, Pan indigenizes tongxinglian while stabilizing it as a modern analytic category (Ellis, 1942/1997, pp. 506).

Rather than beginning with abstract theory, Pan writes as a translator–editor who actively reshapes his sources for Chinese readers. He selects, reframes, and annotates Ellis to contest Eurocentric assumptions and to make Chinese materials legible within sexology. A clear example is his treatment of Ellis’s “sexo-aesthetic inversion” (i.e., transvestism). Ellis relies heavily on European cases—most famously Chevalier d’Éon (1728–1810), a French diplomat and soldier who lived publicly as a woman for decades. Pan counters this tilt by adducing Chinese evidence. In notes to *Xing Xinlixue*, he cites the *Family Instructions of Yan*, which records male elites of the Liang period perfuming garments with women’s scents, shaving their faces, and using powder and rouge. Such details suggest that cross-gender aesthetic practices were visible enough to be recorded in normative texts. By placing these Chinese descriptions alongside Ellis’s European examples, Pan (1) establishes comparability without treating Europe as the norm; (2) roots the category in China’s textual archive; and (3) redirects interpretation away from blanket claims of

“degeneracy” toward historically attested practices. This editorial method shows how translation can function as concept-formation even as it privileges certain archives over others (Ellis, 1942/1997, pp. 231).

Only after demonstrating this concrete, source-based strategy does Pan’s approach fully illustrate Lydia Liu’s claim that the host language exercises theoretical agency in translation: Chinese terms, citations, and historical frames do not passively receive European concepts; they reshape them. In short, Pan extends European sexology by supplying the cross-cultural depth it gestures toward but cannot provide on its own, while simultaneously indigenizing tongxinglian (同性恋) within a Chinese intellectual and historical tradition. This bilingual, bidirectional work matters not merely as philology but as concept-formation: the meanings of “homosexuality” emerge at the intersection of Western taxonomy and Chinese archives, acquiring cultural legitimacy as well as analytic precision. At the same time, the very success of this strategy sets the terms of debate for subsequent readers—foregrounding certain sources and practices while eliding others—a dynamic that will prove crucial to assessing the limits of Pan’s archive (class, gender, and reproduction) in the sections that follow.

3. Pan’s negative influence

While Pan’s creative translation of Ellis’s work was groundbreaking—helping inaugurate a scientific discourse on homosexuality in China—a close reading also reveals important limitations. Although Pan successfully documented the prevalence of same-sex behavior in Chinese sources, he offered little critique of that evidence. In his appendix on “homosexual examples in Chinese historical records”, he treated anecdotes from the *Book of Documents* (《尚书》), *Zhanguo Ce* (《战国策》), and the *Classic of Poetry* (《诗经》) as a continuous lineage of male–male relations, but largely left unexamined the power asymmetries embedded in courtly narratives—differences of rank, age, dependency, and bodily status (Ellis, 1942/1997, pp. 501).

This omission matters. Within imperial hierarchies, a young male favorite’s meaningful refusal could be structurally constrained; yet Pan, following the classical sources, foregrounded romance and intimacy while minimizing coercion, patronage, and vulnerability. The result is a selective archive that privileges elite experience. For example, Pan cites the stories of Dong Xian and Deng Tong as evidence of the universality of same-sex love, but both figures occupied exceptional positions: Dong Xian served as Commander-in-Chief (大司马)—the highest military office—while Deng Tong held the rank of Senior dafu (上大夫) and was among the wealthiest men at court. By limiting himself to official histories and canonical literature, Pan effectively restricted homosexuality to upper-class milieus and silenced non-elite lives—peasants, servants, soldiers—whose experiences surface in other kinds of records.

In recent years, scholars such as Matthew Sommer have documented the widespread presence of Qing legal cases involving sodomy, male same-sex prostitution, and rape. Sommer’s findings sharply unsettle the romanticized, courtly model of same-sex relations on which Pan largely drew. Where Pan filtered out coercion and transaction to craft an honorable lineage, judicial records reveal the messier realities of exploitation, economic exchange, and unequal power among commoners as well as elites. This contrast matters: by privileging canonical literature and official histories, Pan helped codify a depoliticized, class-bound understanding of homosexuality—on the one hand, a refined private sentiment celebrated by literati; on the other, an absence of the power dimensions that also shaped same-sex relations (Sommer, 2000, pp. 7–35).

This class-based oversight is compounded by a second, epistemological flaw: phallocentrism. Pan’s framework centers the male phallus as the necessary marker of sex, implicitly defining legitimate sexual acts as those involving penile participation. The consequence is predictable: women—lacking a phallus—are rendered sexually passive or even ineligible as autonomous participants in same-sex relations. This helps explain why Pan treats female homosexuality as rare or marginal—not because it was absent, but because his criteria could not register it. Tze-lan Sang directly challenges this lens, arguing that features of Chinese social organization—especially the polygynous household—could increase and reinforce female same-sex intimacy. Whereas Pan reads relations among wives and concubines as merely rivalrous or neutral, Sang documents thicker networks of female intimacy, sensuality, and community that do not revolve around the phallus. Her approach recenters women’s practices and meanings, showing how Pan’s framework systematically downplays physical intimacy in women’s same-sex relations (Sang, 2003, pp.

17–65).

A clear counterexample to Pan's male-centered framework appears in the Pearl River Delta, where communities of "comb sisters" (自梳女, *zishunu*) were composed of women who publicly refused heterosexual marriage and bound themselves to one another through vows and everyday cohabitation. Traditionally, at a wedding a senior married woman would perform a hair-combing ritual for the bride, finishing with the married woman's bun (髻, *jì*), symbolizing the transition from girl to wife. A comb sister chose an auspicious day and performed the hair-combing on herself in a formal ceremony—hence "self-combing." Many also entered sworn-sister contracts called Golden Orchid agreements (金兰契), after which they were expected to abide by contract-like rules and live as a harmonious married couple. Contemporary and later descriptions record a typical progression—"始共言" (speaking together), "夜同眠" (sleeping together), "二女同居" (two women living together)—and some women even "do not mind being called husband and wife (何妨作婿)". Other accounts note: "When two women live together, although they lack the physical form of a male–female union, they indeed experience the joys of such a relationship—some say through friction, others through mechanical means". Scholarship on Guangdong and the Delta—e.g., Bret Hinsch on Golden Orchid sisterhoods—reads these practices as female-centered bonds with social, economic, and erotic dimensions, thereby challenging Pan's tendency to define homosexuality through male materials and phallocentric assumptions (Zhang, 2010, pp. 1–12; Li et al., 2004, pp. 34–42; Hu, 1986).

Against this record, Pan's emphasis falls overwhelmingly on male materials, and his phallocentric frame—treating penile participation as the implicit marker of sex—makes it difficult to register women's practices as fully sexual. The result is an analytical blind spot: by privileging elite male texts and criteria keyed to the phallus, Pan leaves women's same-sex intimacy largely underdescribed. That editorial stance helps naturalize a narrative of scarcity, even where local archives suggest enduring, sexually expressive partnerships among women, organized around female pleasure, connection, and mutual aid, independent of men. More broadly, Tze-lan Sang's challenge to phallocentrism underscores this point: female same-sex relations were neither aberrant nor simply "anti-marriage," but positively constituted through emotional solidarity, bodily practices, and economic cooperation. By overlooking these forms, Pan not only missed the ubiquity of women's same-sex relations in practice; he also helped entrench a seemingly authoritative sense of their rarity, narrowing how Chinese readers could imagine the history and social textures of female homosexuality.

If Pan's archive narrows who counts as a sexual subject—privileging elite men and sidelining women—his eugenic frame narrows what sex is for. The same lens that renders female intimacy hard to see also recasts sexuality as an instrument of national utility. Pan's eugenicist thinking—tied to national salvation and racial rejuvenation—reshaped how sex was understood. In his Social-Darwinist calculus, the emerging "problem" of homosexuality was not primarily moral but reproductive. At the confluence of imported hereditarian theories (especially Francis Galton's eugenics) and an indigenous Confucian concern for lineage (*xuetong* 血统, "bloodline"), Pan articulated a utilitarian biopolitics in which the individual body becomes a national resource. Population quality (*suzhi* 素质), not sheer numbers, was crucial for survival in a world of competition and war; accordingly, the purpose of sexuality shifts from private affection and pleasure to managing population fitness. Through scientific oversight of marriage and procreation, Pan sought not a large nation but a strong one. In this framework, reproductive utility becomes the ultimate arbiter of sexual legitimacy—rendering non-procreative forms, including homosexuality, inherently problematic.

Extending this logic, Pan linked homosexual relations to decadence and sterility, even invoking China's image as the "Sick Man of Asia." His argument drew strength from older Confucian anxieties about 断子绝孙 (the discontinuity of the patriline), now repackaged within an urgent, modern narrative of racial survival and anti-imperialist struggle. Although Pan expressed sympathy and resisted fully pathologizing homosexuals, he did not grant them a positive—or even neutral—role in the nation's future. That silence furnished a putatively "scientific," "progressive" rationale for marginalization, one that later aligned with pronatalist, heteronormative policies under both the Nationalist and, subsequently, the Communist states. In the 1980s, homosexuality was officially classified as a mental disorder in China (reversed in 2001), a move consonant with eugenic framings that tethered sexuality to racial fitness. Stripped

of historical and cultural contexts, homosexuality was recast as an obstacle to improving the national “gene stock”—an invisible, unproductive, even harmful entity—an inheritance of discourse that continues to cast a long shadow over recognition and rights for homosexual communities in China today.

4. Conclusion

This paper argued for Pan’s significance in translating the modern category of homosexuality into a Chinese context. Yet the significance of his project extends beyond the history of one translator or one term. As one of the most influential eugenic thinkers in modern China, Pan has often been remembered for his contributions to population thought, marriage reform, and social science. Far less attention has been paid to how his eugenic assumptions also shaped Chinese understandings of homosexuality. This matters because stigma against LGBTQ people in China has often been expressed not through Christian ideas of sin, as in many Western contexts, but through concerns about reproduction, family continuity, and social contribution. Pan’s work reveals an earlier genealogy for this logic. By making tongxinglian intelligible while measuring sexuality against reproductive value, Pan helped create a distinctive dilemma in modern Chinese sexual discourse: homosexuality could be named and partly naturalized, yet still marginalized as useless to family, society, and the nation.

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