

# The Cut Sleeve

AI OF HAN (27 BCE – 1 BCE) WAS A CHINESE EMPEROR AND A MEMBER OF THE HAN DYNASTY.

The nephew of the former Emperor Cheng, he was formally adopted and became the crown prince. When his adoptive father died in 7 BCE, Ai ascended the throne. One of his major relationships was with a court official named Dong Xian.

Dong is traditionally recognised as Emperor Ai's lover. He was promoted many times by his partner, eventually rising to be commander of the imperial armed forces. Both men were in their early twenties and while Ai's reign was marred by corruption and in-fighting, his relationship with Dong Xian gave rise to a famous story. It is one that characterises their relationship as being full of tenderness and deference – as well as massive privilege and wealth.

The story goes that Ai and Dong Xian were sleeping side by side on the Emperor's bed. The Emperor was forced to rise, as he had official business to take care of, but Dong Xian was lying on the flowing sleeve of his robe. Rather than disturb his sleeping lover, Ai sent for a sharp blade and cut the sleeve away from his robe. He then left the room in silence so Dong Xian could sleep in peace.

The thoughtful behaviour of the Emperor gave rise to the phrase "The Passion of the Cut Sleeve" which is often used in China to describe same-sex relationships between men. "Cut Sleeve" is also the name of a story by Pu Songling (1640 CE – 1715 CE) – a writer during the Qing dynasty. It is featured in a collection known to western audiences as "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio". The story's intent is possibly satirical, but nevertheless it is one of the earliest depictions of gay relationships in China.