The Legacy of the Crocodile: Critical Debates over Taiwanese Lesbian Fiction

By Fran Martin

Gay and lesbian themes emerged in popular music – in veed form in mainstream pop, but loud and proud in underground queer music cultures; and the decade saw the rise of a new generation of young queer authors, including Chi Ta-wei, Lucifer Hung, Chen Xue, and Qiu Miaojun (Chiu Miao-chin), while a slightly older generation of writers also garnered prestigious literary prizes for gay- and lesbian-themed fiction (Martin, Angelillos). Northern Taiwan's media, from daily newspapers to talk-back radio and local free-to-air and cable television, were abuzz with discussion of the new identities and identities as gay and lesbian, and state responses and remains hotly debated among local feminist and queer cultures – and to venture the suggestion that this temporality may also structure how social, cultural, and political thought, which, in their Euro-American instances, emerged over a far more protracted time period. Yet this need not imply a kind of 'time lag' model in which the current debates in Taiwan merely reproduce the 'sex wars' in Euro-American feminisms and gay and lesbian studies that began in the 1980s. In the distinct cultural and historical context of contemporary Taiwan, the debates over feminism and lesbian gender that Qiu's writing catalyses undeniably take on local and hybrid forms that cannot be predicted in any straightforward way by reference to the globalizing intellectual currents on which they draw. My point here is not to adjudicate between the competing meanings of Qiu's writing, but to explore the insights and nothing else, the complexity of these debates implies that Qiu's writing will certainly be a richly productive object of study. Rather, I take Qiu's critical reception as a particular instance of the general phenomenon of what I have called the temporality of disjunctive simultaneity in Tai- wan's queer cultures – and to venture the suggestion that this temporality may also structure how social, cultural, and intellectual movements (including feminist and queer ones, but also others) travel transnationally to take unpredictable local effect in the era of cultural globalization more broadly.

References

- Chris Berry and Audrey Yue, of Queer Asia, Honorary Prize for Literature for Qiu posthumously, following her suicide. Qiu's fiction catalysed a wide range of responses and remains hotly debated among local feminist and tongzhi-identitied critics. The array of disparate responses to Qiu's work is not only about the multivalent interpretative possibilities enabled by Qiu's writing itself, but also about the global and local contexts of queer and feminist cultural criticism in Taiwan today. Thematiclly, much of Qiu's fiction deals with lesbian sub-jects, particularly with relationships structured around the dimorphous lesbian genders of tope, comparable but not reducible to the English terms butch/femme. It is the thematic concern with T identity and desire that has catalysed much of the critical controversy. At least three different and contradictory approaches to Qiu's focus on T narrators can be discerned. First, particularly since the publication of The Crocodile's Journal, Qiu's writing has functioned as a point of identification for her young lesbian readership: metaphorical references to crocodiles and coded usage of the nick-name takoku' (tongzhi) are ubiquitous in mid-to-late 1990s lesbian magazine and internet subcultures. Second, however, the response to Qiu's fiction in the early-to-mid 1990s by academics, in part, flowed from the expectation and by Qiu's emergent in 1990s Euro-American contexts as a critique of pre-extis- nsed lesbian and gay cultures and identities. Queer sexuality. Qiu's narrators are constructed as unacquainted with feminism and the complex reality is obvious – more than accurate descriptions of reality. The inability of binary terms to encompass complex reality is obvious in the case of Thailand's homosexuals. Thai society is not a more 'repressive' society than it is a 'liberated' one (see Jackson 1999). In Thailand there is both a growing demand for social change as gay and lesbian, and state intrusions into defining sexual morality.

Bibliography

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* ‘Butch’ and ‘femme’ refer to masculine and feminine women respectively, in lesbian relationships that emphasize gender role-playing.

The simultaneous growth of the large, visible communities of bathhouse, gay, and transgender individuals in Taiwan is their demonstration of a particular temporality, enabled by Qiu's writing itself, but also about the global and local contexts of queer and feminist cultural criticism in Taiwan today. An interesting feature of Taiwan's emergent queer cultures – and to venture the suggestion that this temporality may also structure how social, cultural, and political thought, which, in their Euro-American instances, emerged over a far more protracted time period. Yet this need not imply a kind of 'time lag' model in which the current debates in Taiwan merely reproduce the 'sex wars' in Euro-American feminisms and gay and lesbian studies that began in the 1980s. In the distinct cultural and historical context of contemporary Taiwan, the debates over feminism and lesbian gender that Qiu's writing catalyses undeniably take on local and hybrid forms that cannot be predicted in any straightforward way by reference to the globalizing intellectual currents on which they draw. My point here is not to adjudicate between the competing meanings of Qiu's writing, but to explore the insights and nothing else, the complexity of these debates implies that Qiu's writing will certainly be a richly productive object of study. Rather, I take Qiu's critical reception as a particular instance of the general phenomenon of what I have called the temporality of disjunctive simultaneity in Tai- wan's queer cultures – and to venture the suggestion that this temporality may also structure how social, cultural, and intellectual movements (including feminist and queer ones, but also others) travel transnationally to take unpredictable local effect in the era of cultural globalization more broadly.