New Park: Gay Literature in Taiwan

By Chi Ta-wei

The majority of gay-themed literature in Chinese is produced in Taiwan. Especially in the last decade many Taiwanese gay-themed works have been acclaimed, translated into other languages, and/or adapted into films. As homosexuality in fiction can be explicit or implicit, an exhaustive examination of homosexuality in Taiwanese literature is virtually impossible. Thus, this short survey will only centre on the works where explicit representation of homosexuality is identifiable.

The most famous Taiwanese gay-themed novel is Pai Hsien-yung’s Crystal Boys (1983). This novel portrays the 1970s gay hustlers who gathered in Taipei’s New Park, which remains the best-known gay cruising venue in Taiwan. Both elaborate and vernacular, Crystal Boys (already translated into several languages) visualizes both a gay space (the New Park) and a gay community of hustlers. The prominent novel de- fonce in contemporary Chinese literature, is one of the earliest Taiwanese gay works. It was preceded by André Gide’s Winter (1906) and The Cousin (1974), two novellas by Lin Hsiu-min (currently better known as the founder and choreographer of the prestigious Cloud Gate Dance Theatre). While Lin focuses on the well-educated gay men who are under the sway of American culture, Pai illustrates the lives of underprivileged gay boys who perch on a low rung in the social stratification.

The 1990s have witnessed a rapid growth of gay-themed literature. One of the most acclaimed novels has been Notes from a Desolate Man, by Chu Tien-wen (1994), which often writes scripts for the well-known director Hou Hsiao-hsien. Desolate Man, which has been already translated into Eng-

lish, is an exquisite postmodern text on mourning and melancholia. This masterful novel presents lonesome middle-aged gay men and AIDS victims. Its concern with the transient pleasure and pang, imbued with a Buddhist touch, can also be found in Wu Chi-wen’s Reader of Fin-de-Siècle Boy Love (1999) and The Perplexing Galaxy (1998). The former is a rewrite of Precious Mirror of Running Horses; a classic novel on male same-sex love from the nineteenth century, while the latter features spectacular sexual transgressions (includ-

ing male-to-female surgery). Lin Jin-yin’s The Burning Gen-


Thanks to the Taiwanese lesbian and gay activism that has emerged in the 1990s, lesbian and gay people are less stigmatized in Taiwan today. Among the activists, Hsu You-sheng is celebrated not only because he is a resourceful writer of vari-

ous genres (including erotica catering to female readers), but also for having launched a public gay wedding with his Cau-

casian lover. Although gay marriages are not yet legally recog-

nized in Taiwan, Hsu has won blessings widely. His novel Men Married In and Married Out (1996) portrays a gay marriage.

The writers born after the late 1960s have contributed markedly to the representation of gay lives. The Cousin’s Cousin (1995), the novel by Chu Miao-chin (also known as Miao Jinqin), who committed suicide when she was only twenty-six, is one of the first lesbian-themed works in contemporary Chinese fiction. The novella depicts lesbian characters in a college, whose lives are paralleled by those of similarly impass-

ioned gay characters. ‘Queer’, a Western term introduced to Taiwan in the 1990s, is often used by these younger writers. With the collections of short stories Queer Sense (1995) and Membranes (1996). Chi Ta-wei is well known for his ‘queer’ science fiction that parodies heterosexual normality. Queer Archi-

pal (1997) and Queer Carnival (1997), also edited by Chi, show

Taiwanese queer writing, both theoretical and creative, is

inspired by queer theory as well as by Western literature (writers such as Jean Genet and ‘queer cinema’ (directors such as Derek Jarman). Numerous young writers also diligently circulate their queer writings on the Internet, which has been a major catalyst for the blooming of gay culture in Taiwan in the 1990s. These younger writers usually present less normative and more eccentric characters, and subject gay characters may be rather confident, if not defiant. Flesch (1998), by Sun Tze-ping, for its transnational colours, enjoys popu-

larity among youthful readers.

Gay literature is not officially forbidden or purged by the Taiwanese government. It is, however, challenged by some senior writers. The 1990s witnessed a boom of lesbian and gay writings to a degree unexpected both in terms of quality and quantity. This literature focuses on an interconnected web of personal stories and the historical process. The mass mainstream media – that have become quite sophisticated and

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komi (1997) portrays a gay marriage.

By Sharon Chalmers

There has been a consistent dis-
course around female same-sex

attractive in Japan, albeit predomin-
antly in terms of negative or unnatu-

ral (fushizen) desires. This public dis-
cussion began with the recent publi-

cation of public prints for girls in the early 1900s and followed through to con-
demnation of the independent ‘new

woman’ (atazuri onna) in the 1920s.

At the same time, with the emergence of sexology discussions there were fur-

ther outrages as Japanese social critics denounced the ‘masculinization’ of Japanese women as represented by the moga (modern girl) and the male and female roles of otenki/umenosokutei performed by the all-female Takarazuka theatre troupe throughout the 1920s. However, during the 1960s and early 1970s, Japan’s struggle for female rights, both polit-

ical, and economic changes, a shift

occurred that opened up space for same-sex attracted women to create meeting places outside the privacy of their own homes. These spaces were either in short-lived bars or through meeting circles such as o-mai

arranged meeting) clubs, both of which were primarily based on gen-
dered role-playing. However, there was nothing instinctual or natural about how to behave despite the more commonly

held assumptions about what it was to be tachi (butch) or neko (femme). As one of the writers (Fumi) with whom I spoke recounts: ‘I was asked for the first time if I was butch or femme. “Doritch na no?” (Which one?) So I asked: “Do I have to decide?” And the owner of the bar said: “You know, these young people now don’t decide on these things any

more.” She complained a bit but didn’t

force me to say it.”

Gender ambiguity notwithstanding, these spaces did create the beginnings of a new socio-cultural context in which same-sex attracted women could meet each other. And throughout the 1970s, more groups began to emerge, such as Subarashii Onna (Wonderful Women). At the same time newsletters also began to be produced through the mini-komi network. Mini-

komi is a system of distributing infor-

mal newsletters – by groups that do not have access or connections to the mass mainstream media – that have become quite sophisticated and have wide circulation among various subcultures.

Yet despite this increase in groups, images of ‘lesbians’ (rezaiden) in main-

stream Japanese culture continued to be created on the pathological female deviant, represented in the guise of the heterosexualized butch/femme (tachi/ neko) roles. Alternatively, and more

commonly, the word rezai, or rezai, was inseparable from portrayals of female-female sex in androcentric pornography. This left most women who were questioning their sexuality few places to gain information.

These understandings have contin-

ued through the 1990s, the association of lesbianism with pornography being widely shared in Japan, amongst het-

erosexuals and lesbians alike.

Family and freedom

Juxtaposed to the above images is the centrality of being a wife and mother across all social relations. The concept of ‘Japanese womanhood’ is achieved through the representation of women’s acquiescence to sacrificed lives within families. Writers focus on a mother’s love, and the significant numbers of women who enter tertiary education. Thus,