New Park: Gay Literature in Taiwan

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.

By Chi Ta-wei

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 literary community. This heteronormative depiction of the new socio-cultural context in which same-sex attracted women could meet and a large extent it is still the case today, despite the fact that there is a rich modern history of female same-sex desire to be found in Japanese literature and popular culture dating back to the early 1900s.

The writers born after the late 1960s have contributed markedly to the representation of gay lives. The Cicadas (1994), written by Qiu Xiaolong (aka known also as Qiu Xiaolin), 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 parallelled by those of similarly impas-sioned 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 known for his ‘queer science’ fiction that parodies heterosexuality. Queer Archipel-ago (1995) and Queer Carnival (1997), also edited by Chi, show cases Taiwan’s localised queer discourses and literary practices, and provide annotated bibliographies. It is apparent that 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 blossoming of gay culture in Taiwan in the 1990s. These younger writers usually present themselves as alternative writers. Instead of the stereotype that gay characters may be rather confident, if not defiant, Flek (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 phenomenon may very well be seen as a backlash, production and circulation of lesbian and gay literature has not stopped. Many lesbian and gay works keep winning awards, and writing contests for lesbian and gay literature are held.

In addition to fiction, Taiwanese gay-themed films also deserve attention. Among the best known of them are The Wedding Banquet (1995) by Ang Lee (the director of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon). This film focuses on an interracial gay couple in New Park, and Tsai Ming-liang’s The River (1997), which features a sex scene between father and son. Both stories may sound quite unusual, if not incredible, but they actually accurately represent Taiwanese gay realities. The former scenario is not foreign to the more bourgeois gay men, while the latter scrutinizes the lives of lower-class gay men. What both films share is the fact that they interrogate the father-son familial system, possibly the greatest obstacle in the lives of both films' Taiwanese gay men.

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Who’s That Girl?

Lesbian In/visibility in Japanese Society

Two of the most commonly asked questions when I first began my research on contemporary lesbian sexuality in Japan were: ‘Are there any?’ and ‘Where do you find them?’ These questions emanated from both Japanese and non-Japanese, from academics and non-academics, from men and women, and surprisingly even from Japanese gay men. The common assumption behind these questions was that, for the overwhelming majority of the population, self-identified lesbians did not exist in Japan, or at least very little did they identify themselves as such in the public domain.

By Sheran Chalmers

There has been a consistent dis-course around female same-sex attraction in Japan, albeit predomin-antly in terms of negative or unnatu-ral (bashful) desires. This public dis-cussion began with the early 1900s with the emergence of public criticism for girls in the early 1900s and followed through to the deni-mination of the independent ‘new woman’ (ataarashii onna) in the 1910s. At the same time, with the emergence of sexology discourses there were fur-ther outcries as Japanese social critics denounced the ‘masculinization’ of Japanese women as represented by the moga (modern girl) and the male and female roles (otokoyaku/nesumooyaka) performed by the all-female Takarazuka theatre troupe throughout the 1920s. However, during the 1960s and early 1970s, the gay liberation move-ment, the sexual, and economic changes, a shift occurred that opened up a 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 invented 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 (Fumii) with whom I spoke recounts: ‘I was asked for the first time if I was butch or femme. “Dochi 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 they 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 and distributed through the mini-komi network. Mini-komi is a system of distributing infor-mal newsletters – by groups that do not have access or control to the main mass media media – that have become quite sophisticated and have wide circulation among various subcultures.

Yet despite this increase in groups, images of ‘lesbians’ (rezaijin) 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 rezaijin, or rezai, was inseparable from portrayals of female-female sex in androcentric pornography. This last left 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 hetero-ssexuals 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 activities as confined solely to the ‘Japanese family’ through the roman-ticization and glorification of the ideal of ‘motherhood’ and the Japanese house-wife. Women may very well seem as in married women who work part-time and the significant numbers of women who enter tertiary education. Thus,
Filtered Voices: Representing Gay People in Today’s China

By Cui Zi’en

Research > China

In 1991, the noted sociologist Li Yinhe and her husband Wang Xiaobo, a famous novelist, published Their World: A Study of the Male Homosexual Community in China. The first academic work on male homosexuality in contemporary China, their book quickly became a bestseller. Thanks to this significant work, Chinese readers began to adjust their attitudes towards homosexuality and to understand its cultural dimensions. In 1994, another scholar, Zhang Beichuan, published Same-Sex Love, focusing on sexology and sex education. This book also illustrated the research on homosexuality conducted by international scientists. In 1995, Fang Gang, known for his sensational journalism, published Homosexuality in China, which also became a bestseller. Roughly written, obviously turning the homosexual issue into a commodity, this book was widely accused of sloppiness and voyeurism. Fang Gang himself admitted that his book was ‘journalistic literature’ and entirely based on hearsay.

The media approaching homosexuals

In 1998, the magazine Hope featured a special issue entitled ‘Understanding Homosexuality’. With its twenty pages and the picture of the rainbow flag, the issue provided a positive and comprehensive report on homosexuality, thus making Hope a pioneer in the media as far as the representation of homosexuality is concerned. In 2000, China News Weekly published the special issue ‘Blurred Men and Women’, showcasing homosexual culture in literature, the fine arts, fashion, the entertainment business, and in every day life. In the same year, a television show in Hunan Province, Let’s Talk, broadcast a one-hour panel discussion called ‘Approaching Homosexuals’. Finally, early this year, Modern Civilization Pictorial, edited by the prestigious Chuang Journal of Social Sciences, published a special issue entitled ‘Homosexuals Are Among Us’. From then on, up to the present day, this magazine regularly devotes ten pages to the issue of homosexuality.


Fiction and film

The first novel on homosexuality from today’s China, Scarlet Lips, by the Beijing-based writer Cui Zi’en, was published in Hong Kong in 1997, just before Hong Kong was handed over to China. Owing to its manifesto homosexual theme, Scarlet Lips is still not allowed to circulate in China. Worldson, the Hong Kong publishing house specialized in lesbian and gay literature that published Scarlet Lips (and later other works of fiction by Cui Zi’en), also printed in 1998 the collection of short stories Good Man Rogo (Rogo used to be an ice-cream brand name), by the Tianjin-based writer Dung Ge. One of the first films on homosexuality in today’s China, East Palace, West Palace, written by the above-mentioned writer Wang Xiaobo and directed by Zhang Yuan, won several awards at international film festivals in 1996. Man Man Woman Woman, written by Cui Zi’en and directed by Liu Binjian, was a winner at the 1999 Locarno International Film Festival and has been invited to more than fifty international film festivals since then. The first film made by gay people in China, Man Man Woman Woman makes a marked effort to avoid posting any dichotomy between homosexual and heterosexual. Also a winner of international awards, Summer This Year, written and directed by Li Yu in 2000, is the first film on lesbian life and love in China. The following year, Yin Wewei made a documentary on lesbianism called The Box. Finally, two films shot early this year, The Old Testament and Enter the Claws, both written and directed by Cui Zi’en, have already been invited to international film festivals. From the 1990s to the present, every representation of homosexuality in China has necessitated legitimization by the ‘academic cause’. No lesbian- or gay-themed book or magazine, radio or television show, etc., can ever be allowed unless the ‘academic cause’ is brought in. The academic empire thus becomes a mirror of the political one. Under such circumstances, homosexuals and homosexual culture continue to be systematically objectified and made into ‘other’. If homosexuals want to voice their subjectivity, the process must necessarily be filtered by ‘experts’, or alternatively, homosexual people have to disguise themselves as the experts. Still now, any representation of homosexuality (in fiction, film, drama, academic research, magazines, websites, and so forth) carried out by openly homosexual people is reg- ularly pushed underground. The only promising exception is the already mentioned special issue of Modern Civilization Pictorial early this year, which contained personal stories that homosexuals themselves wrote, and internationally award- winning fiction by homosexual writers – a most rare chance for homosexuals to exhibit their subjectivities.

References

By Cui Zi’en, Scarlet Lips (Stara zasijeh), Hong Kong: Worldson Publication (1997).
- Cui Zi’en et al., A Study of the Male Homosexual Community in China (Third Edition), in which homosexuality was no longer considered an illness. Thus, Chinese homosexuals were ‘released’ from the asylum. The event attracted much attention in the media and in the scholarly community, but homosexuality had become a topic of discussion in China already in the early 1990s. Below I will provide a chronological overview of discourses and debates about homosexuality in scholarship and the media, fiction, and film that have marked, at different levels, Chinese cultural life during the last decade.

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By Cui Zi’en

nations of the familial nature of Japanese-ese society intersect across many areas of the social, economic, and political life, as shown by the fact that over the past 20 years the government, business sector, and bureaucracy have attempted to re-invent so-called traditional ‘family values’ as the basic unit of Japanese society.

Within this political milieu it is not surprising that lesbian sexuality has remained largely invisible in mainstream Japan. The Japanese ‘gay boom’ of the early 1990s did increase the visibility of homosexuality, but the ways in which both women and men were represented remained fixed in the category of voyeurism. While there was some increase in the number of lesbian magazines, the overwhelming majority of these, which both women and men were represented, remained fixed in the category of voyeurism. While there was some increase in the number of lesbian magazines, the overwhelming majority of these, which both women and men were represented, remained fixed in the category of voyeurism. While there was some increase in the number of lesbian magazines, the overwhelming majority of these, which both women and men were represented, remained fixed in the category of voyeurism. While there was some increase in the number of lesbian magazines, the overwhelming majority of these, which both women and men were represented, remained fixed in the category of voyeurism. While there was some increase in the number of lesbian magazines, the overwhelming majority of these, which both women and men were represented, remained fixed in the category of voyeurism. While there was some increase in the number of lesbian magazines, the overwhelming majority of these, which both women and men were represented, remained fixed in the category of voyeurism. While there was some increase in the number of lesbian magazines, the overwhelming majority of these, which both women and men were represented, remained fixed in the category of voyeurism.