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MILITARY GAY COMRADES:

Negotiating the Homosocial(ist) Identity in Mainland China's Tongzhi Fiction

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ABSTRACT

As a sub-genre of online Comrade Literature, Military Comrade Stories (军事同志小说 *junshi tongzhi xiaoshuo*) from mainland China stand out as a body of fiction that is directly concerned with the ramifications of social control in Chinese society. These stories address the ambiguous sphere of homosociality in the Chinese military experience by featuring *tongzhi* as men serving in China's national army, playing with the dual identification of *tongzhi* associated with both military comrades and gay men. This paper considers the ramifications of homosexual characters disrupting the Chinese heteronormative power paradigm when they serve in the military. A close analysis of "Commitment" 《承诺》 (2008) by Qing Feng (青风), with a focus on the shifting relationship between the two male protagonists, presents a novel perspective on the nexus of homosocial friendship and homosexual desire in the Chinese context. "Commitment" subversively repositions homosexual characters traditionally oppressed by China's Communist regime within the figure of a military comrade who is closely associated with that persecuting authority. Thus, this paper posits that the modern understanding of *tongzhi* signifies the ideological formation of Communist comradeship and homosocialist bonding, exposing homoerotic tensions at the core of China's socialist ideology.

MILITARY GAY COMRADES

Billy Bragg's song, "Tender Comrade," limns a sentimental view of an affectionate soldier seeking compassion and consolation in the arms of another comrade during World War II.ⁱⁱ The song plaintively questions what a "tender comrade" will tell others about his relationships with other soldiers:

Will you say that we were heroes
Or that fear of dying among
strangers
Tore our innocence and false
shame away?
And from that moment on deep in
my heart I knew
That I would only give my life for
love

Brothers in arms in each other
arms
Was the only time that I was not
afraid
What will you do when the war is
over, tender comrade?
When we cast off these khaki
clothes
And go our separate ways
What will you say of the bond we
had, tender comrade?ⁱⁱⁱ

These lyrics depict the ambiguity of homosocial affective relations inherent in the camaraderie between soldiers. The imagery suggests a fluid boundary between the sexual and nonsexual dimensions of male same-sex intimacy

that antedates the influence of gay activism and the making of a discrete homosexual identity.^{iv} While specifically situated in a Western context, “Tender Comrade” evinces a thematic universality about the nature of intimate male-male bonding. In particular, the song speaks to Foucault’s broader vision of homoerotic friendship and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of a homosocial^v and homosexual continuum in affective same-sex relationships.

Along these lines, Military Comrade Stories (军事同志小说 *junshi tongzhi xiaoshuo*), a sub-genre of online Comrade Literature, addresses the ambiguous sphere of homosociality in the Chinese military experience. This category of stories feature *tongzhi* as men serving in China’s national army, playing with the dual identification of *tongzhi* associated with both military comrades and gay comrades. Although military service is central to the construction of most States, where serving in the armed forces is often considered a defining characteristic of patriotic citizenship, it is often also where homosexuality is most clearly codified and scrutinized. Thus, *tongzhi* characters in Military Comrade Stories are men torn between their national duties, ideas of self and family, and sexualities. They symbolically represent patriotic men upholding Communist ideals and stereotypes of heterosexual masculinity in the army. At the same time, however, the social bonds between these men gesture at homoerotic intimacy, controverting preconceived notions of homosexuality. Therefore, Military Comrade Stories portray the continuum of homosocial and homosexual relations when *tongzhi* characters renegotiate the presumed links between masculinity and militarism, sexuality and State.

This paper considers the ramifications of homosexual characters’

disruption of the Chinese heteronormative power paradigm when they serve in the military. A close analysis of “Commitment” 《承诺》 (2008) by Qing Feng (青风),^{vi} with a focus on the shifting relationship between He Shuai and Weijun, presents an interesting perspective on the nexus of homosocial friendship and homosexual desire in the Chinese context. “Commitment” subversively repositions homosexual characters traditionally oppressed by China’s Communist regime within the figure of the military comrade who is closely associated with that persecuting authority. This paper posits that the modern understanding of *tongzhi* signifies the ideological formation of Communist comradeship and homosocialist bonding, exposing homoerotic tensions at the core of China’s socialist ideology.

MILITARY COMRADES: CULTURAL AND POLITICAL IDENTITY OF TONGZHI IN THE CHINESE ARMY

As a sub-genre of Comrade Literature, military *tongzhi* fiction stands out as a category of stories that are directly concerned with the ramifications of social control in Chinese society. The label *tongzhi* has a long history, originating in the early Qin Dynasty (221 BC - 206 BC), where it was originally used to refer to people with the same ethics and ideals.^{vii} The term “Comrade” (同志 *tongzhi*), which literally translates as “same will” or “of the same intent,” is commonly associated with Sun Yat-Sen’s famous quote, “the revolution has not yet succeeded; comrades we must struggle still.”^{viii} During the Communist Revolution (1921-1949), the Chinese Communist Party appropriated *tongzhi* as an honorific address term reserved for Chinese Communist Party revolutionaries who shared the same goal to overthrow

the Nationalist government and establish Communism. Being addressed as *tongzhi* during this time required the addressee's Party membership or demonstration of commitment to the Communist Revolution, often symbolizing recruitment into the Revolutionary Army.^x

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Party promoted the use of *tongzhi* as a new address term to replace previous referents to an individual's social status and class.^x As part of the Party's strategy to establish an egalitarian system, the use of *tongzhi* was extended from soldiers in the Revolutionary Army to the general public as a generic and politically correct address term for everyone in China regardless of social class or gender. This popularized use of *tongzhi* over the past few decades has made this address term a political symbol loaded with Communist ideological connotations. Interestingly, it has now been reappropriated as the most popular word used to refer to Chinese homosexuals, gay men in particular.^{xi,xii} By taking the most sacred title from China's mainstream Communist ideology, *tongzhi* establish a sexual identity while also reclaiming a distinctively Chinese familial-cultural history.^{xiii} The term invokes the voice of Chinese revolutionaries striving to establish a new government, uniting *tongzhi* members and activists on the basis of shared beliefs and goals – to advocate for the equality of homosexuals in China.

Given the discursive history of *tongzhi* and how the meaning of the term has changed over time, it is unsurprising that *tongzhi* writers would take advantage of a polymorphic *tongzhi* character in Military Comrade fiction. This stylized use of *tongzhi* creates polysemic texts that undercut dominant political, social, and sexual discourses in modern China. Along the lines of this reading, Military Comrade Stories reveal how Mainland China's emergent *tongzhi* discourse integrates the

sexual into the social, political, and cultural. In Chinese communist scholarship, the People's Liberation Army, also known as the Chinese Red Army (红军 *hongjun*), is consistently endorsed as a model to be emulated for the nation's social and economic development.^{xiv, xv} The critical development prompting this dogma is the nation-wide campaign to "Learn from the Experience of the People's Liberation Army in Political and Ideological Work" launched by an editorial on the *People's Daily* in 1964.^{xvi, xvii} Aside from ardently commending the military's techniques and policies, the government's public rhetoric also endowed the army with numerous other virtues that were worthy of emulation. Accolades given ranged from "patriotism" and "a supreme revolutionary spirit" to honesty, discipline, courage, and admirable self-conduct.^{xviii} In other words, Comrades in the armed services were valorized as ideal men. Ultimately, the objective of this campaign to learn from the PLA was to fortify the Party's active leadership role in controlling China's economic and social development.^{xix} To this day, the Chinese national army still remains the symbol of Party control, strength, and political loyalty.^{xx}

Against this backdrop of the PLA's political and historical significance, the writing of homosexual relations into the Chinese military and mainstream Communist ideology does indeed borrow from the armed forces to do "political and ideological work."^{xxi} Military Comrade Stories thus harbor the potential to simultaneously undermine repressive sociopolitical and sexual discourses by framing issues of male same-sex relations from a multi-layered perspective. "Commitment" is one such novella that presents the continuum of homosocial and homosexual behaviors through a

tongzhi character that blurs the boundaries between military comrade and gay man.

In the first volume, the story recounts the experiences of He Shuai, the son of a wealthy and well-connected family, after he joins the army. Upon turning 18 in 1983, He Shuai announces to his parents that he has decided not to take the college entrance exams, but instead will volunteer for military service despite an ongoing war. Because of his arrogance and spoiled behavior, He Shuai is detested by the other soldiers. He is assigned a derogatory post, taking care of the pigpen until his mother visits him and gets him transferred to Squad Two, one of the National Army's "model units."^{xxxii} He meets his Sergeant and Squad Leader, Lu Weijun, and the unit's 10 other soldiers. After training for several months, He Shuai achieves some acceptance amongst the other soldiers, but the squad is sent to China's contested border region with Vietnam, a place rife with sporadic conflicts. At the front lines, the group fosters an intimate community of mutual support as they face war's violence and death, doing their best to help each other through the ordeal. Near the end of the war, He Shuai is accidentally left behind after spraining his ankle and Weijun turns back to look for him. The two men struggle to get out of a forest in enemy territory, dealing with heavy storms and the need to find water and food. They each in turn get wounded or sick and must be tenderly ministered to by the other. After staying overnight in an abandoned hut to shelter from the rain, they are ambushed by Vietnamese soldiers. He Shuai is injured in their attack, and Weijun swears to risk his life to ensure He Shuai is taken back to safety. He Shuai's next memory is of waking up in a hospital bed, and his mother tells him that Weijun had passed away during battle. He Shuai believes that Weijun had sacrificed his life to save him, and swears

to live a socially respectable life by attending university, succeeding in his career, and getting married, promising to name his children after Weijun to honor him.

The second volume fasts forward 11 years, where He Shuai is wealthy and married, but has sustained a permanent limp from the war and is haunted by dreams of Weijun. His wife, Zhou Lili, is seeking a divorce to leave him for another man. One day, He Shuai is shocked to see Weijun at a bar in "S city." He Shuai learns that Weijun had survived and tried to look for him after the war, but since He Shuai had been out of the country, the two men did not cross paths again until that day. For the past few years, Weijun had been fighting in illegal boxing competitions to earn money. After spending some time together, the two men confess and acknowledge their gay love for each other as a culmination of their brotherly camaraderie from shared military experiences. He Shuai, upon receiving news that his father is in poor health, decides to move back to Beijing to take care of his parents. He Shuai also convinces Weijun to quit fighting and move back to Beijing with him to start their new life together. After several melodramatic plot turns, in which multiple characters proclaim their straight or gay love for either He Shuai or Weijun, causing misunderstandings that almost cause the two to sever the relationship, the two men finally end up together. The story ends on a lighthearted note where He Shuai and Weijun publicly declare their "marriage" during an outing at Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

At first glance, "Commitment" does not appear to be a story about homosexuality at all, but rather a sociopolitical critique of China's turbulent Communist history over the past few decades. The setting during the Sino-Vietnamese border skirmishes of 1979 up

until the 1990s fought by the Chinese People's Liberation Army also invites this analysis (Chen 1987).^{xxiii} This time frame coincides with the initiation of Deng Xiaoping's opening up reforms, ushering in a period of rapid socioeconomic development and instability vis-à-vis government power.^{xxiv + xxv} Given this context, it is unsurprising that descriptions of the army experience in "Commitment" are brimming with references to symbols and slogans of the Communist Party.

The story is drenched in red imagery: fresh red blood, blooming red flowers, and blushing or angered red faces. Two main characters have the word "red" (红 *hong*) in their names as well – Wang Shaohong (王少红) and Jianhong (建红). This imagery invokes references to red as the color of the Communist Party, and specifically the *Little Red Book* (小红书 *xiaohongshu* or 红宝书 *hongbaoshu*) of Chairman Mao quotations that formed the bedrock of the Cultural Revolution. The names of several characters in the novel are also borrowed from real-life Party officials; in particular, Li Feiyue (李飞跃)^{xxvi} and Li Gang (李刚)^{xxvii} are both well-known Comrades presently working as government officials for the Chinese Communist Party. This direct reference to Party officials caricatures their personas to criticize the homosocialist Communist government system, especially when all the soldiers in the novel turn out to be gay.

Aside from soldier names that parody actual Party officials, others echo the Communist practice of name-changing (改名风 *gaimingfeng*) to make individual names sound more revolutionary.^{xxviii} For example, the characters Lu Weijun (陆卫军) and Luo Weiguo (罗卫国) have fictional names that respectively mean "protect the army" and "protect the country," reaffirming

Communist discourse propagated during the Cultural Revolution that emphasized patriotism and a revolutionary spirit. In general, the sustained use of names and themes associated with the Communist regime makes reference to and criticizes the fact that many key Party leaders have extensive military backgrounds, influencing their ideological convictions.^{xxix, xxx}

Despite the explicit references to politics and class struggle symptomatic of China's rapidly changing social environment, "Commitment" presents more than a critique of the Communist regime – it also specifically focuses on how relations between men are bound up in patriarchal institutions. The novella conveys the continuum of male homosocial bonding as it intersects with male friendship, filial piety, class distinctions, national duty, and homoerotic desire. In Eve Kosofsky's study on *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*,^{xxxi} she argues that the act of "draw[ing] the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic, ... is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted."^{xxxii} In the Chinese context, Military Comrade Fiction reflects this continuum of male homosocial and homosexual relations. Indeed, the military gay *tongzhi* identity internalizes and deploys this tension from within the national army to critique China's larger framework of State power.

In "Commitment," the portrayal of one of the most important establishments of Chinese national culture – the People's Liberation Army – is done in an admixture of a preoccupation with institutional discipline and fascination with the situational homosocial desire that accompanies the world of men and militarism. When He Shuai enters the

army as a new recruit, he is immediately immersed in a strict disciplinary environment where “nobody cares where you come from, if you are the brother of a prince, or whatever power your parents may have, [because] here, [they were] all soldiers. This was a military troop, not a place to fool around.”^{xxxiii} Initially, He Shuai rebels against these strict disciplinary practices and is penalized by being consigned to serve as the pigpen caretaker. Later, when he joins Squad Two, Sergeant Lu Weijun warns him that “people cannot live like pigs” and that members in Squad Two “are wolves, and do not welcome pigs.”^{xxxiv} Nonetheless, it is because of these protocols and the desire to “not be a pig” that He Shuai is compelled to “work harder than ever before,” enabling him to establish good relations with fellow soldiers.^{xxxv} This sense of camaraderie amongst Squad Two soldiers is what eventually fosters strong homosocial bonds that blur the boundary between homosexual and heterosexual relations, particularly when the novella portrays an almost seamless progression from military *tongzhi* to gay *tongzhi* with an emphasis on male same-sex friendship.

In the midst of the stigma and shame associated with male homosexuality, intimate friendship between men has remained a consistently idealized model of same-sex relations. In his 1981 interview for the French magazine *Gai Pied*, Foucault offers a specific site for homosexuality’s development when he elaborates on the value of friendship for the gay community’s political and ideological future. “Friendship as a Way of Life” posits that “homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable” where “the development toward which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship.”^{xxxvi} Foucault describes queer male same-sex relations as one that is “still formless” in which partners “have

to invent, from A to Z, ... the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure.”^{xxxvii} In this way, Foucault cultivates friendship as a mode of homosexual existence, opening the philosophical canon of friendship to new and troubling avenues of desire and social refusal.

When drawing upon the military to elucidate his argument about homosexual intimacy posing a challenge to general social norms, Foucault states that “[t]he institution is caught in a contradiction” because “affective intensities traverse it which at one and the same time keep it going and shake it up.”^{xxxviii} The army epitomizes this contradiction when “love between men is ceaselessly provoked [*appele*] and shamed” and “institutional codes can’t validate these relations.”^{xxxix} Instead, these male same-sex relations “with multiple intensities, variable colors, imperceptible movements, and changing forms ... short-circuit [institutional codes] and introduce love where there’s supposed to be only law, rule, or habit.”^{xl} Foucault’s reflections on homosexual friendship gesture toward an enhanced recognition of what can be troubling in male-male companionship, and suggest how institutional structures such as the military facilitate those intimate relations. Rather than short-circuiting institutional codes, the male bonding depicted in “Commitment” simultaneously rehearses and inverts the tension between homoerotic desire and hegemonic power. After all, homosocialism is crucial to create the lines of desire and affective relations that undergird and activate the State’s ideological power, contributing to the formation of (sexual) subjects. In this view, Military Comrade fiction problematize the figure of a gay Chinese soldier, juxtaposing homosocialist camaraderie with homosexual intimacy to

renegotiate preconceived notions of male *tongzhi* relations.

The portrayal of a soldier's duty to both his family and nation manifests conflicting ideas about what kinds of behavior should define masculinity and an ideal man in contemporary Chinese society. Images of the family and themes of filial piety preside over the view of same-sex relations presented in "Commitment," especially as issues of national identity, gender, and class intersect through male homosocial narratives. Throughout the novella, He Shuai and other main characters talk about their families or responsibilities as filial sons, both in terms of their duty to national service as well as in marriage and raising a family after the war. It is clear from the start that all the men are of different social classes and it is only the army that brings them together, facilitating interactions that would not have happened outside the institution.

Despite these differences, the soldiers in Squad Two all share an ambition to be filial sons throughout their military service.^{xli} Filial piety is mentioned at several points in the story, where characters such as Lu Weijun and Liu Dazhou state that their "biggest aspiration after the war" is to "get married," "have a son," and be "a good man."^{xlii} However, He Shuai's relationship with his mother throughout "Commitment" upends the expected relationships concerning preconceived notions of masculinity, national identity, and filiality, contesting heteronormative conventions of the family.

Although He Shuai frames his decision to join the military in filial terms of "protecting his family [and] country" and "serving his duty" as a good son and citizen, the discordant mother-son relations resulting from such behavior contradicts traditional ideals of filiality.^{xliii} When He Shuai announces that he wants

to join the army, he does so in rebellion against his mother's wishes: Zhao Yunfang adamantly "warns" him that "if [he] tries to sneak past [her] to volunteer at the army, [he] no longer should consider [her as] mother."^{xliv} This recurring image of the family connotes parallels to the family model for State organization in socialist ideology and traditional Confucian philosophy central to Chinese culture and politics.^{xlv} The conflict between national duty, promoted by the government as an act epitomizing filial piety, and the rupturing of parent-child family relations criticizes the Chinese State's contradictory rhetoric in the 1980s. In a letter to his parents before being dispatched to the frontlines, He Shuai dramatizes this tension when articulating his decision to reject his parent's attempts to pull him out of the army. He Shuai writes that he "knows ... that he has repeatedly shamed [his parents] as their son" in going against their wishes and "causing them worry," but emphasizes that he is "desperately training" to "sacrifice for his country ... for honor ... [and] to prove that [he] is not worthless."^{xlvi} As this letter reveals, it is an act of ostensible "bravery" and hyper-masculinity embodied by a soldier going to war that is portrayed as a son's disrespectful, "unfilial," and "disagreeable" behavior towards his parents.^{xlvii}

In contrast, it is only in the second volume of "Commitment" that the narrative indicates He Shuai finally achieves the status of a filial son. This inflection point occurs after He Shuai and Weijun acknowledge their love for each other and have started making plans for their future together, including gay marriage. After He Shuai's father passes away, he informs his mother of his plans to move back to Beijing and live together with Weijun so that he can better care for her: "He Shuai told her about his future

plans, and the old woman was elated... Zhao Yunfang did not know what else to say, ... her heart felt comforted – comforted by her son’s filial piety.”^{slviii} Zhao Yunfang’s implicit acceptance of her gay son as filial demonstrates the elision of references to homosexuality in conflict with filial piety throughout the novella. This representation gestures at a range of homosocial and homosexual acts compatible with cultural traditions. Although framed in terms of filial piety and duty as a male Chinese citizen, involvement in the People’s Liberation Army is portrayed as behavior that clashes with cultural values. In contrast, *tongzhi* relations evolving from military comrade experiences are indirectly endorsed as desirable for united families – and by extension, a compassionate and cohesive society.

COMRADES IN ARMS: AFFECTIVE GENDERED RELATIONS IN MILITARY CAMARADERIE

“Commitment” articulates the relationship between homosociality and homosexuality in forms that resist conventional discourses of masculinity and militarism. Indeed, gay males populate the portrayed national army, suggesting the ways in which the presumed links between masculinity, militarism, and heterosexuality should be reconfigured in contemporary society. The text reappropriates the patriotic soldier figure to signify homoerotic tensions inherent within the male camaraderie at the root of a successful national military. By queering the brotherly love between soldiers in Squad Two of the National Army across several decades, “Commitment” portrays the homosocial nature inherent in all male same-sex relationships, rethinking the nature of homosexuality vis-à-vis intimate friendship and patriarchal institutions.

The dynamic interaction between homosocial bonding and military asceticism in “Commitment,” rather than suppressing homosexuality, actually generates or reinforces queerness. Under strenuous conditions facing life and death, and the banality of life after facing death, the homosocial-cum-homosexual party in question is forced to recognize and create a new space in which same-sex relational desire can find acceptance.

Foucault’s notion of friendship as an alternative form of intimacy provides a useful interpretive lens to analyze how “Commitment” presents homosocial/sexual relations grounded in an image of reciprocity and care between men. These male bonds are essential in keeping soldiers on the battle lines as biopolitical subjects willing to fight and die for the State. Accordingly, the men in Squad Two help each other cope with the rigors of military life, the anxieties of battle, the depression of seeing other soldiers being injured or killed, and provide mutual moral support. In the trenches, they tell stories to keep each other’s minds off the rat infested and dirty environment around them.^{slix} When He Shuai kills another man for the first time and feels sick with remorse, it is Jin Gui, another Comrade, who consoles him by telling him “not to think about it” and “not to be afraid” because they “are killing the enemy [in a] self-defensive war.”^{sl} They sing heartwarming songs to comfort each other when they start to get homesick, and tend to each other’s wounds when someone is injured.^{sl} It is only through these close relationships that the men are able to make it through the war together, driving them to proclaim that “[they] will be brothers in this life and the next” and that “the ones who survive ... must continue to live for [their] brothers who have died no matter what.”^{sl} Within this context, the extent to which military comrades depend on homosocial relations

for survival reflects Foucault's notion of intimate same-sex bonding as "a desire, an uneasiness, a desire-in-uneasiness" that truly does become "a matter of existence."^{lviii}

Themes of gender fluidity and homoerotic desire traverse He Shuai and Weijun's relationship with the portrayal of gender performance as well as recurring references to gazing at the moon, illustrating a progression from military to gay *tongzhi* relations. In a story that appears to concern itself with war, power, and political commentary in recent Chinese history, the first prominent scene revealing gender ambiguity and homoerotic desire as thematic motifs occurs when the men play Catch Old K (捉老K), a game where players draw cards to determine the "Elder Master" (老大) and the "Little Brother" (小弟). The first pairing is between Jin Gui and Wang Shaohong, where the latter is dared to "deliver a love confession to the girl in [his] heart."^{lv} Wang Shaohong expresses an "internal monologue" that leaves the others soldiers speechless:

There is someone in my heart. I don't know when it was I started liking him. But when I found out, the feeling was already anchored deep in my heart, unable to be pulled out. Seeing that person laugh, I am happy; seeing him sad, I am even sadder. At first, I did not know what it was, but when I realized that it was love, I was scared at myself. I want to hide, but cannot bear to. Because, he makes people feel warm. After a long time of struggle, I decided to suppress myself: liking someone is no big deal, as long as I don't let you find out about it it'll be fine. This type of feeling is very bitter,

but also very sweet. A taste beyond words...

The idea of me and you together is impossible, but as long as I can continue seeing you, I will have enough from this life. I only hope that you do not disgust me. I just can't help liking you...^{lv}

In Mandarin Chinese, the pronunciations of "her" and "him" sound the same, and so this textual wordplay clues readers in to the homoerotic nature of Wang Shaohong's confession.^{lvi} The other soldiers in the story's diegesis, however, do not pick up on this conceit. They misunderstand Shaohong's confession and ask briefly who this "mysterious woman" is, but quickly dismiss his spontaneous monologue by advising him to "just straightforwardly tell her [his] feelings" rather than "torturing himself" over it.^{lvii}

The next pairing is between Weijun and He Shuai, where He Shuai is dared to "mimic a woman singing a song."^{lviii} He Shuai readily takes on the task, with "one hand holding onto the shape of a microphone" and the other "hand curled into *lanhuazhi* (兰花指)," a hand pose traditionally used by female characters in Beijing Opera. At the end of the song, the other soldiers are stunned by the fact that his "performance was so real" – a simulacrum "real" enough to cause Weijun and Jin Gui's faces to "turn redder and redder, and then even redder and redder, like the sun setting in the West."^{lix} Not only does this scene engender clear references to Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, it also alludes to China's history of *Dan* actors in Beijing Opera.^{lx} As discussed in previous chapters, Butler posits that gender identity is the result of reiterated acting – one that produces the effect of a static gender while obscuring the contradiction and instability of any single

person's gender act. In this view, the specific act of performing gender constitutes who people are, and one's learned performance of gendered behavior (masculine or feminine traits) can disrupt heteronormative ideals. Therefore, He Shuai's overt enactment of gendered behavior as a female singer destabilizes the binary gender construction of man and woman, masculine and feminine, and by extension, blurs the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual behaviors.

The likening of He Shuai's performance to a *Dan* role advances the centrality of gender fluidity and homosexuality associated with the *tongzhi* identity, grounding these traits in Chinese cultural traditions. On this point, it is possible to view *Dan* roles in terms of drag and what Butler has singled out as "a way not only to think about how gender is performed, but how it is resignified through collective terms."^{lxi, lxii, lxiii} This effect is further evident in "Commitment" when Weijun teases He Shuai for not being able to grow a beard, calling him a "transvestite" (人妖 *renyao*), but later reflects that he first fell in love with He Shuai during "[his] performance mimicking a female singer."^{lxiv} Thus, the exhibition of "transgender" through He Shuai's *Dan* performance is akin to drag in that it "not only mak[es] us question what is real, and what has to be, but ... show[s] us how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted."^{lxv, lxvi} He Shuai's singing performance reveals a form of gendered ventriloquism on which the artistic and iconographic, but markedly feminine, *Dan* tradition is predicated. By the same token, He Shuai's appropriation of a *Dan* role specific to traditional Chinese culture asserts a persona mimicking femininity and inherently draws attention to the fluidity of gender identity itself. In staging

a feminine aesthetic of male acting central to Beijing Opera, He Shuai overtly performs femininity, but subversively also performs the *very process of gender performativity* itself rooted in distinct Chinese familial-cultural roots.

This critical scene foreshadows later developments of homoerotic desire between the soldiers during and after the war. Weijun and He Shuai's character development educes the notion of gender performativity, where they are positioned in masculine and feminine roles respective to each other. Weijun is described as an ideal masculine figure: he is "tall and strongly built," "dependable and sturdy as a mountain," and an excellent soldier who "trains without end to be the best fighter."^{lxvii} In turn, He Shuai is "weak" when he first enters the army due to his "Young Master" (少爷 *shaoye*), pampered background, where his "results [during training] were never really good."^{lxviii} Upon joining Squad Two, he was always the one "falling behind after the others" and getting sick or injured after training exercises, but is requested to entertain the other soldiers during breaks with his "beautiful singing voice."^{lxix} At this juncture, Butler's ideas about gender performance as discursive practices are appropriate to examine He Shuai and Weijun's characterizations. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"*^{lxx} Butler posits that the body's intelligibility in relation to sex and gender is produced at the site of performativity or "specific modality of power as discourse."^{lxxi} As such, she maintains that all sexual identities are constitutive repetitions of a "phantasmatic original" working through a normative force – the practice of reiteration – to establish itself.^{lxxii}

But how are military *tongzhi* figures and brotherly camaraderie resignified as homosexual *tongzhi* and gay relations? By illustrating gender performance,

“Commitment” not only reveals the fluidity of gender but also how homosocial bonds fostering mentorship and solidarity can be congruent with the homoerotic friendship of an intimate gay male couple. The distinct masculine and feminine roles exhibited in Weijun and He Shuai’s relationship are made evident when they spend time alone in the jungle together. This exhibition of gender performativity also utilizes the military as an institution predicated on reiterative training to enforce a specific identity of the patriotic soldier. The military environment in “Commitment” is presented as a space marked by compulsory performance for both discipline and desire, complementing and reinforcing Butler’s proposed process of subject formation.

As the soldiers leave the trenches after their last battle, He Shuai sprains his ankle and is accidentally left behind by the troop. When Weijun realizes that He Shuai is missing, he goes back to search for him and finds him unable to walk. Weijun rescues him by carrying him on his back, gruffly asserting that “[he] has been carrying firewood on his back since the age of five” and that in comparison carrying He Shuai “is nothing.”^{lxxiii} However, Weijun falls from exhaustion and catches a fever from being soaked by the rain, and He Shuai tenderly nurses him, feeding him food and water “like he was feeding a baby.”^{lxxiv} After several nights in the jungle, they come across a deserted wooden hut, and decide to stay there to shelter from the incessant rain of the monsoon season. To relieve ennui, He Shuai teaches Weijun to waltz, and sings a heartfelt Cantonese song about the moon on several occasions. One night as they are sleeping outside and “gazing at the full moon,” He Shuai spontaneously starts singing “Lonely Traveler at the Edge of the World” 《天涯孤客》. As he

explains, it is “a song about the moon ... [telling] the story of a man drifting outside, who sees a moon, and thinks of his hometown.”^{lxxv} Weijun grows partial to the song, and asks He Shuai to sing it at night before they fall asleep.

This song brings to mind numerous Chinese poems featuring the reflection of the moon as a popular motif for love and homesickness.^{lxxvi} The lyrical refrain of “smiling at the bright moon and moonlight reflected in the pond [笑对朗月月光光照地塘上]” also evokes the well-known Chinese aphorism, “like flowers in the mirror, and the reflection of the moon in the water” (镜花水月 *jinhua shuiyue*), alluding to the ephemeral and illusory nature of mortal existence.^{lxxvii, lxxviii} Along the lines of this reading, the literary trope of the moon’s reflection in a pool of water also has a long tradition of being associated with themes of gender fluidity, addressing the tenuous relation between visual perception and the construction of gender.^{lxxix} In the Chinese tradition, one prominent example of this relationship between the moon’s reflection and gender fluidity is found in the figure of Guanyin (观音), a transsexual bodhisattva, who is paradigmatically depicted as gazing at the moon’s reflection in a pool of water.^{lxxx, lxxxi} Hence, Guanyin’s association with the Buddhist phrase and “water-moon” imagery suggests a specific skepticism of the reliability of gendered appearance in addition to a broader skepticism of perceived reality.^{lxxxii}

In “Commitment,” the moon is a recurrent symbol that connects He Shuai and Weijun’s friendship during and after the war: it is mentioned whenever the two men spend time alone together or think about each other at night. In this way, references to the moon reflect key developments in their changing relationship from military comrades to gay lovers. It is helpful to remember,

therefore, that the moon also has a long history of being associated with the Moon Elder (月下老人 *yuexia laoren*, also known as 月老 *yuelao*), the God of Marriage, who is supposed to connect, by an invisible red thread, persons who are destined to marry.^{lxxxiii}

After He Shuai's wife asks for a divorce, he goes out for a walk and gazes at the moon: "Raising his head, all I saw was the moon, big and round; this type of moon really made him recall a lot of things."^{lxxxiv} When He Shuai and Weijun are reunited, they go to sing at a KTV bar. He Shuai sings his song about the moon and at the end of the night the narrator reveals that "this night was just like that night 10 years ago next to the water spring, forever seared into He Shuai's sea of memories."^{lxxxv}

As Weijun walks home after spending the evening with He Shuai, he "raises his head and sees a big moon... [Weijun] smiled to himself, musing at how it seemed so many of his memories had to do with this moon."^{lxxxvi} It is also during the Mid-Autumn Festival celebrating the full moon that He Shuai first thinks about introducing Weijun to his family.^{lxxxvii} Later, after a night "strolling in the park and admiring the moon," the two men finally acknowledge their love for each other and He Shuai "raises his head to see that big round moon: he felt like crying out, this feeling of happiness pressed down on him so heavily it was hard for him to breathe."^{lxxxviii} Hence, what was initially a symbol of brotherly companionship in times of adversity comes to represent their shifting relationship and desire, reflecting strong male homosocial bonds that mature into homosexual love over time.

The moon in this text therefore signifies concomitant changes in the male homosocial-cum-homoerotic continuum and patriarchal kinship systems positioned

within a framework of patriarchal heterosexuality. This moon leitmotif presented as an extension of He Shuai's characterization capitalizes on the fact that the moon, in traditional Chinese culture, represents *Yin* (阴), the concrete essence of the female or negative principle in nature.^{lxxxix} As such, recurring references to the moon accentuates He Shuai's feminine behavioral traits and gender performance. He Shuai's fondness of the moon thus illustrates his projective identification with this conventionally feminine symbol, together with the connotations of gender fluidity and visual indeterminacy that the icon has historically represented. In other words, gender performance is reinforced by moon symbolism, destabilizing the homo/heterosexual and masculine/feminine relational binaries to emphasize a continuum of relations between the homosocial and homosexual.

With repeated depictions of feminine behavior, it is striking that actual women play a rather peripheral role in "Commitment," and appear to serve the sole purpose of strengthening homosocial/homosexual male bonds. In particular, the presence of Jiang Xiaoyun, a female nurse working in the army, and Zhou Lili, He Shuai's wife, generate the structural context of triangular, heterosexual tensions, but ironically only reinforce the homosocial/homosexual continuum of intimacy between He Shuai and Weijun. In discussing the relation of heterosexual to homosocial bonds, Sedgwick cites an essay by Gayle Rubin to argue that "patriarchal heterosexuality can be best discussed in terms of ... the traffic of women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men."^{xc} In this view, relationships are not established between a man and a woman, but between two men,

where the woman serves “as a ‘conduit of a relationship’ in which the true *partner* is a man.” (Sedgwick 1985, 26, emphasis in original)^{xcj, xci} The women that intersperse He Shuai and Weijun’s lives reflect this account: encounters with Jiang Xiaoyun and Zhou Lili prompt the men to recognize and strengthen their true homoerotic desires. Accordingly, the portrayal of the men’s response to women contests the dichotomy between homosocial and homosexual male bonds to concretize *tongzhi* relations as an all-encompassing concept.

Although conversation about women crops up frequently throughout the text, it is always mentioned in connection to their impact on male-male bonds. This is explicit in Volume One as the soldiers are immersed in an all-male military environment where “the subject of women was never met with silence.”^{xciii} When He Shuai and Weijun talk about their futures after the war, Weijun admits that he “really admires Jiang Xiaoyun” and “wants to find a wife,” but laments that he “can never be a match for Xiaoyun” and that “[he] really doesn’t know what he would want in a wife ... because he has never had [a woman] before.”^{xciv} He Shuai urges him to confess his feelings to Xiaoyun, but Weijun loses his temper and shouts at him for “making [him] sick” and “warns [him] not to bring up any ideas about Xiaoyun again.”^{xcv} In response, He Shuai tries to comfort Weijun saying that he “is the ringing image of an ideal man,” to which Weijun retorts that “if [he] was really that good, [He Shuai] should just marry him instead.”^{xcvi} Here, it is conversation about a woman that drives He Shuai and Weijun to first consider the ambiguity of their relationship to each other.

Similarly, it is He Shuai’s divorce from Zhou Lili that prompts him “to start having extreme doubts,” where he later admits that “he has lost interest in

women.”^{xcvii} Zhou Lili had accused He Shuai of being “unable to love her” because he could only think “of the war ... [and] of [his] Squad Leader,” leading He Shuai to realize that he was “truly in love with Weijun ... [and] nobody else.”^{xcviii} Moreover, it is only when Zhou Lili wants to get remarried that He Shuai is driven to fully pursue his relationship with Weijun, proposing plans for gay marriage.^{xcix} As such, these triangular schemas introduce heterosexual associations amidst homosocial relations, revealing that emerging patterns of male friendship, rivalry, mutual care, and love cannot be understood outside of its relation to women. To this end, the abstraction of women and heterosexual relations are juxtaposed against tangible experiences of male homosocial/homosexual intimacy, elevating the transcendent status of a male homosocial destination of desire.

GAY COMRADES: A MODE OF EXISTENCE BETWEEN INTIMATE FRIENDSHIP AND FRIENDLY ROMANCE?

With regard to male homosocial desire as a paragon of love that potentially transcends differences between men, it is interesting to note that the homosexuality depicted throughout “Commitment” turns out to represent anything but actual sexual relations. This aesthetic detail speaks to Foucault’s argument that homosexuality should not be a fixed identity but rather a fluid horizon of relational and ontological possibilities grounded in same-sex friendship, rather than a sexual act. By presenting homosexuality as a matter of friendship, Foucault posits an intimate homosocial relation between men detached from images of sex.^c He claims that the idea of “two young men meeting in the street, seducing each other with a

look, grabbing each other's asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour" advances a "neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease," and hence is ineffective in challenging social norms.^{ci} Instead, Foucault argues that it is "affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship" – i.e., sentimentalized forms of homosexual intimacy – that is "troubling" and more potently subversive of hegemonic ideologies.^{cii} Hence, friendship and sex are not diametrically opposed; rather, friendship offers gay politics an exodus from sexuality and the relational models that accompany it.^{ciii} In Foucault's view, insofar as the *tongzhi* community exhibits the "tying together of unforeseen lines of force and the subsequent formation of new alliances," the ties that bind this diverse community might be best designated as bonds of friendship.^{civ}

In "Commitment," the romance between He Shuai and Weijun is portrayed in a way that the two men are lovers and intimate without necessarily being homosexual. As a gay love story, it is striking that homosexuality is not mentioned until the very end of the text. Instead, an emphasis on *tongzhi* relations conflates the label's connotations of military comrade and homosexual comrade, thereby rendering both meanings of the term simultaneously intelligible via the figure of the gay soldier. To develop this image, the ubiquitous presence of *tongzhi* is stressed. This is made explicit in He Shuai's reflection that: "Actually, there are many *tongzhi* around... Everyone felt that it was relatively normal; I also did not think much of it. Everyone's human, it's just that ... some people like others of the same kind."^{cv} Indirect references to homosexual couplings are also evident when soldiers get particularly attached to one another (for example, when other soldiers from Squad Two are

depicted in pairs). When homosexual relations are finally explicitly mentioned, they are presented as a natural progression from the homosocial relations that were cultivated in the army. Otherwise stated, two men get together as a couple in which the experiences of desire and duty can be shared: their passionate lifetime union is only an extension of the friendship and loyalty they have always felt for each other while serving in the army. Accordingly, He Shuai and Weijun's homoerotic desire is described as "a feeling that has existed for a long time" but as something that they "did not understand before" and previously dismissed as "brotherly care" – an emotion that later unfolds as a "lifelong commitment" to loving each other.^{cvi} Nevertheless, romantic scenes do not describe anything further than the two men cuddling or kissing, and even then, only rather abstractly.

By emphasizing a de-eroticized intimacy between the two men, the text presents a departure from the limited and limiting forms of State-sponsored heteronormative associations to gesture towards an expanded and unmapped field of relations. This narrative development evinces Foucault's argument for the need to develop a "homosexual culture" beyond "the sexual act itself" to escape the "readymade [formula] of the pure sexual encounter."^{cvii} In his view, this is necessary to introduce "a diversification that would also be a form of relationship and ... a 'way of life'" where "to be 'gay' ... is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life."^{cviii} By examining "Commitment" through this Foucauldian lens, the text introduces *tongzhi* as a concept that transcends age, status, and social class, replacing it with a diversity of desirable relations. The Military Comrade Story draws upon the historical importance of friendship, equality, and

non-biological kinship promoted by the Communist Party and epitomized by the ideological use of *tongzhi* as a form of address. The queering of homosocial camaraderie in the national military, therefore, challenges general social norms and inscribes a new form of homosexual intimacy that does not conflict with Chinese cultural values.

In the absence of a delineation of heterosexual and homosexual behaviors based on the sex act, the tricky issue of sexual orientation or object choice in He Shuai and Weijun's relationship gets resolved by what Constance Penley has referred to "an idea of *cosmic destiny*: the two men are somehow meant for each other and homosexuality has nothing to do with it."^{cxix, cx} Although He Shuai and Weijun eventually acknowledge their homosexuality, they do so only as a result of their specific love for each other, rather than due to a more general desire for men. This is manifest in He Shuai's proclamation that "[he] has met many other men on the streets, but does not like a single one of them. The only person [he] likes is [Weijun]." ^{cxii} Both men also repeatedly emphasize that they "belong to each other in this life and the next," will "never be separated," are "unable to go on living" without each other, and do not desire any other men. ^{cxiii} Furthermore, the characters stress their identification with same-sex relations as *tongzhi* rather than *tongxinglian*, grounding their relationship in a term that subverts conventional paradigms of homosexuality.

But what is served, at the level of fiction, by having He Shuai and Weijun together romantically as homosexuals, yet somehow devoid of sexual relations altogether? This aesthetic style allows for a much greater range of identification and desire that deconstructs and renegotiates the meaning of a *tongzhi* identity – and by extension, what Foucault has termed "the homosexual mode of life."^{cxviii} In Military

Comrade texts, homosexuality is presented "not [as] a form of desire but something to desire," where *tongzhi* relations signify a multiplicity of relationships along the homosocial and homosexual continuum. More specifically, *tongzhi* has a tri-layered signification: the term connotes homosexuality in popular culture, refers to revolutionary intentions as promoted in Chinese Communist discourse, and also evokes the socialist ideal for an equal society that transcends all heteronormative constraints. Indeed, Military Comrade fiction speaks to Foucault's notion of "the 'slantwise' position of [the homosexual]" represented by the polymorphous category of *tongzhi* in contemporary Chinese society. ^{cxiv} The deconstruction and reconstruction of a *tongzhi* position "lay[s] out [diagonal lines] in the social fabric" to "reopen affective and relational virtualities" that "allow these virtualities to come to light" – namely, the "slantwise" position of a heterosexual/homosocial/homosexual person connected to the *tongzhi* identity.

The shifting meaning of Tiananmen in "Commitment" parallels this reappropriation of a *tongzhi* positionality to contest Communist discourse and heteronormative ideologies. As one of China's most emotionally and historically charged spaces, the Tiananmen gate and square has a long history, and its symbolic significance has been altered over the years in relation to China's imperial and bureaucratic world as well as revolutionary past. Built in 1415 in the Ming Dynasty, the Tiananmen Gate itself – The Gate of Heavenly Peace – was meant to be an entryway into the imperial and bureaucratic world of the Forbidden City. In Imperial China, Tiananmen played a significant role in the rituals of royal governance as the place where the emperor's edicts were announced. It became a public space only at moments of grave national crisis. ^{cxv} However, as the

Square progressively developed into a political and educational hub during the Republican Era, it also became a forum for rallies and debates over national policy.^{cxvi} The May Fourth demonstration in 1919 had the greatest impact on this whole period of Chinese history, symbolically marking the inauguration of Tiananmen Square as a fully public and anti-governmental space.^{cxvii} ^{cxviii} Tiananmen Square thereafter became the regular, chosen location for Chinese demonstrators to hold national rallies.

When Mao Zedong came to power, Tiananmen was recreated as both a public and official location endorsing the Communist leadership, underscored when giant photographs of Mao and Zhu De, the Red Army's leading general, were erected. After the Cultural Revolution in 1976, however, the people reclaimed Tiananmen as an open space for discussion concerning democracy and the arts.^{cxix} Thus, although Tiananmen still served as an intractable center of the government's power,^{cx} the square also became a beacon of opposition. In contemporary China, Tiananmen is a symbolic space commonly associated with the Chinese Communist Party and Maoist ideology, but also of conflict and (failed) revolutionary intent, especially after the student protests and crackdown of 1989.

The resignification of Tiananmen as a place rooted in China's Imperial history to one connoting Maoist ideology and associated with revolutionary intent mirrors the reappropriation of *tongzhi* in Communist discourse. Throughout "Commitment," references to Tiananmen initially invoke it as a place representing the military comrades' "commitment" to national duty. However, at the end of the story, Tiananmen is resignified as a place that enables the emergence of non-normative *tongzhi* genders and sexualities, emphasized when He Shuai and Weijun declare their lifelong bond to each other

during an outing to the Square. Tiananmen in "Commitment" therefore becomes a space that facilitates gay bonding, ironically queering the Square's longstanding symbolism of bureaucratic power.

Weijun brings up Tiananmen as a place he wants to visit after the war, to which the other soldiers in Squad Two respond by committing to make a trip there together, emphasizing that "if we survive, we need to go together... We need to go."^{cxxi} Furthermore, He Shuai promises Weijun more than once to take him to Tiananmen.^{cxix} Hence, the aspiration to visit Tiananmen holds the soldiers together in dire times facing life and death during war. At the end of the story, He Shuai and Weijun finally make this trip to Tiananmen. However, the scene that develops at the Square itself has very different implications: when posing for a picture together, He Shuai kisses Weijun on the cheek. This gesture leads to an elaborate public disclosure of their *tongzhi* relationship, where they also announce their "marriage." In front of Jian Hong and Jian Fei, Weijun's siblings, He Shuai insists that he wants to "make it clear" to everyone that "he is [Weijun's] wife."^{cxiii} Weijun reaffirms that "Brother He has given [him] a family, [making him] very fortunate" and hopes that his siblings "can support [them] with [their] blessings."^{cxiv} In this scene, Tiananmen becomes the site for *tongzhi* identification and gay love, transforming the Square into a public arena where homosexual relations are made visible. Nonetheless, by positioning each other as husband and wife, He Shuai and Weijun reveal that they still situate themselves within a heteronormative paradigm.

"Commitment" was originally serialized in 2007, but was edited and reposted in 2008 with an appended epilogue. This epilogue takes the form of three diary entries from Xia Xiaofei, He

Shuai's nephew, expanding the time horizon of the story to include a third generation: the generation of youth in contemporary China today, and how they receive *tongzhi* relations. Xiaofei documents his experience going on a beach vacation with his Jiujiu^{cxv} (He Shuai) and Uncle Lu (Weijun). The boy observes that the two men are very close friends – “just like brothers, ... almost even closer than brothers” – and deduces that their intimacy must have resulted from shared military experiences.^{cxvi, cxvii} Even so, Xiaofei idolizes the men for their camaraderie, and exclaims that “when [he] grows up, [he] wants to have such a friendship as well” and similarly make “a lifelong good friend.”^{cxviii}

One day out at the beach, Xiaofei notices that He Shuai had gone underwater when swimming. Weijun dives repeatedly to rescue him, and resuscitates him with CPR. Xiaofei is in tears from worry, but picks up on their loving interaction once He Shuai is revived. He Shuai tells Weijun that his good leg had cramped up and he had started sinking, but “wasn't afraid” because he knew that Weijun “was just by his side” and that he “could not possibly die.”^{cxix} He Shuai and Weijun then kiss each other, and even though He Shuai tries to pretend to Xiaofei that it was just “manually assisted breathing,” the child instantly understands the nature of their relationship. As Xiaofei writes: “Although I am a child, I'm not stupid, okay? ... In this world, I know that ‘tongzhi’ is a word with multiple meanings. ... Isn't it just two men in love? It's not so rare.”^{cxx} The narrative ends on a positive note in which Xiaofei agrees to “keep their secret” with the promise of being “good friends,” where Xiaofei asserts that “no matter what, [Uncle Lu] is still my idol” and that “as long as they have my blessings, [He Shuai and Weijun] will definitely live a fortunate and happy life.”^{cxxi}

The emphasis on He Shuai and Weijun's friendship in the epilogue once again invokes Foucault's argument of friendship as an alternative relational form – as “a desire, an uneasiness, a desire-in-uneasiness that exists among a lot of people” – enabled by homosexuality.^{cxiii} The fluid movement from homosocial friendship to homosexual love embodied within the *tongzhi* identity speaks to the notion of homosexuality as an uncharted and labile space of relational possibilities. He Shuai and Weijun's version of friendship shifts away from homosexuality to fixed identity by focusing on *tongzhi* relations as a familiar catalogue of attitudes and behaviors associated with mutual care, responsibility, and understanding. Their relationship stresses a homosocial/sexual continuum comprised of lifelong loyalty to each other, reaffirming the conception of friendship valorized in queer discourse as a respite from social ostracism and an alternative to compulsory heterosexuality.

Thus, “Commitment” presents an account of queer community through the figure of gay male military *tongzhi*, developing a relational form that does not necessarily depend upon the conjugal couple or blood kinship, but nonetheless presents a legible and appealing image of intimacy. The text embraces friendship as a model for same-sex relations within a dominant heteronormative paradigm, emphasizing homosocial equality and longevity. Ultimately, “Commitment” forwards *tongzhi* characters grounded in friendship to replace the disrupted binary between homosexual and heterosexual behaviors with a continuum of homosocialist intimacy and desires.

SOLDIERLY CAMARADERIE: THE BOUNDARIES OF TONGZHI HOMOSOCIAL HOMOEROTICS

When Military Comrade Stories ironically position homosexual characters as patriotic and masculine soldiers, the *tongzhi* community establishes a form of emancipation from the Communist authority that represses and emasculates them. In “Commitment,” we see how Military Comrade Stories contribute to an effort to specify the proper boundaries of the State’s authority in relation to other increasingly visible forms of social and political coercion towards homosexual desire. Experiences in the army, a conventional model for infallibility and discipline suppressing all symptoms of the human body, is exposed as an institution dominated by the overwhelming effects of emotional breakdowns and uncontrollable desires.

By repositioning queer characters within the figure of the military comrade representing the strong arm of the Communist regime, “Commitment” dismantles and inverts the relational structures that form the very backbone of patriarchal homosociality and the Party system. The work illustrates how the army brings men from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds together in an intimate space where same-sex friendship and love short-circuits political structures and class distinctions. Throughout the text, there is a sustained strategic blurring of relational boundaries – between friendship and romance, homosociality and homosexuality, soldier and lover. As a sub-genre, Military Comrade fiction rethinks the meaning of being *tongzhi* and the scope of *tongzhi wenxue* itself, repositioning the category of *tongzhi* as a mode of intimacy outside heterosexual norms. With an emphasis on friendship and camaraderie, the structure of the story allows the conception of *tongzhi* relations in the absence of sex altogether. Instead, the *tongzhi* identity and homosexuality becomes intelligible through same-sex relationships at the heart of

heteronormative ideals. At the same time, however, the novella reveals that characters are inevitably trapped within an institutional framework governed by patriarchal conventions. This is evident when the text co-opts the marriage trope and inscribes gender performance within male same-sex relations.

The idealization of queer friendship with respect to homosexual relations is central to Christopher Nealon’s book, *Foundlings*,^{cxxxiii} in which he develops his method of “affect-genealogy.” For Nealon, queer texts are traversed by powerful longings that are both corporeal and historical; in their articulate hopes and desires, these texts gesture both toward impossible affiliations and a queer community connected across time. Nealon’s study of “affect-genealogy” is germane to a discussion of emergent *tongzhi* texts and communities, particularly Military Comrade narratives. By drawing upon Nealon to read “Commitment” as a “foundling text” bridging three generations, the work brings together ascetic but passionate outsiders who share the desire for a *tongzhi* bond. As Nealon writes:

Because [foundling texts] do not properly belong either to the inert terminal narratives of inversion or to the triumphant, progressive narrative of achieving ethnic coherence, they suggest another time, a time of expectation, in which their key stylistic gestures, choice of genre, and ideological frames all point to an inaccessible future, in which the inarticulate desires that mobilize them will find some “hermeneutic friend” beyond the historical horizon of their unintelligibility to themselves.^{cxxxiv}

In this view, founding texts such as “Commitment” express a desire for an “inaccessible future”: a yearning for structures of life and communities that are not yet possible in twentieth-century China.^{cxxxv} Nonetheless, these texts inhabit a “time of expectation” as they wait for others – “hermeneutic friend[s]” – who will know how to read and empathize with them.^{cxxxvi} This sentiment is evident in the epilogue, where Qing Feng indicates that Chinese youth of the 21st century will be the ones affecting change in how *tongzhi* communities are established and perceived.

In contemporary China, hope for alternative forms of queer relation and community is a salient issue, particularly as *tongzhi* try to articulate alternatives to marriage and the heteronormality of social and gendered life. There is a need to expand the public sense of what counts as a relationship. Through references to Communist ideology, the military, and homosocialist desires, Military Comrade fiction sustains a desexualized image of the *tongzhi* couple. In the long run, these stories attempt to articulate a unified community somewhere between family and nation – a *tongzhi* movement based on same-sex friendship and intimacy that transcends hegemonic political, social, and cultural boundaries.

ⁱ Bragg, Billy. “Tender Comrade.” 1988.

ⁱⁱ Gary L. Leiring, *Officially Gay: The Construction of Sexuality by the US Military* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ Bragg, Billy. “Tender Comrade.” 1988.

^{iv} Leiring, *Officially Gay: The Construction of Sexuality by the US Military*

^v Sedgwick defines “homosocial” as a word that “describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with ‘homosexual,’ and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual’” (1985:1). She describes male “homosocial desire” in relation to an

unbroken continuum between male homosocial and homosexual relations.

^{vi} Most Comrade stories are published either anonymously or pseudonymously. Qing Feng, the author of “Commitment,” also follows this practice. Chinese netizens customarily use nicknames for all online interactions, but on Comrade websites pseudonyms also preserve anonymity of authors writing about provocative matters, protecting them from legal and social ramifications.

^{vii} Carol M. Scotton and Wanjin Zhu, “Tongzhi in China: Language Change and its Conversational Consequences,” *Language in Society* 12 (1983): 477-494.

^{viii} Wah-shan Chou, “Homosexuality and the Cultural Politics of Tongzhi in Chinese Societies,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 4(3-4)(2001): 27-46.

^{ix} Andrew Wong and Qing Zhang, “The Linguistic Construction of the *Tongzhi* Community,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 10(2)(2000): 248-78.

^x For example, common address terms *tongzhi* was intended to replace include: “Miss” (小姐 *xiaojie*), an unmarried woman of a privileged class or intelligentsia; “Mister” (先生 *xiansheng*), a man of the privileged class or intelligentsia; “Auntie” (阿姨 *ayi*), an older woman; “Master” (老爷 *laoye*), head of the family of a privileged class. For more information see 2008.

^{xi} Andrew Wong, “The Trouble with *Tongzhi*: The Politics of Labeling Among Gay and Lesbian Hongkongers,” *Pragmatics* 18(2)(2008): 277-301.

^{xii} In 1989, *tongzhi* was first used in the Chinese title of the inaugural Hong Kong Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (香港第一界同志电影节 *xianggang diyi jie tongzhi dianying jie*) as a term for same-sex desire. After the festival, *tongzhi* was widely adopted by gay and lesbian organizations in Hong Kong and was then exported to Taiwan, Mainland China, and diasporic Chinese communities (Chou 1997).

^{xiii} Chou, “Homosexuality and the Cultural Politics of Tongzhi in Chinese Societies.”

^{xiv} John Gittings, “The ‘Learn from the Army’ Campaign,” *The China Quarterly* 18(Apr-Jun)(1964): 153-159

^{xv} Robert D. Fisher, *China's Military Modernization: Building for Regional and Global Reach*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2010).

^{xvi} Gittings, “The ‘Learn from the Army’ Campaign.”

^{xvii} This campaign initiated an emulation movement that established the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) as a model for the whole nation to “learn from, study, and compare with” (NCNA 1964, qtd. from Gittings 1964).

All sections of society, from commercial industries, government departments, and rural work cadres, were called upon to study the “advanced” political and ideological work of the armed forces. This campaign lasted several months and reached fanatic intensity, where there was an exceptional amount of news about the PLA’s political achievements and of its model soldiers or companies (Powell 1965).

^{xviii} Gitings, “The ‘Learn from the Army’ Campaign.”

^{xix} This ideological rationale is articulated in an article printed in *Red Flag*, the Party journal, stating that the emulation campaign was initiated to ensure that the armed forces remained “under the absolute leadership of the Party [as] a responsive and obedient tool...” (“Political Work” 1964, qtd. in Powell 1965, 130).

^{xx} Fisher, *China’s Military Modernization: Building for Regional and Global Reach*.

^{xxi} Ralph L. Powell, “Commissars in the Economy: ‘Learn from the PLA’ Movement in China” *Asian Survey* 5(3)(1965): 130

^{xxii} Qing Feng (青风), *Commitment <<承诺>>* (2008), accessed on February 9, 2013. <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=353537>, 4.

^{xxiii} King C. Chen, *China’s War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications* (Palo Alto: Hoover Institution Stanford University, Hoover Press Publication, 1987.)

^{xxiv} Loren Brandt and Thomas G. Rawsky, *China’s Great Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.)

^{xxv} The Chinese economic reforms (改革开放 *gaige kaifang*, literally “Reform and Opening up”) refers to the program of economic reforms named “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” reformists in the Chinese Communist Party led by Deng Xiaoping initiated in December 1978. The reforms led to a period of rapid economic growth which dramatically impacted social inequity and income disparities within the nation (Brant and Rawski 2008).

^{xxvi} Comrade Li Feiyue (李飞跃同志) started working for the Communist Party in 1985 and is the Committee Secretary of Guizhou Province for the Miao and Dong autonomous regions (贵州省黔东南苗族侗族自治州委书记).

^{xxvii} Comrade Li Gang (李刚同志) is the deputy director of the police department in the northern district of Baoding city, Hebei province. His name is infamously associated with the “My Father is Li Gang!” (我爸是李刚!) incident, where Li Qiming, Li Gang’s son, knocked down two girls and killed one of them when driving on school grounds in Hebei University. Instead of showing any sign of remorse, Li Qiming yelled at the security

guards and the angry crowd, challenging them to sue him because his “father is Li Gang.” The phrase became one of the most popular catchphrases amongst Chinese netizens to criticize the arrogance of children of government officials. The incident also exposes the extent of corruption within the government system itself, where people associated with the Communist Party expect to be above the law. Li Gang has since been named one of the “Four Big Name Dads” (四大名爹) amongst locals to refer to well-known cases of government corruption or excess.

^{xxviii} Xing Lu, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Impact on Chinese Thought, Culture, and Communication* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2004.)

^{xxix} Powell, “Commissars in the Economy.”

^{xxx} Many leaders in the Chinese Communist Party have served as military commanders or as commissars.

^{xxxi} Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.)

^{xxxii} Kosofsky, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, 1-2.

^{xxxiii} Feng, *Commitment*, 3.

^{xxxiv} Feng, *Commitment*, 4.

^{xxxv} Feng, *Commitment*, 14.

^{xxxvi} Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” in *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume One – Ethics Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1981 [1997]), 135-136.)

^{xxxvii} Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 137.

^{xxxviii} Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 137.

^{xxxix} Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 137.

^{xl} Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 137.

^{xli} The virtue of filial piety in a patriarchal family structure creates significant hardships for Chinese homosexuals. In Confucian philosophy, filial piety (孝 *xiao*) is considered the first virtue in Chinese culture. Major components of filial piety include an emphasis on children taking care of and respecting their parents as well as producing a male heir to carry on the family name. Consequently, many *tongzhi* go to great extents to keep their homosexual identity concealed and often force themselves into heterosexual marriages to superficially fulfill these filial duties.

^{xlii} Feng, *Commitment*, 12; 17

^{xliii} Feng, *Commitment*, 1.

^{slv} Feng, *Commitment*, 1.

^{slv} The family as a model for the organization of the State ties into the notion of filial piety where Confucius believed the child should be subordinate to the parent and elders, and subject to the sovereign who is to be regarded as the father of the nation. As such, the State as the family writ large was considered the most harmonious, orderly, and natural form of government.

^{slvi} Feng, *Commitment*, 7.

^{slvii} Feng, *Commitment*, 7.

^{slviii} Feng, *Commitment*, 36.

^{slix} Feng, *Commitment*, 8; 9; 10.

^l Feng, *Commitment*, 9.

^{li} Feng, *Commitment*, 10; 12; 13.

^{lii} Feng, *Commitment*, 7; 14.

^{liii} Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 136.

^{liv} Feng, *Commitment*, 12.

^{lv} Feng, *Commitment*, 12.

^{lvi} The male-referent 他 and the female-referent 她 are both pronounced *ta*.

^{lvii} Feng, *Commitment*, 12.

^{lviii} Feng, *Commitment*, 12.

^{lix} Feng, *Commitment*, 12.

^{lx} The Dan (旦) refers to any female role in Beijing opera and is a traditional aesthetic practice entrenched in homoerotic implications. Traditionally, all Dan roles were played by men. Four famous Dan actors are Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Shang Xiaoyun, and Xun Huisheng. The prevalent custom of *xiadan* (dallying with *dan*) implies the intimate relationship between *dan* female impersonators and their admirers from officialdom or the literati (Zhang 1965, 1627-1638). For more information, refer to: Min, Tian. (2000); Li, Lingling (2001); Wu, Cuncun (2004).

^{lxi} Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004a, 216.)

^{lxi} Judith Butler, "Imitation and gender insubordination," in *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sarah Salih (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004b.)

^{lxii} In Butler's view, when men impersonate women, consciously assuming the feminine in exaggerated form, they enact a parody of femininity that reveals its

constructed nature and offers the critical distance necessary for resistance.

^{lxiv} Feng, *Commitment*, 17; 36.

^{lxv} Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 217.

^{lxvi} Butler, "Imitation and gender insubordination."

^{lxvii} Feng, *Commitment*, 4; 7; 19.

^{lxviii} Feng, *Commitment*, 4.

^{lxix} Feng, *Commitment*, 4; 5; 12.

^{lxx} Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* (New York: Routledge, 1993.)

^{lxxi} Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* 187.

^{lxxii} Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* 187.

^{lxxiii} Feng, *Commitment*, 15.

^{lxxiv} Feng, *Commitment*, 16.

^{lxxv} Feng, *Commitment*, 18.

^{lxxvi} For example, possibly the most famous poem is Li Bai's (李白) *Night Reflections* 《夜思》 in which he gazes at the moon and broods over missing his hometown. The moon as a symbol of love is also known to have been beloved by many Chinese poets: in A.D. 762, the well-known poet Li Taibo drowned from leaning over the edge of a boat one night in a drunken attempt to embrace the reflection of the moon (Williams 2006).

^{lxxvii} Guoqiu Chen, "Discussing Lowers in the Mirror and the Moon in Water: an Investigation of a Poetic Metaphor [论镜花水月: 一个诗论象喻的考析]," in *Jinghua Shuiyue: Wenxue Lilun Piping Lunwen Ji* (Taipei, Taiwan: Dongda Tushu Gongsi, 1984, 1-12.)

^{lxxviii} Carlos Rojas, *Flowers in the Mirror: Vision, Gender, and Reflections on Chinese Modernity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2000.)

^{lxxix} Rojas, *Flowers in the Mirror: Vision, Gender, and Reflections on Chinese Modernity*, 35.

^{lxxx} Carlos Rojas, *The Naked Gaze: Reflection on Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, 9.)

^{lxxxi} In the Indian Buddhist tradition, Guanyin was originally a male bodhisattva, represented by the masculine figure of Avalokitesvara. Over time, the bodhisattva was feminized when introduced into China via translations of Buddhist scriptures (Rojas 2000:35). Allusions to this phenomenon can be found in several

classical Chinese works. See, for example: Tang Xianzu. *Mudan Ting*. Scene 28, p. 153, and scene 38, p. 156. (Cyril Birch, *The Peony Pavilion*, pp. 158 and 216.)

^{lxxxii} Rojas, *The Naked Gaze, Reflections on Chinese Modernity*, 7-8.

^{lxxxiii} C. A. S. Williams, *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2006.)

^{lxxxiv} Feng, *Commitment*, 23.

^{lxxxv} Feng, *Commitment*, 25.

^{lxxxvi} Feng, *Commitment*, 26.

^{lxxxvii} Feng, *Commitment*, 27.

^{lxxxviii} Feng, *Commitment*, 31.

^{lxxxix} Williams, *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*.

^{xc} Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, 25-26.

^{xci} Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, 26.

^{xcii} Emphasis in original

^{xciii} Feng, *Commitment*, 10.

^{xciv} Feng, *Commitment*, 17.

^{xcv} Feng, *Commitment*, 17.

^{xcvi} Feng, *Commitment*, 17.

^{xcvii} Feng, *Commitment*, 22; 26.

^{xcviii} Feng, *Commitment*, 21; 34.

^{xcix} Feng, *Commitment*, 37-38.

^c Tom Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement* (New York: Statue University of New York (SUNY) Press, 2012.)

^{ci} Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 136.

^{cii} Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 136.

^{ciii} Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement*.

^{civ} Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 136.

^{cv} Feng, *Commitment*, 32.

^{cvi} Feng, *Commitment*, 34; 35; 42.

^{cvi} Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 137.

^{cvi} Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 138.

^{cix} Constant Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Popular Culture" in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 487.)

^{cx} In her discussion of slash fiction and female fandom of *Star Trek*, Penley observes that a question often debated is whether Kirk and Spock are having homosexual sex, or whether they can be defined as homosexual. She contends that slash authors frequently "try to write their stories so that somehow the two men are lovers without being homosexual" so as to "[put] them above the crude intolerance, xenophobia, and homophobia they abhor in the society around them" (1992:487). Through this aesthetic style of "having them together sexually but not somehow being homosexual," the stories actually allow for a greater range of fan identification and desire in the slash universe with regard to the binary oppositions of sex and gender in the heteronormative real world (1992, 497).

^{cxii} Feng, *Commitment*, 34.

^{cxiii} Feng, *Commitment*, 34; 37; 41; 42.

^{cxiii} Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 137.

^{cxiv} Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 138.

^{cxv} One such moment occurred in 1644, when Li Zicheng, a peasant rebel from Shaanxi Province, seized the city of Beijing. During the heavy fighting that ensued, Tiananmen was badly damaged, perhaps almost destroyed. The gateway in Beijing today, with its five archways and elaborate superstructure, is a reconstructed version that was completed in 1651 (Spence 1990).

^{cxvi} In the Republican Era, the new Department of Justice and Parliament were built on the west side of Tiananmen Square. Numerous universities and colleges are also established near Tiananmen. For example, Beijing University's main campus units for literature, science, and law, were all just to the east of the Forbidden City, within walking distance to Tiananmen. Other colleges were also clustered near the square, including the prestigious Tsinghua University (Spence 1990).

^{cxvii} Orville Schell, "Introduction," in *Children of the Dragon: The Story of Tiananmen Square* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990, 11-15.)

^{cxviii} The "May 4 Movement" refers to an entire event where Chinese scholars, scientists, writers, and artists struggled to explore new ways of strengthening China and incorporating the twin forces of science and democracy into the life of their society and government. Linked in its turn to a study of the plight of China's workers and peasants, and to the theoretical and

organizational arguments of Marxism-Leninism, the May 4 Movement had a direct bearing and influence on the growth of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which convened its first congress in 1921 (Schell 1990).

^{cxix} Jonathan Spence, "The Gate and the Square," in *Children of the Dragon: The Story of Tiananmen Square*, ed. Orville Schell (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990, 16-37.

^{cxix} The Government used the square to hold solemn rallies and funeral ceremonies for Mao, who died in late 1976. The square was further expanded to house an elaborate mausoleum for Mao to the south of the Revolutionary monument (Spence 1990).

^{cxxi} Feng, *Commitment*, 12.

^{cxxi} Feng, *Commitment*, 12; 23; 26.

^{cxxi} Feng, *Commitment*, 43.

^{cxxi} Feng, *Commitment*, 43.

^{cxv} A term referring to one's mother's brother in Chinese society. In this case, Jiujiu refers to He Shuai.

^{cxv} Citations refer to Epilogue diary entry 1.

^{cxv} Feng, *Commitment* (Epilogue), Entry 1

^{cxv} Feng, *Commitment* (Epilogue), Entry 1

^{cxv} Feng, *Commitment* (Epilogue), Entry 3

^{cxv} Feng, *Commitment* (Epilogue), Entry 3

^{cxv} Feng, *Commitment* (Epilogue), Entry 3

^{cxv} Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 137.

^{cxv} Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.)

^{cxv} Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall*, 23.

^{cxv} Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall*, 23.

^{cxv} Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall*.

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