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TAIWANESE QUEER IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE LITERARY REALM: Interpreting Fictions of Homosexuality in *Crystal Boys* and *Notes of a Desolate Man*

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In the past few decades, Taiwanese society has been struggling to integrate a strong Chinese cultural heritage with a unique sense of self-identity and a national history distinct from the mainland. The political conflict in Taiwan has intensified in recent years, influenced by new social developments, intercultural interactions and global influences. It transforms Taiwan and engenders a highly polymorphous society with different communities vying for their representative cultural voices (Liao 92). The emergent homosexual culture in Taiwan is one such marginalized voice trying to assert itself. Through literary discourse, the community commands focus on the complexity of the relationships between queer identity and the larger Taiwanese society (Chang 196). Specifically, queer literature (“ku’er wenxue”) since the 1980s uses cultural representations of homosexuality to reflect a sense of growing homosexual and national identity crisis on the island and to address the psychological dilemma of living under the rapidly changing global conditions (Martin [1] 4). Queer discourses are thus used allegorically to define new social categories and to forge foreign resistance. Nonetheless, they are still trapped within an institutionalized global

network. Bai Xianyong's *Crystal Boys* and Zhu Tianwen's *Notes of a Desolate Man* (NDM) are two examples of Taiwanese novels that portray a suppressed homosexual identity to illustrate the complex dynamics that arise out of a shift in the island's societal and political framework amidst the emergence of a new globalized cultural paradigm. A comparative analysis of the novels reveals significant changes in the liberalization and pluralization of Taiwanese society after martial law was lifted in 1987. Although both *Crystal Boys* and NDM use fictions of homosexuality to portray the issues of globalization and its impact in a changing society, the novels represent two different indigenous and foreign male homosexual cultures in parallel to the tensions between local and global influences in a society trying to define its national identity. Through references to Western cultural commodities and the relationships of central homosexual characters to foreign friends in the novels, the authors overlap sexual politics with an emerging identity crisis concerned with nationalism and tradition responding to globalization within the cultural specificity of Taiwan.

Situating Queer Identity Politics: Background on Taiwan's History

Taiwan's history is one of successive waves of colonization that have profoundly shaped the island's unique contemporary culture and made the rise of queer theory and politics possible. Taiwan was handed over to Nationalist China in 1945 and held under martial law for 38 years until 1987. The first lesbian and gay discourses began to flourish when martial law was lifted and gained full momentum in the 1990s. The lifting of martial law, with the cessation of political and cultural regulation of speech, released powerful democratizing energies accompanied by rapid urbanization and industrialization that called for a more open and multicultural society in Taiwan (Lin 239). The nation's progress towards modernization thus "appeal[ed] to the values of democracy, liberalism, and pluralism" but has been "defined more by rupture and disjuncture than by any universal or unifying qualities" (Martin [2] 11). A growing consumer-oriented society lays the foundation for the explosive success of queer literature, out of a "desire...to understand the burgeoning social imagery of Taiwan through correlative Western frameworks," (Liao 92). The concept of homosexuality is itself a Western-influenced concept, and the rise of queer literature inherently symbolizes the ubiquitous penetration of foreign cultures in Taiwan. Queer discourse, through a spiritual journey in search of sexual and cultural identity, thus politicizes homosexual desire and employs the theme of transgressive same-sex sexuality as a vehicle to articulate the psychological aspect of living in new global conditions (Chang 198). Through media publicity, popular culture and the adoption of a postmodernistic style, Taiwan's queer politics manages to present itself as avant-garde, progressive and trendy at the cultural front to exert its widespread influence (Bosco 393). Both *Crystal Boys* and NDM use varied fictional representations of a homosexual culture to explore the perplexities about identity and tradition that Taiwanese society faces as a result of increasingly globalized and foreign conditions. Because the novels were published a decade apart, their distinct narratives reflect the evolution of responses to the transnational flow of culture commodities in contemporary Taiwan.

Crystal Boys: Sensitivity to Dilemma of Intensifying Local and Global Cultural Interactions Under Martial Law

Published in 1983, Bai Xuanyong's *Crystal Boys* was the first Taiwanese novel that explicitly depicts male homosexuality. It is now considered a foundational classic of *ku'er wenxue* in early 1980s Taiwan (Lin 240). The novel came onto the literary

scene while Taiwan was undergoing a series of social and political events prior to the lifting of martial law that led to the island's dramatic transformation and markedly polymorphous cultural climate.

Crystal Boys presents a fusion of sexual and political overtones, deploying homosexual relationships as metaphors to describe the conflicted sentiments of a budding anti-nationalist Taiwanese identity trapped between the local and the global. The very title, "*nie-zi*," directly places the novel within the context of a traditional family

nie-zi

Nie-zi can be translated to mean "sons of sin," "son born of a concubine," or "monster."

structure where sons have a filial duty to carry on the family line. However, the failure to reproduce sets the homosexual community apart from conservative society, constituting a cultural diaspora within Taiwan (Martin [2] 48). The preoccupation with father-son relationships and anxiety over the absence of a home/father is a haunting theme throughout the novel and highlights discordant psychological

responses to foreign influences in a rapidly transforming society.

The novel tells the story of a group of young male sex workers and their patrons who gather in the hidden "dark kingdom" of Taipei's New Park (17). A-Qing, the novel's young protagonist, is banished from his family home by his father after being expelled from school for "an immoral act with the lab supervisor" (13). He drifts into the underground life of New Park, and joins the community of "young birds" who cruise the park (14). The legendary, tragic love affair between Dragon Prince and Phoenix Boy is told by the voices within the story, at the end of which the Dragon eventually "plunge[s] his knife right into the middle of [Phoenix's] chest" out of frustration over the impossibility of their love (186).

When A-Qing meets the Dragon Prince, Wang Kuilong has just returned to Taipei after ten years of hiding "in Manhattan...the heart of New York...across from Central Park" when he was exiled by his father for a homosexual scandal (103). Wang describes his experience in New York as emotionally traumatic, one that turned him into "a living ghost who never saw the light of day" (103). Central Park was a horrible place for him, and "for all those years [he] lived without memories, without feeling" after being sexually abused (104). Even the "young birds" he encountered there had been sexually victimized or were under constant life threat: "thousands and thousands of kids...[roam] the checkerboard streets of New York, day and night, night and day, prowling, hiding out, picking up diseases, and being devoured in the parks" (107). Wang's dystopic account of New York demystifies the American Dream and gives an impression of Western society as one that is devoid of meaningful life and human compassion. Wang yearned "to go home, back to Taipei, back to New Park" (108). Upon his father's death, Wang ends his forced exile by returning home to Taiwan, taking up the role of a wayward and confused son trying to escape the reach of foreign influences. The relationship between A-Qing and Wang thus contrasts local and global homosexual experiences, symbolizing a community exposed to foreign influences in Taiwan that realizes they no longer belong to the mainland, but are reluctant or fearful of adapting to Western culture. This is emphasized when A-Qing consciously tries to distance himself from Wang because intimacy made him feel as though Wang was trying to "pull [him] into the quicksand with him," paralleling local sentiments of the suffocating and inescapable influx of foreign influences (112).

In contrast, A-Qing's relationship with Little Jade suggests a different politics that is more favorable towards foreign influences. Both A-Qing and Little Jade consistently seek surrogate fathers throughout the novel, but Little Jade is also determined to

pursue his “cherry blossom dream” and search for his biological father, proclaiming that he “won’t rest, dead or alive, until [he finds] that goddam father of [his]” (131). A bastard child, Little Jade only knows that his father is a Taiwanese-Japanese merchant, but is fully determined to “make it to Tokyo,...change [his] name and start over” (132). Resourceful and cunning, Little Jade is unafraid of the unknown and understands that he has to “depend on [his] own flesh and blood” to meet clients such as Lin Maoxiong who can take him to Japan (132). He eventually succeeds in jumping ship to Japan, and his letters to A-Qing are bubbling with excitement about the “neon signs of Shinjuku” and his new job as a waiter (311). Little Jade also tells A-Qing about the much larger and active community of “young birds” in Tokyo who “flit up and down the streets without worrying about the police” in an open and tolerant society (318). Little Jade’s letters give readers a completely different impression of going abroad from Wang’s account; here, foreign cultures imply hope and positive life changes. Little Jade’s refusal to accept abandonment and determination to “search through every inch of Japan” in an active pursuit for his father symbolize a desire within Taiwanese society to assert their unique cultural identity amidst pressure to create an increasingly globalized construction of a heterogeneous community (319).

The contrast between Wang and Little Jade’s experiences abroad represents the divided politics of the novel with conflicting attitudes towards globalization as a process in which Taiwan variously embraces, adapts and resists foreign paradigms. While Wang’s disheartening, resigned narrative represents the dominant voice of the text, Little Jade’s rebellious and subversive character leaves readers with an optimistic outlook at the end of the novel and foreshadows the emerging defiant activism of the 1990s. The preoccupation with the relationship of sexual identity to a traditional patriarchal family structure in *Crystal Boys* challenges the bourgeois ideologies of familial structure and reproductive sexuality to reflect the emergent cultural hybridity in Taiwan. The distinct foreign experiences of homosexual characters depicted in the

The “Birds of Youth”...allude to a displaced community within Taiwanese society unsure of how to respond to the dilemma of living in a swiftly transforming political and cultural environment.

novel symbolize an increasingly multi-dimensional attitude towards foreign influences and globalization in Taiwanese society. Ultimately, the novel is concerned with the “Birds of Youth” who are “a bunch of fledglings who’ve lost [their] nest, like a flock of sea swallows crossing the ocean, struggling to keep flying ahead, with no idea where [they]’ll end up,” alluding to a displaced community within Taiwanese society unsure of how to respond to the dilemma of living in a swiftly transforming political and cultural environment (81). Bai thus uses the fictional portrayal of homosexuality as an anti-nationalist metaphor to represent a shift towards a more Taiwan-centric construction of cultural identity, with sexual deviation embodying social and political resistance.

Notes of a Desolate Man: Postmodern Response to the Global Condition Post-Martial Law

Published in 1994, a decade after *Crystal Boys* and at the height of the post-martial law tsunami of queer literature, Zhu Tianwen’s *Notes of a Desolate Man (NDM)* is a poignant response to the speed of global modernization and considered a key work for the public representation of homosexuality in Taiwan. Rapid economic development

and Taiwan's entry into the global financial and economic realm in the 1990s resulted in dramatic social changes "marked by a disjuncture between a traditional life world and the new global environment" (Wang 2000: 372). Writing out of the postmodern milieu, Zhu's novel exhibits a flattening of perception countered by a nostalgic narrative of yearning for the lost world of traditional family structure. In a radically new global capitalist environment dominated by industrialization, technology and urbanization, the Taiwanese population is depicted as being severed from its traditional way of life.

In *NDM*, the first-person narrator, Little Shao, is a Taiwanese gay man who has "reached [his] fortieth year, the prime of a man's life," yet feels like he has already "become like a dead tree," and gives us a testimony of a desolate man in an increasingly desolate world defined by instability (1). Similar to *Crystal Boys*, *NDM* vacillates between endorsing and disparaging a homosexual lifestyle to reflect a divided sexual politics with conflicting attitudes towards social changes brought about by new global conditions. However, *NDM* moves away from father-son relationships as a central organizing axis to emphasize unique characteristics of a new homosexual awareness in a global city undergoing rapid transformations. This development in *NDM* parallels the waning of Chinese authoritative power and influx of Western cultural commodities in 1990s Taiwanese society. Zhu's novel offers a self-reflective and recursive account of a man's attempt to grapple with his social identity while overwhelmed by a consumer-oriented environment wherein the individual is increasingly commodified by mass media.

Written in a highly aesthetic postmodernist style, *NDM* provides a very different construction of homosexual culture, weaving a dreamlike account of the psychological world of a homosexual man that is much more intellectual, westernized and decadent than *Crystal Boys*. The narrative is riddled with references to Western cultural commodities, and a large part of the novel itself consists of Little Shao reading notes from or ruminating on Western literary theories and films. A focal theme is Little Shao's retrogressive, recurring and masochistic attachment to the social institutions of a traditional nation and a family structure that treat homosexuals as "simply exceptions...to be excluded" (38). As Little Shao lingers around Taipei's central district and New Park, he represents the "other" in Taiwanese society, occupying a space undefined by any clear familial or national social position. As he ponders over the neologism "queer" that has resulted in the "creation of a new age, a rectification of names," he alludes to the formation of a new cultural identity with the introduction of the term that empowers and unites but also marginalizes and divides (25). Little Shao's transient mobility resulting from his unstable homosexual identity thus allegorically represents the emergence of an alternative, ambiguous identity in the context of a morphing globalized urban space.

The novel begins with Little Shao stating in a tone of regret that "this is a time of decadence, this is a time for prophesy" (1). Little Shao is an undeniably gay character, but strongly endorses traditional family values by "living ignobly amid the norms of the human world" and vilifying his own homosexual identity (3). On one hand, he upholds Foucault's lessons on "the relationship between sex and power" that prevents assimilation into the new heterogeneous system of mass culture as a homosexual (41). On the other, he also reveres Levi-Strauss's "three-element kinship system" that denigrates gays as freaks doomed to be "the odd components screened out by [his] system" (38-9). Thus, Little Shao alternates between an admiration of Western cultural theories and self-castigation for "having been brainwashed by White Europeans," expressing an undefined spectrum of identity politics in a community confronted by the hybridity of contemporary Taiwanese culture (26).

Zhu describes homosexual pursuits aesthetically to symbolize the challenges facing Taiwanese society in an attempt to secure value and meaning in a postindustrial world: in an environment of seemingly heterogeneous global capitalism, wanton sexuality is synonymous with the attempt to redeem lost cultural meaning and “[obtain] freedom through sexual pleasure” (44). Little Shao laments that a non-reproductive society is doomed to “unnatural” extinction, but still savors a decadent aesthetic vision of an “erotic utopia” (45). His ambivalence symbolically alludes to the dilemma of an anonymous yet uniquely Taiwanese “Fido generation” struggling to forge an identity for themselves and “make [their] voices heard” in a progressively globalized, heterogeneous society (69).

The relationship of Little Shao with his old friend, Ah-Yao, highlights their differences and suggests an apparent distinction between Western and Taiwanese homosexual identities. When Little Shao was still “lost and tormented in a labyrinth of identity” before he succumbed to “the ferocious beast named desire” and accepted “the fate of a GAY man,” Ah Yao “was already a happy GAY man” and had been promiscuous since he was young (26).

Like Wang in *Crystal Boys*, Ah Yao also lives in New York City, but their experiences of America are entirely. Ah Yao is an involved activist who stands for the movement to “Act up. Fight back. Fight AIDS.” and lived in New York happily and comfortably with his sexual identity prior to his death (2). However, Little Shao adamantly proclaims that he “never took part in Ah Yao’s movement” as he cannot comprehend a “[belief] in organizations and movements,” pessimistically dismissing Ah Yao’s activism as futile and even ridiculous (25). Despite their differences, Ah Yao consistently makes international “New York-Taipei phone calls” to Little Shao “for no other reason than to hear [Little Shao’s] voice [which] connected him with his past” even though the conversations “often ended in anger and resentment” (27). Ah Yao’s unwillingness to disconnect himself and continual querying of whether Little Shao “had read the material he sent” represents the perennial presence of the global urging the local to adopt foreign constructs (27).

The conflicted relationship between Little Shao and Ah Yao manifests the tension between differences in the local and the global experience, much like A-Qing and Wang in *Crystal Boys*. However, *NDM* shines a much more favorable spotlight on the impact of foreign influences and modernization. While Little Shao initially condescends toward “Ah Yao’s lifetime of insatiable, indiscriminate mating” that led to his contraction of AIDS and eventual death, he later sees Ah Yao as a hero and “a warrior” who “will find his place...on that splendid [AIDS] memorial quilt” (2, 22). After his death, A-Qing also repeatedly “yearned for Ah Yao’s praise” and claims it would “have meant more to [him] than all the blessings in the world” (51). Their intimate yet international relationship reveals the global and the local as a harmonious hybrid where there is an inescapable necessity for globalization to “bless” and release what is repressed in local Taiwanese society. As such, Zhu uses alternate fictional representations of a homosexual culture locally and abroad to depict how Taiwanese society is changing to become increasingly pluralistic as a hybrid of Western decadence and traditional family values, wherein the identity of a “Fido generation” of both past and future is progressively integrated and intertwined in a global culture (76).

Over the past few decades, Taiwanese society has been confronted with a changing cultural paradigm and new global conditions that have destabilized traditional constructions of family, gender and sexuality. To speak of globalization, then, is to raise the question of a nation’s place in emergent transnational movements and its conflicting interests to simultaneously modernize by weakening ties to traditional culture while

holding on to historical roots. The immense social upheavals and penetration of foreign cultural influences compels both Bai and Zhu to explore the definition of a new Taiwanese identity trapped between the local and the global through homosexual identification in queer literature. The globalization process is unique on the island, as the influx of foreign cultural commodities occurs concurrently with Taiwan's landmark separation from mainland China, intensifying the simultaneous disappearance of old concepts and the invention of new ones.

In queer literature, sexuality has been "understood as produced by historically contingent organizations of knowledge" with changing structures "varying [with] geocultural locations and historical contexts," making it the ideal trope to symbolize the impacts of globalization on Taiwanese society (Martin [2] 8). As such, although *Crystal Boys* and *NDM* deal explicitly with homosexuality, they are ultimately not about homosexuality in isolation but rather employ fictional representations of

Both fictions... present readers with the formation of a dissident sexuality actively "constructed out of complex relations among local cultures, national histories, regional linkages, and globally mobile sexual knowledge."

drifting, rootless urban sexual subjects to articulate the rapid globalization of lifestyle and identity politics in Taiwan. Both fictions thus present readers with the formation of a dissident sexuality actively "constructed out of complex relations among local cultures, national histories, regional linkages and globally mobile sexual knowledge" (Martin [2] 8). Firstly, both *Crystal Boys* and *NDM* relate explicitly to homosexuality but also reveal the development of conflicting local and global influences on a cultural paradigm before and after the lifting of martial law in Taiwan. Bai's *Crystal Boys* serves as a coming out story for queer literature, with the disparate foreign experiences of Wang and Little Jade signifying a budding anti-nativist sentiment but divided responses to global influences in Taiwan. While Zhu's *NDM* also portrays the ambivalent and ambiguous perspective toward a contemporary society increasingly influenced by foreign cultures, the dissembling narrator breaks off from the familialism that obsesses *Crystal Boys* but alternates between endorsing heterosexual family values and celebrating the prevailingly decadent homosexual lifestyle.

Secondly, while the central homosexual characters in both fictions engage in same-sex relationships, they do not necessarily identify themselves as gay, symbolizing a community that is adapting to yet rejecting an identity built on unfamiliar Western constructs. In *Crystal Boys*, the "young birds" of New Park engage in sex with their patrons, but they do so in order to adapt for survival, and the representation of male homosexual love is anything but gay-positive. In *NDM*, Little Shao is more receptive to accepting a gay identity, but consistently denigrates homosexual behaviors, most evident through his condescension of Ah Yao's promiscuity.

Finally, the relationships of central narrating characters with their foreign friends also depict a process of cultural negotiations between traditional and contemporary values and conflicting local and foreign theories and practices. While A-Qing and Little Shao are part of the local sphere, Wang Kuilong, Little Jade, and Ah Yao are globally experienced, having extensive foreign interaction. By overlapping the sexual relationships and experiences of these characters in each novel, both Bai and Zhu illustrate how the local and the global intersect to influence Taiwanese society.

Contrasting antithetical local and foreign homosexual experiences in fiction symbolize the rupture of tradition with global influences, where globalization is “greeted on the one hand with celebration and admiration, on the other with foreboding and dismay” (Gibson-Graham 239). Fictional representations of homosexual relationships in both novels are therefore characterized by the foreign character dominating the local (as in Wang and Ah Yao’s possessive desire for A-Qing and Little Shao, respectively), allegorically referring to the looming prevalence of globalization with a “penetration of capitalism into all processes of production, circulation, and consumption, not only of commodities but also of meaning” (Gibson-Graham 239). As globalization dismantles transnational boundaries and assimilates foreign influences, a new divergent culture is being created in Taiwanese society, represented by an emerging homosexual cultural identity in queer literature.



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