

New Park: Gay Literature in Taiwan

Research >
Taiwan

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

By Chi Ta-wei

The most famous Taiwanese gay-themed novel is Pai Hsien-yung's *Crystal Boys* (1985). This novel portrays the 1970s gay hustlers who gathered in Taipei's New Park, which remains the best-known gay cruising venue in Taiwan. Both elaborate and vernacular, *Crystal Boys* (already translated into several languages) visualizes both a gay space (the New Park) and a gay community. *Crystal Boys*, recognized as a tour de force in contemporary Chinese literature, is one of the earliest Taiwanese gay works. It was preceded by *André Gide's Winter* (1966) and *The Cicadas* (1974), two novellas by Lin Huai-min (currently better known as the founder and choreographer of the prestigious Cloud Gate Dance Theatre.) While Lin focuses on the well-educated gays who are under the sway of American culture, Pai illustrates the lives of underprivileged gay boys who perch on a low rung in the social stratification.

The 1990s have witnessed a rapid growth of gay-themed literature. One of the most acclaimed novels has been *Notes from a Desolate Man*, by Chu Tien-wen (1994), who often writes scripts for the well-known director Hou Hsiao-hsien. *Desolate Man*, which has been already translated into English, is an exquisite postmodern text on mourning and melancholia. This masterful novel presents lonesome middle-aged gay men and AIDS victims. Its concern with the transient pleasure and pang, imbued with a Buddhist touch, can also be found in Wu Chi-wen's *Reader of Fin-de-Siècle Boy Love* (1999) and *The Perplexing Galaxy* (1998). The former is a rewrite of *Precious Mirror of Ranking Flowers*, a classic novel on male same-sex love from the nineteenth century, while

Hsu You-shen, an openly gay writer, had a highly publicized same-sex wedding with his Caucasian partner Gray Harriman in Taipei City in 1996.

Poster for Mickey Chen's successful documentary, *Boys for Beauty*, which depicts today's young gay men in Taiwan.



Mickey Chen

the latter features spectacular sexual transgressions (including male-to-female surgery). Lin Juin-yin's *The Burning Genesis* (1997) and Li Yue-hua's *The Rouge Men* (1995) focus on the solitude among gay men. With the stories in *I Love Chang Eileen* (1992) and *The Stars above the Hills* (1998), Lin Yu-yi displays poignant coming-of-age stories of gay men.

Thanks to the Taiwanese lesbian and gay activism that has emerged in the 1990s, lesbian and gay people are less stigmatized in Taiwan today. Among the activists, Hsu You-sheng is celebrated not only because he is a resourceful writer of various genres (including erotica catering to female readership), but also for having flaunted a public gay wedding with his Caucasian lover. Although gay marriages are not yet legally recognized in Taiwan, Hsu has won blessings widely. His novel *Men Married In and Married Out* (1996) portrays a gay marriage.

The writers born after the late 1960s have contributed markedly to the representation of gay lives. *The Crocodile's Notes* (1994), the novel by Chiu Miao-chin (also known as Qiu Miaojin), who committed suicide when she was only twenty-six, is one of the first lesbian-themed works in contemporary Chinese fiction. The novella depicts lesbian characters in a college, whose lives are paralleled by those of similarly impassioned gay characters. 'Queer', a Western term introduced to Taiwan in the 1990s, is often used by these younger writers. With the collections of short stories *Queer Senses* (1995) and *Membranes* (1996), Chi Ta-wei is known for his 'queer' science fiction that parodies heterosexual normality. *Queer Archipelago* (1997) and *Queer Carnival* (1997), also edited by Chi, showcase Taiwan's localized queer discourses and literary practices, and provide annotated bibliographies. It is apparent that Taiwanese queer writing, both theoretical and creative, is

inspired by queer theory as well as by Western literature (writers such as Jean Genet) and 'queer cinema' (directors such as Derek Jarman). Numerous young writers also diligently circulate their queer writings on the Internet, which has been a major catalyst for the blooming of gay culture in Taiwan in the 1990s. These younger writers usually present less pathos and self-pity among gay men. Instead, their gay characters may be rather confident, if not defiant. *Flesh* (1998), by Sun Tze-ping, for its transnational colours, enjoys popularity among youthful readers.

Gay literature is not officially forbidden or purged by the Taiwanese government. It is, however, challenged by some senior writers. The 1990s witnessed a boom of lesbian and gay writings to a degree unexpected both in terms of quality and quantity. This phenomenon may very well be seen as a return of the repressed, but many senior writers complain instead that the emerging gay literature is just an unwanted fashion. The tension between pro-gay literature writers and those who object to it deserves critical attention. Despite the backlash, production and circulation of lesbian and gay writings has not stopped. Many lesbian and gay works keep winning awards, and writing contests for lesbian and gay literature are held.

In addition to fiction, Taiwanese gay-themed films also deserve attention. Among the best known of them are *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) by Ang Lee (the director of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), which focuses on an interracial gay couple in New York, and Tsai Ming-liang's *The River* (1997), which features a sex scene between father and son. Both stories may sound quite unusual, if not incredible, but they actually accurately represent Taiwanese gay lives. The former scenario is not foreign to the more bourgeois gay men, while the latter scrutinizes the lives of lower-class gay men. What both films share is the fact that they interrogate the father-centred familial system, possibly the greatest obstacle in the lives of Taiwanese gay men. <

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Hsu You-shen

Who's That Girl? Lesbian In/visibility in Japanese Society

Research >
Japan

Two of the most commonly asked questions when I first began my research on contemporary lesbian sexuality in Japan were: 'Are there any?' and 'Where do you find them?' These questions emanated from both Japanese and non-Japanese, from academics and non-academics, from men and women, and surprisingly even from Japanese gay men. The common assumption behind these questions was that, for the overwhelming majority of the population, self-identified lesbians did not exist in Japan, or at the very least they did not identify themselves as such in the public domain. This was the scenario up to the mid-1990s and to a large extent it is still the case today, despite the fact that there is a rich modern history of female same-sex desire to be found in Japanese literature and popular culture dating back to the early 1900s.

By Sharon Chalmers

There has been a consistent discourse around female same-sex attraction in Japan, albeit predominantly in terms of negative or unnatural (*fushizen*) desires. This public discussion began with the establishment of public education for girls in the early 1900s and followed through to condemnation of the independent 'new woman' (*atarashii onna*) in the 1910s. At the same time, with the emergence of sexology discourses there were further outcries as Japanese social critics

denounced the 'masculinization' of Japanese women as represented by the *moga* (modern girl) and the male and female roles (*otokoyaku/musumeyaku*) performed by the all-female Takarazuka theatre troupe throughout the 1920s.

However, during the 1960s and early 1970s, along with massive social, political, and economic changes, a shift occurred that opened up a space for same-sex attracted women to create meeting places outside the privacy of their own homes. These spaces were either in short-lived bars or through meeting circles such as *o-miai*

(arranged meeting) clubs, both of which were primarily based on gendered role-playing. However, there was nothing inevitable or natural about how to behave despite the more commonly held assumptions about what it was to be *tachi* (butch) or *neko* (femme).¹ As one of the women (Fumie) with whom I spoke recounts:

'I was asked for the first time if I was butch or femme. "Dotchi na no?" (Which one?) So I asked: "Do I have to decide?" And the owner of the bar said: "You know, these young people now they don't decide on these things any

more." She complained a bit but didn't force me to say it.'

Gender ambiguity notwithstanding, these spaces did create the beginnings of a new socio-cultural context in which same-sex attracted women could meet each other. And throughout the 1970s more groups began to emerge, such as *Subarashii Onna* (Wonderful Women). At the same time newsletters also began to be produced and distributed through the *mini-komi* network. *Mini-komi* is a system of distributing informal newsletters – by groups that do not have access or choose not to contribute to the mass mainstream media – that have become quite sophisticated and have wide circulation among various subcultures.

Yet despite this increase in groups, images of 'lesbians' (*rezubian*) in mainstream Japanese culture continued to be centred on the pathological female deviant, represented in the guise of the heterosexualized butch/femme (*tachi/neko*) roles. Alternatively, and more

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

These understandings have continued through the 1990s, the association of lesbianism with pornography being widely shared in Japan, amongst heterosexuals and lesbians alike.

Family and freedom

Juxtaposed to the above images is the centrality of being a wife and mother across all social relations. The concept of 'Japanese womanhood' is achieved through the representation of women's activities as concerned solely with 'the Japanese family' through the romanticization and glorification of the ideal of 'motherhood' and the Japanese housewife. This is despite the large increase in married women who work part-time and the significant numbers of women who enter tertiary education. Thus,