

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,

Filtered Voices: Representing Gay People in Today's China

Research >
China

While 'scientific research' on homosexuality has been legitimized, 'artistic creation' concerning homosexuality still remains illegitimate in today's China. In 2001, the Chinese society of psychiatry published *Categories and Diagnostic Standards of Mental Illness in China* (Third Edition), in which homosexuality was no longer considered an illness. Thus, Chinese homosexuals were 'released' from the asylum. The event attracted much attention in the media and in the scholarly community, but homosexuality had become a topic of discussion in China already in the early 1990s. Below I will provide a chronological overview of discourses and debates about homosexuality in scholarship and the media, fiction, and film that have marked, at different levels, Chinese cultural life during the last decade.

By Cui Zi'en

(translated by Chi Ta-wei)

In 1991, the noted sociologist Li Yinhe and her husband Wang Xiaobo, a famous novelist, published *Their World: A Study of the Male Homosexual Community in China*. The first academic work on male homosexuality in contemporary China, *Their World* chiefly explored its sociological and anthropological dimensions. When later the book was revised into *The Homosexual Subculture* (1998), it became a bestseller. Thanks to this significant work, Chinese readers began to adjust their attitudes towards homosexuality and to understand its culture. In 1994, another scholar, Zhang Beichuan, published *Same-Sex Love*. Focusing on sexology and sex education, this book also illustrated the research on homosexuality conducted by international scientists. In 1995, Fang Gang, known for his sensational journalism,

published *Homosexuality in China*, which also became a best-seller. Roughly written, obviously turning the homosexual issue into a commodity, Fang Gang's book was widely accused of sloppiness and voyeurism. Fang Gang himself admitted that his book was 'journalistic literature' and entirely based on hearsay.

The media approaching homosexuals

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

The AIDS crisis has also triggered increased attention to same-sex sexuality. The *AIDS Bulletin*, edited by Wan Yen-hai, a very well-known AIDS activist, began to be circulated in 1994. In 1998, the aforementioned scholar Zhang Beichuan took charge of the *Friends' Bulletin*. Both publications emphasize the perspective of the 'experts' and centre on two topics: homosexual culture and AIDS prevention.

Fiction and film

The first novel on homosexuality from today's China, *Scarlet Lips*, by the Beijing-based writer Cui Zi'en, was published in Hong Kong in 1997, just before Hong Kong was handed over to China. Owing to its manifest homosexual theme, *Scarlet Lips* is still not allowed to circulate in China. Worldson, the Hong Kong publishing house specialized in lesbian and gay literature that published *Scarlet Lips* (and



Cui Zi'en

later other works of fiction by Cui Zi'en), also printed in 1998 the collection of short stories *Good Man Rogo* ('Rogo' used to be an ice-cream brand name), by the Tianjin-based writer Tong Ge.

One of the first films on homosexuality in today's China, *East Palace, West Palace*, written by the above-mentioned writer Wang Xiaobo and directed by Zhang Yuan, won several awards at international film festivals in 1996. *Man Man Woman Woman*, written by Cui Zi'en and directed by Liu Binjian, was a winner at the 1999 Locarno International Film Festival and has been invited to more than fifty international film festivals since then. The first film made by gay people in China, *Man Man Woman Woman* makes a marked effort to avoid positing any dichotomy between homosexual and heterosexual. Also a winner of international awards, *Summer This Year*, written and directed by Li Yu in 2000, is the first film on lesbian life and love in China. The following year, Yin Weiwei made a documentary on lesbianism called *The Box*. Finally, two films shot early this year, *The Old Testaments* and *Enter the Clown*, both written and directed by Cui Zi'en, have already been invited to international film festivals.

From the 1990s to the present, every representation of homosexuality in China has necessitated legitimization by the 'academic cause'. No lesbian- or gay-themed book or magazine, radio or television show, etc., can ever be allowed unless the 'academic cause' is brought in. The academic empire thus becomes a mirror of the political one. Under such circumstances, homosexuals and homosexual culture continue to be systematically objectified and made into 'others'. If homosexuals want to voice their subjectivity, the process must necessarily be filtered by 'experts'; or alternatively, homosexual people have to disguise themselves as the experts. Still now, any representation of homosexuality (in fiction, film, drama, academic research, magazines, websites, and so forth) carried out by openly homosexual people is regularly pushed underground. The only promising exception is the already mentioned special issue of *Modern Civilization Pictorial* early this year, which contained personal stories that homosexuals themselves wrote, and internationally award-winning fiction by homosexual writers – a most rare chance for homosexuals to exhibit their subjectivities. <

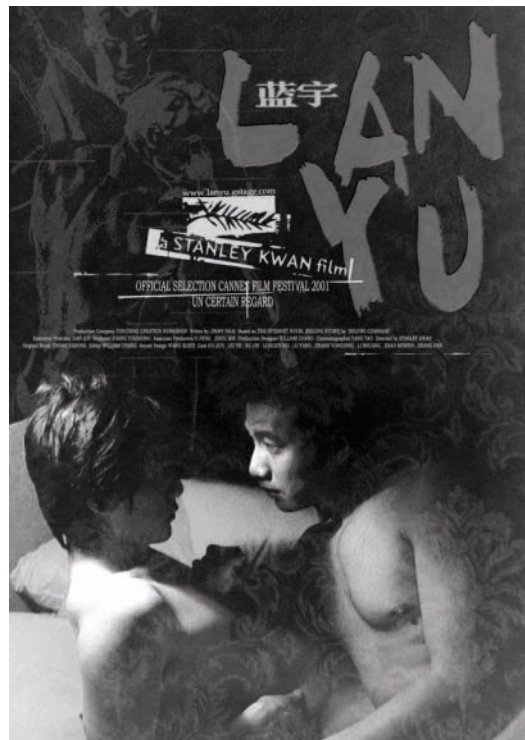
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Official film poster of the Stanley Kwan film *Lan Yu* (Hong Kong, 2001). The film is based on one of the earliest and best-known contemporary Chinese gay novels, 'Story from Beijing', which has been circulating on the Internet since 1996. Using actors from the PRC, the film was shot on location in Beijing, but without previous permission by Chinese officials. After the film had won prestigious international awards, it very soon found its way to the market in the PRC.



This is one of the film posters used in Taiwan (<http://lanyu.gstage.com>).

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

Within this political milieu it is not surprising that lesbian sexuality has remained largely invisible in mainstream Japan. The Japanese 'gay boom' of the early 1990s did increase the visibility of homosexuality, but the ways in which both women and men were represented remained fixed in the category of voyeurism. While there was some increase in the number of lesbian magazines, due to the lack of resources and the lower wages that women earn, the opportunities for lesbians to produce, distribute, and buy lesbian-focused magazines remain extremely limited.

Yet, no story is ever that simple. On the one hand, as discussed above,

throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s there have been growing numbers of lesbian women who have become more visible, albeit generally still within the confines of the various lesbian scenes that exist throughout Japan. As a result, there now exists a variety of communities, tastes, and politics that one can access, including loose networks that offer various forms of support such as meeting spaces, the *mini-komi* newsletters, lesbian week-ends (which have taken place for over 17 years), various bars, lesbian businesses, lesbian mothers' groups, exhibitions, workshops, and the annual Japanese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. On the other hand, despite the emergence of these events, for the vast majority of Japanese self-identified lesbians the risks involved in 'stepping out' are still too great, and this is not necessarily a desired goal. Indeed, what would the benefits of 'coming out' be in a society where 'form' holds precedence over 'tolerance' and where knowing

one's place is socially sanctioned?² In some ways and for the moment anyway, the ability of Japanese lesbians to move in and across identities may allow them more space and free them up from an identity politics that tends to demand to know 'who that girl really is'. <

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Notes >

- 1 'Butch' and 'femme' refer to masculine and feminine women respectively, in lesbian relationships that emphasize gender role-playing.
- 2 For a detailed discussion of the specific conditions under which, in Japan, 'form' takes precedence over 'tolerance', see Sharon Chalmers, *Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan*, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon (2002).