

The Legacy of the Crocodile:

Critical Debates over Taiwanese Lesbian Fiction

Research >
Taiwan

Since the early 1990s Taiwan has witnessed a remarkable explosion of queer cultural production. A spate of gay, lesbian, and transgender-themed films was released, spanning a range of styles from popular to art-house and independent documentary, by directors including Ang Lee, Tsai Ming-liang, Mickey Chen, and Li Xiangru. Graphic artworks appeared deconstructing normative sexuality and gender, by artists including Tung-lu Hung, Mei-hua Lai, and Chun-ming Hou.

By Fran Martin

Gay and lesbian themes emerged in popular music – in veiled form in mainstream pop, but loud and proud in underground queer music cultures; and the decade saw the rise to fame of a new generation of young queer authors, including Chi Ta-wei, Lucifer Hung, Chen Xue, and Qiu Miaojin (Chiu Miao-chin), while a slightly older generation of writers also garnered prestigious literary prizes for gay- and lesbian-themed fiction (Martin, *Angelwings*). Northern Taiwan's media, from daily newspapers to talk-back radio and local free-to-air and cable television, were abuzz with discussion of the new identity that the young generation of queer intellectuals and activists was busy producing: *tongzhi*, meaning literally 'comrade' but now designating a coalitional 'gay-and-lesbian'.

Despite this apparently momentous proliferation of queer cultural production, it must be noted that the audience for much of the new *tongzhi* culture remains limited. In the case of avant-garde queer fiction, film, and graphic arts, the audience is largely restricted to the educated, urban middle class. The fact that such stories, films, and artworks enjoyed prominence in the intellectual circles of northern Taiwan does not translate into any widespread acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals, and much of the media buzz around *tongzhi* culture remains markedly homophobic. Nonetheless, queer cultural production in Taiwan of the 1990s provides an interesting example of the rapid and complex transformations in Asian sexual cultures in the era of cultural globalization.

An interesting feature of Taiwan's emergent queer cultures is their demonstration of a particular temporality, characterized by disjuncture and by the disconcertingly simultaneous availability of multiple, often incommensurable ways of thinking about sexuality (Martin, *Situating Sexualities*). For example, while 'queer' emerged in 1990s Euro-American contexts as a critique of pre-existing lesbian and gay cultures and identity politics, *ku'er* – a transliteration of 'queer' – first appeared in northern Taiwan's intellectual circles in 1994, just two years after the local appropriation of the term *tongzhi*. We see here the near-simultaneous emergence and interesting cohab-

itation of two apparently contradictory discourses: *tongzhi* sexual identity, on the one hand, and *ku'er's* post-structuralist identity critique, on the other (Chi 1997).

Another striking illustration of this point is found in the local critical reception of writing by the late lesbian author Qiu Miaojin (1969–1995). Qiu is best known for her novels *The Crocodile's Journal* (1994) and *Montmartre Testament* (1996), the former winning the China Times Honorary Prize for Literature for Qiu posthumously, following her suicide. Qiu's fiction catalysed a wide range of responses and remains hotly debated among local feminist and *tongzhi*-identified critics. The array of disparate responses to Qiu's work says something interesting not only about the multivalent interpretative possibilities enabled by Qiu's writing itself, but also about the global and local contexts of queer and feminist cultural criticism in Taiwan today.

Thematically, much of Qiu's fiction deals with lesbian subjects, particularly with relationships structured around the dimorphous lesbian genders of *T/po*, comparable but not reducible to the English terms butch/femme*. It is the thematic concern with *T* identity and desire that has catalysed much of the critical controversy. At least three different and contradictory approaches to Qiu's focus on *T* narrators can be discerned. First, particularly since the publication of *The Crocodile's Journal*, Qiu's writing has functioned as a point of identification for her young lesbian readership: metaphorical references to crocodiles and coded usage of the nickname of *The Crocodile's Journal's* protagonist, Lazi, were ubiquitous in mid-to-late 1990s lesbian magazine and Internet subcultures. Second, however, the response to Qiu's fiction in the early-to-mid 1990s by academics, influenced in part by Euro-American lesbian-feminism, was fairly harsh. Some critics worried that Qiu's *T* narrators reproduced oppressive, patriarchal gender relations. These critics sometimes ascribed the psychic anguish of Qiu's narrators to the fact that their author was unacquainted with feminism and the organized *tongzhi* movement, thus censuring Qiu's fiction for perpetuating 'negative images' of lesbians. But third, just a couple of years after this, there emerged a new tendency to discuss Qiu's writing from the perspective of local efforts to recover the histories of Taiwan's *T/po* lesbian cultures which, it was sometimes argued, had been suppressed by the intellectual feminists' critique of their purportedly sexist structure. This third movement, in turn, effected a dialogue with the Euro-American rise of studies of butch/femme and transgender identities in lesbian and gay studies at about the same time.

Qiu's narrators are honoured as subcultural lesbian icons; censured as retrogressive, anti-feminist masculinists; and recuperated as representatives of a queer and subversive form of lesbian gender – all at almost exactly the same moment. In one sense this suggests the simultaneous co-presence of forms of feminist and queer thought, which, in their Euro-American instances, emerged over a far more protracted time period. Yet this need not imply a kind of 'time lag' model in which the current debates in Taiwan merely reproduce the 'sex wars' in Euro-American feminism and lesbian and gay studies that began in the 1980s. In the distinct cultural and historical context of contemporary Taiwan, the debates over feminism and lesbian gender that Qiu's writing catalyses undeniably take on local and hybrid forms that cannot be predicted in any straightforward way by reference to the globalizing intellectual currents on which they draw. My point here is not to adjudicate between the competing views about the significance of Qiu's fiction – though if nothing else, the complexity of these debates implies that Qiu's writing will certainly be a richly productive object of study. Rather, I take Qiu's critical reception as a particular instance of the general phenomenon of what I have called the temporality of disjunctive simultaneity in Taiwan's queer cultures – and to venture the suggestion that this temporality may also structure how social, cultural, and intellectual movements (including feminist and queer ones, but also others) travel transnationally to take unpredictable local effect in the era of cultural globalization more broadly. <

References

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- * 'Butch' and 'femme' refer to masculine and feminine women respectively, in lesbian relationships that emphasize gender role-playing.