Abstract
This article deals with the formation of Taiwan’s homosexual cultural politics in the 1990s, the impact and implications of which are yet to be examined within the larger context of Taiwan’s cultural and political development and ethnic relationships. It is argued that the rise of this cultural politics is both a reflection and a source of a growing sense of identity crisis on the island. By examining the configurations of “queer” in various discursive domains, this interdisciplinary study seeks to delineate the cross-referencing ideological network of this cultural movement and its entanglement with the complexity of Taiwan’s nationalism. At the same time, to the extent that this movement tends to present itself as a radical politics from a privileged epistemological and cultural standpoint, this claimed radicalism is also scrutinized for its problematics and ironies.

Keywords
queer, ku’er, tongzhi, nationalism, pseudo-Taiwanese, post-nation

One often comes across a certain perspective (usually from China’s political analysts) that tends to oversimplify the tension of ethnic relations in Taiwan as an issue “provoked” or “created” by Taiwanese politicians as a ploy to attract votes. Such a viewpoint not only underestimates Taiwanese citizens’ capacities
for political judgment, it also shows a profound lack of understanding of
Taiwanese society. For cultural clash is, indeed, an integral part of Taiwan’s
multi-layered cultural, ethnic, and political experiences, growing out of a long
and complex history of external and internal colonization. This social fact of
conflict can neither be denied nor easily dismissed with a clarion call for “social
harmony,” a high-flung cliché most frequently used by totalitarian states in
regulating public opinion. The intensification of conflict in recent years, albeit
signifying a serious crisis, nonetheless bears the imprint of the inevitable pro-
cess of the island’s democratization. For better or worse, it has engendered a
highly polymorphous society that is heavily contested by different voices con-
stantly competing for cultural representations. And the island surely is not short
of oppositional voices that avail themselves of a marginal status by which to
articulate themselves in terms and relations other than “the national.”

This article deals with the formation of one such collective contestation,
the impact and implications of which have yet to be examined within the
larger context of Taiwan’s cultural and political development as well as its
complex ethnic relationships. One cannot fail to notice that a tide of homo-
sexual visibility is sweeping the island, and since its emergence in the early
1990s it has rapidly become one of the most energetic and influential forces
of cultural intervention. On the most obvious level, it is an example of the
return of the repressed, which, together with various previously neglected or
marginalized forces, have surfaced after the collapse of a totalitarian regime.
However, it must be pointed out that other minority politics that have also
emerged in the last two decades or so (among them the hard-fought struggle
of the aboriginal people) have not reached the kind of success and publicity
that homosexual identity politics has enjoyed in its relatively short years of
development. This suggests that what we are dealing with here is not just a
specific interest group’s demand for legitimacy, but more important, the extent
and ways that homosexual knowledge is produced, circulated, and received
in the public sphere. As this article will show, Taiwan’s homosexual identity
politics is most active in print culture (although it is not limited to it), partly
because, among other reasons, it was not born in the street, unlike gay move-
ments in some other parts of the world. Thus the cultural representation of
homosexuality in Taiwan, as a form of resistance, is mostly mobilized as
discursive practices through a highly institutionalized network. The univer-
sity is a main site for the production of homosexual discourses.¹

To a large extent, then, the new surge of same-sex sensibility in Taiwan’s
public sphere has occurred in the academic context of a changing paradigm
of cultural theory and practice resulting from the global circulation of ideas.
Given the fact that Taiwan’s sexual discourses are heavily indebted to American
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queer theory, one could easily read it as another instance of Western cultural colonization, or on the other hand, one could, as seen in some recent studies of Taiwan’s homosexual subculture (Tan, 1998; Sang, 2003; Martin, 2003a), take the Taiwanese example as indicative of the limits of the Western model of sexual knowledge so as to constitute a very diversified global picture of homosexual identities.

However, what interests me most here is not the rich multiplicity of homosexual expressions in various cultures but rather the role that homosexuality, as an ideological sign, plays in the process of cultural production, and in particular, its conscious deployment of “difference” in forming a post-identity politics. A very important fact to be recognized is that the mobilization of sexual knowledge in Taiwan’s public sphere is a cultural activity strongly tied to local politics. I am especially interested in how the cultural production of homosexuality in Taiwan has facilitated an “imagined community” at a specific historical juncture that has witnessed a significant shift in the island’s political power and cultural positioning on the one hand and the emergence of a new globalized cultural vocabulary called “queer” on the other.

This article aims to bring to light the underlying political logic of this highly visible cultural movement and to assess its importance. At the same time, to the extent that this movement tends to present itself as a radical politics from a privileged epistemological and cultural standpoint, this article will also call it into question. For if we view it simply as a progressive politics of liberation, we lose sight of the complexity of the discursive conditions under which its rhetoric of liberation is constructed and delivered. What I would emphasize is that this cultural movement is not only contingent on the changing social processes in a particular time frame but also shaped and developed through a system of power operating within itself.

My aim is to put the movement into perspective by opening up complications that I find often obscured in the familiar discursive tendency in Western scholarship to privilege oppositional narratives as anti-hegemonic discourses when dealing with a non-Western context. Nationalism in particular is often taken as a necessary evil, and, as Partha Chatterjee (1993: 4) aptly puts it, “[l]ike drugs, terrorism, and illegal immigration, it is one more product of the Third World that the West dislikes but is powerless to prohibit.” Accordingly, counter-national forms of imagination are often interpreted and idealized in a simplistic oppression/emancipation or center/periphery dialectic. This article is not intended to defend nationalism but to demonstrate from the case of Taiwan that there are much more complex dynamics at play here. Precisely because Taiwan’s queer activism has evolved not in an isolated context of sexual-minority experience but in a multidimensional context of political and
What follows is a critical analysis of various interconnected configurations of “queer” in different discursive domains in 1990s Taiwan. I do not attempt to give a comprehensive picture of Taiwan’s queer discourses but to identify and characterize an intellectual movement that relies heavily on the appropriation of the figure of homosexuality to promulgate a cultural politics of resistance. The first section looks at the development of the translations of the imported term queer and examines how and why the term has become a meaning-loaded keyword in this strain of counter-nationalist dissident culture. The second section investigates the ways by which the notion of queer provides a theoretical groundwork for a selected body of academic and creative work. I will concentrate in this section on the fad of reinterpreting Bai Xianyong’s Crystal Boys (Niezi), reputed to be Taiwan’s first gay novel, and explore the social and political significance of this phenomenon. The phenomenon is an important one to study not simply because it represents a re-conceptualization of homosexuality but because it illuminates most effectively a series of linked issues that are at the center of contemporary Taiwan’s critical debates: ethnicity, historical and spatial memory, and cultural identity. This section will also address the related questions of the institutionalization and consumption of cultural knowledge, drawing on a “queer” novel by Zhu Tianwen, Notes of a Desolate Man (Huangren shouji). I conclude with thoughts on the general direction that this rapidly expanding cultural intervention has taken in Taiwan and on its consequences, hoping to yield some new possibilities for a re-narration of this cultural critique.

Naming “Queer”

Upgrading Comrades

In January 1994, Isle Margin (Daoyu bianyuan), a journal launched in 1991 with the intention of becoming “Taiwan’s most avant-garde, most pungent, most radical, most extreme, most controversial, and most marginal cultural and political magazine,” published a special issue on “queer” under the title: ku’er (酷兒). Ku’er, while a phonetic transliteration of “queer,” is also a semantic approximation of “queer” into Taiwan’s cultural context. Ku and er mean “cool” (a term widely used in Taiwan’s youth culture since the 1980s) and “child,” respectively; together they may be best rendered as “cool babe.”
As such, these “cool babes” made every effort to present queerness as youthful, capricious, crazy, and fearlessly provocative, enacting the “make trouble and have fun” (Bérubé and Escoffier, 1991: 15) queer watchwords in a local fashion. Their manifesto reads,

To us marginal queer . . . constructing a myth of subjectivity is not a goal. But rather, we wish to dismantle, play mischievously, have fun, and open up the chastity belt of the prim and proper. We peek, masturbate, worship ourselves, and let ourselves go as far as our fancy takes us. (Daoyu bianyuan 10, Jan. 1994: 5)

Such emphasis on the fun side of queerness, while re-circulating the playfulness that queer politics always encourages, may give the impression that the Taiwanese young queers have—intentionally or naïvely—lightened the implication of threat or harm embedded in the English term queer. In this regard, another translation of “queer” as guaitai (怪胎, literally “monster/abnormal fetus” or “freak”), which appeared a few months after ku’er, may capture more closely the queer spirit of intermixed self-mockery and self-assertion, but it has not taken hold in Taiwan the way ku’er has. Ji Dawei, in his edited Queer Archipelago (Ku’er qishilu), acknowledges the semantic limitation of ku’er but adds,

Although a brainchild inspired by queer, ku’er in flesh and blood was a product formed in Taiwan. In other words, it is a “bastard” of cultural intercourse. It is not necessary—nor is it possible—for this bastard to be completely faithful to the “original queer.” . . . Ku’er is a new species of mixed blood. (Ji, 1997: 10-11)

This justification for the “unfaithful” rendering of the Western original foregrounds tensions of local/global identities while the stress on a trendy postcolonial signifier—hybridity—attempts to create additional symbolic capital. That a word should matter so much is a clear indication of the competition over identity and naming. Therefore ku’er was distinguished from tongzhi (comrade) and guaitai: “Tongzhi advocates identity formation while ku’er calls it into question. . . . Guaitai expresses the caprice of queerness but lacks its provocative quality” (Ji, 1997: 12, 56). Indeed, it is this “provocative quality” of queerness, taken to be “the discontent with any existing order” (Ji, 1997: 14), “new” in style and ideology, that has been highlighted in Taiwan’s queer/ku’er activism. Queer, envisioned as deconstruction par excellence as it renders subjectivities infinitely and permanently indeterminate and ambiguous, was
recoded and forcefully represented by Taiwanese cultural critics as the ultimate signifier of the absolute Other, a non-mainstream vanguard position—assumed by the unbridled with postmodern cool.

_Isle Margin_ has played a crucial role in the construction of the political language of the Taiwanese queer/ku’er culture. It has reflected significantly, on the one hand, the queer “performative politics” operated through parody and transgression (Hennessy, 1995: 159-60), and on the other, the unique climate of theatricality in Taiwan’s political and cultural arenas in a competitive mood for visibility and postmodern expressions. _Isle Margin_ also serves as the best example of how seemingly different issues can be easily crossed in Taiwan. In July 1993, it published a special issue called “Pseudo-Taiwanese” (*Jia Taiwanren*) where one sees an interesting fusion of sexual and political imaginaries. Queerness becomes a cutting-edge anti-national metaphor and is appropriated for the deconstruction not of gender, but rather the notion of “Taiwaneseness.”

The theme of this issue is best represented in the feature article bearing the same title, “Pseudo-Taiwanese,” authored by “Taiwanese” (*Taiwanren*). The article critiques the essentialism of two mainstream national discourses regarding the “Taiwanese” as a people, namely, the older origin-centered ethnic fundamentalism and the newer, inclusive, and seemingly non-essentialist “New Taiwan” discourse. The article takes the latter in particular as the main target of criticism and denounces its rhetoric of “four major ethnic groups” (*si da zuqun*) and “community with a shared destiny” (*mingyun gongtongti*). Informed by poststructuralist and queer theoretical perspectives, the article elaborates on the meanings of “pseudo” (*jia*) as counterfeit/impure (*weizhuang/ bu chunzhen*), simulation (*moni*), and parody (*xieni*), so as to reveal the homogenized rhetoric of Taiwanese nationalism as arbitrary and fictional as well as to defy assimilation by setting forth an outcast community as “the fifth ethnic group,” a fake copy of the “authentic Taiwanese.”

Sexual deviation—made indistinguishable from a diasporic identity here—is configured as this cultural and political “difference.” Five samples of “Taiwanese human dregs” are presented as the “pseudo-Taiwanese”: a global traveling stripper, a pimp, a diasporic young female Taiwanese, a woman’s-underwear thief, and a gay who was reported as saying, “My sexual habits are different from most Taiwanese; I like anal sex first and then oral. . . . As long as I’m making love, I feel that I’m a happy Taiwanese” (*Daoyubianyuan* 8, July 1993: 42, trans. in Chang and McArthur, 1996: 155). The style of the article is a deliberate mixture of academicism and obscenity, fully demonstrated in its conclusion:
Therefore, pseudo-Taiwanese have no subjectivity and no essence; they can neither form a center nor can they be represented or re-presented. This is an ethnic group without an ethnic history or tradition; it is a (post)modern ethnic group formed from mixing broken, fragmented, chaotic symbols and experiences.

What are you? Are you a Taiwanese mainlander? A Taiwanese Hakka or an indigenous Taiwanese? A Taiwan Fujianese? Why put yourself down, why not come with us and be a pseudo-Taiwanese?

We’re having anal sex, dancing, crapping or pissing anywhere, farting, causing trouble, embezzling, screwing around, procrastinating, writing graffiti, heckling, dressing up, getting hot, pimping, fornicating, enjoying sex, and getting off. (What about you?) We are all pseudo-Taiwanese. (Daoyu bianyuan 8, July 1993: 45, trans. in Chang and McArthur, 1996: 159)

By means of “bad copies” of the “real thing,” this parodic practice demonstrates that there is after all no such thing as “authentic” since what is taken as authentic is nothing but codes and signifying systems, thereby revealing the constructed nature of identities. At the same time, through a foregrounding of these “bad copies” or “aliens” who are ill-fitted to the social collective of “proper” citizen subjects, it raises an important question about the imagination of membership in a nation-state. Most significantly, it draws attention to the privileging of discourses of national identity in Taiwan, criticized here as having overridden other important social issues—such as gender and class. It speaks for differences and argues for plurality and irreducibility.

A conspicuous feature of this article (also shared by more examples examined below) is that the author envisions himself as a grassroots activist who is very consciously oppositional and militant. He speaks on behalf of the subaltern, and even poses himself as one, while enunciating in an internalized language of Western high theory blended with a rhetoric of obscenity—the author’s imaginary “subaltern/grassroots” language. Obscenity here, of course, is a political gesture—à la Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque—that, through the topographical connotations of the lower stratum of the body, functions as a tactic of intervention to invert and violate the solemnity of the official doctrines, in this case the state language of Taiwan nationalism. It is self-empowering by being blatantly indecent and confrontational. As such, the subalterns are embraced in the queer sense of “deviants” and “perverts,” and thereby exalted as the “postmodern” models of radical transgression. The representation of the low and the excluded is such that it conveys a strong
impression of a manufactured queerness and “cool.” The socially marginalized are imposed upon with a highly charged political rhetoric infused with a deconstructionist consciousness in a club-like, self-celebratory fashion, and are taken very much for granted as anti-statist. The “we” versus “you” polarized positioning flaunts a superior subjectivity in the tone of the masterful and the knowing: we the pseudo-Taiwanese are an enlightened, “pretty-damn-happy,” liberated, postmodern bunch, while the rest of you Taiwanese don’t even know what’s out there.

Such discourse, framed in binary terms, could easily lead us to ask: who exactly are the ethnic others it is referring to? The subalterns representing the so-called “pseudo-Taiwanese”—lumped together as an undifferentiated whole here—are treated more as a rhetorical figure, the stand-in for a counter-national narrative, than as concrete social subjects deserving of serious consideration. Of course, this may be defensible in terms of discursive strategy, but it can only lead to more questions. The article repeatedly describes the “authentic Taiwanese” as the “capitalist, male, heterosexual, Minnan” community, and it is interesting to note in this regard that this special issue was originally to be called “The Mainlanders’ Issue” (Waishengren zhuanji) (Editorial, Daoyu bianyuan 8, July 1993: 2). Indeed, one is tempted to think that, for all the deconstructive tactics of de-essentializing ethnic identity, the bottom-line issue here is ethnic after all, and the construction of the culturally sophisticated postmodern “pseudo-Taiwanese” is perhaps simply an oblique way of referring to the island’s mainlander population, if not mainlander academics—in the name of the disenfranchised. It is not surprising that Fu Dawei, himself a waishengren academic, should say that many of his fellow scholars of mainlander origin are still culturally/ideologically trapped in the time-honored waisheng/bensheng ethnic divide, constructed by the GMD government in the 1940s, with the result that their counter-national discourses tend to oversimplify not only the complexity of Taiwan’s multi-ethnic situation but also the related issues of class and gender. Worse still, they are often articulated in a manner “no less patriarchal” than the target of their criticism (Fu, 1993).

Fu’s observation spotlights the core problem of this oppositional discourse and also helps explain why so many writings in Isle Margin are strikingly similar in their rhetoric. Take, for example, another lead article, “The Necessity of Coming Out/Committing Adultery” (Chugui/gui zhi biyao) in the issue following the “Pseudo-Taiwanese” edition, entitled “Women’s National/Familial Identification” (Nüren guo/jia rentong). Here, hetero/homo and male/female binaries, loosely mapped onto each other, again serve as a master framework for constructing an anti-nationalist narrative. The nation-state, together with capitalism, are viewed symbolically as the public
space of the masculine and the heterosexual while the oppositional are constituted as both the feminine and the homosexual. This by now very familiar gendered practice of body politics has been well rehearsed in feminist and postcolonial studies. With an added queer edge, the article performs a discursive violence on the Symbolic by playing with obscene language as well as with the two phonetically similar expressions, “chugui” (出櫃, coming out of the closet) and “chugui” (出軌, derailed/adulterous), to imagine a life of anti-order and illegitimacy beyond national boundaries. This time, the implied “pseudo-Taiwanese” are represented by a cohort of gays/lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, workers, prostitutes, and the “female dregs” (echoing the “human dregs” in the “Pseudo-Taiwanese” article), namely, female perverts, criminals, and women who are “too promiscuous and lecherous,” taken all together as the ensemble of the “social excess,” and therefore a naturally allied anti-statist subversive force. Clearly, proliferation of sexualities is constructed here as an alternative cultural imagery to the prevalent nationalist sentiment, often promulgated in catch phrases like “Taiwan consciousness” and “Love Taiwan.” Hence a key statement in the article reads: “Our love and sexual desires are never focused. Aside from gender, our partners are never fixed. Age, identity, class, appearance, nationality, we couldn’t care less. Climbing over the fence/wire of home/nation is our expertise” (Daoyu bianyuan 9, Oct. 1993: 6). As often seen in such cultural politics, sexuality is naturalized as instability, flux, mutability, heterogeneity, and a means of crossing national, racial, and class lines and thus countering the fixity and order that the nation-state represents.

The article then concludes: “I come out, I make love, therefore I am” (Daoyu bianyuan 9, Oct. 1993: 6). The high-flown cry is obviously modeled after the American queer movement slogan “I Am Out, Therefore I Am,” an extension of the post–Black Power slogan in the first-person performative, “I’m Black and I’m Proud” (Berlant and Freeman, 1992: 161, 156). When transposed to a different social context, the imported slogan acquires an even greater hyper-rhetorical quality. Moreover, a slogan originally worn on tee shirts and written on banners in street demonstrations (Berlant and Freeman, 1992: 161) risks the loss of its meaning once it is transformed, albeit with the best humanist intention, into a playful discursive performance in another context. For in the process of othering, sex, gender, class, and desire are violently condensed into ideological icons, to the extent that they become not only more of form than of content but also indistinguishable, thus interchangeable, cut off from historicity and the social struggles through which identities are produced.
Queer Post-Nation

Dogmatic as it might seem, this approach is frequently adopted by some of Taiwan’s most vocal cultural critics. Chen Kuan-hsing (Chen Guangxing), revered as a “guru of postcolonialism” (Editorial, Daoyu bianyuan 14, Sept. 1995: 3) by his fellow anti-nationalists, is particularly drawn to this combative style in his well-known project of “post-nation,” or “broken nation” (po guozu) as he calls it in a play on the Chinese phonetic equivalent of “post.” At first glance, Chen may seem out of place in my discussion since he has not involved himself directly in the debates over sexuality and gender. But that is exactly the point here—the paradox that one does not even have to touch on the topic of homosexuality in order to perform a seemingly queer politics. We are witnessing a mix-and-match label game in which a hodgepodge of a wide variety of identity categories is hand-picked, assembled, and tuned to political use.

In almost all of Chen’s writings, the nation-state is a taken-for-granted internal colonizer and imperialist complicit with global capitalism, and to contest nationalism, he advocates a “New Internationalist Localism” (Xin guoji zaidi zhuyi) and “People’s Democratic New Internationalist Localism” (Renmin minzhu xin guoji zaidi zhuyi) (Chen Kuan-hsing, 1991, 1993, 1994a). “Internationalist” and “people,” in Chen’s formulation, are clearly overlapping, if not interchangeable, both signifying a global, anti-statist coalition of the oppressed. Thus “people” in Chen’s usage does not refer to “all” but exclusively to his select category of the disenfranchised, namely, “women, the aborigines, gays/lesbians, and workers,” who are Chen’s symbols of the periphery and therefore his agents of “decolonization” (1994c: 209-10). He then designates these four groups as Taiwan’s unofficial “four major ethnic groups” (1995).10

Chen’s queering attempt, however, is haunted by the same ethnocentric political logic as the “Pseudo-Taiwanese” article. Clearly, throughout his writings, he sees the perpetrator of Taiwanese nationalism as none other than the politicians and intellectuals of one specific ethnic background—the Minnan—and he does not shy away from name-calling. Chen’s favorite list of the perennial “bad guys” includes Li Denghui, Li Yuanzhe (the 1986 Nobel laureate in chemistry and 1994-2006 president of the Academia Sinica), and Yang Zhao (cultural critic, poet, and novelist), all of whom represent, for Chen, the “Han, Hokklo, capitalist, heterosexual, and male”-based state apparatus (1994b; 1994c: 166-68, 182-96, 201-03). Together they are treated as one ethnic collective, the chief engineers responsible for building the evil empire of Taiwan.
Even if we put questions of Chen’s preoccupation with ethnicity aside, this equation of nationalism with the state apparatus is problematic, as has been pointed out by others. Ien Ang and Jon Stratton describe Chen’s approach as “not only theoretically reductionist and politically essentialist, but also historically inappropriate”:

In our view, a cultural studies sensitive to the specificity of the local cannot presume a necessary correspondence between nationalism and the nation-state on the one hand and “oppressive” politics on the other. What it needs to analyse and critique is the politics of particular nationalisms and the complex power relation operative within (and between) particular nation-states, not to argue from a formal, a priori condemnation of nationalism and the nation-state per se. A cultural studies based on the latter, furthermore, would deprive itself of the capability to understand some of the most salient social movements in the contemporary world, for many of whom nationalist discourses remain important (if ambiguous) resources and the nation-state, for better or worse, provides a significant framework for their very existence and field of operation. (1996: 72)

Placed in a larger context, Chen’s oppositional discourse can be seen as an extreme version of an ideological shift in the imagining of the nation, symptomatic of many cultural critiques today. Nationalism, as Partha Chatterjee (1993: 3–4) observes, was still regarded not long ago as “a feature of the victorious anti-colonial struggles in Asia and Africa,” but “as the new institutional practices of economy and polity in the postcolonial states were disciplined and normalized under the conceptual rubrics of ‘development’ and ‘modernization,’” it has now been already “relegated to the domain of the particular histories of this or that colonial empire” and “viewed as a dark, elemental, unpredictable force of primordial nature threatening the orderly calm of civilized life.” Thus “the emancipatory aspects of nationalism were undermined” by a cynicism and historical amnesia.

In the case of Taiwan, the half-century of Japanese rule (1895-1945) and the ensuing four decades of GMD authoritarian governance have resulted in a heightening sense of urgency to reclaim disappearing local languages and cultural memories. Rapid socio-political changes have brought about a significant rethinking of the meaning of “Taiwan” as a cultural home. With the dismantling of the old ruling class, what was long regarded as Taiwan’s official “Culture” has become merely one “culture” among many. The tables have turned. However, the struggle for the legitimization of previously suppressed cultures has also triggered a strong sense of identity crisis in some social segments (particularly
Distrust of the rise of Minnan identity and culture has made opponents like Chen resort to absolutist ideological polemics that denounce the Taiwanese attempt at nation rebuilding by holding tight to the presupposition that any claim of national identity is imperialistic. What we see here is an anxiety over the loss of a home/nation lying deep in the psychic makeup of this oppositional discourse, a discourse presented as a high-minded call for a cosmopolitan post-nationality.

“Queer,” in this context, becomes a surrogate home, a privileged site that enables the discontented to accumulate cultural capital by occupying the high ground of avant-garde theory as globalized intellectuals so as to transcend the provincialism of the domestic culture altogether. Therefore, this reconstruction of an imagined lost home/nation relies heavily not only on neologisms but also on bilingual reworking of certain keywords. The editorial in Isle Margin’s “Pornographic Nation” (Seqing guozu) issue best illustrates this point:

Are you disgusted with straights?
Let’s all be queers/the wicked/the oblique.

Queers/Queer Nationals yearn for a Pornographic United Nation.

Queers are “Pseudo-Taiwanese/Alter-native Taiwanese.”

Every social movement should be a Queer movement.

The question of nation is closely related to the “coming out of queers.” In our country, queers are everywhere. Our nation ought to be a Queer Nation—women’s, ku’ers’, workers’, aborigines’, and the disabled’s nation. Without us queers, there won’t be any community with a shared destiny. This nation is ours, the queers’. (Daoyu bianyuan 14, Sept. 1995: 3; italicized English in original)

“Queer” here, in addition to ku’er, acquires two more Chinese renditions: xie (邪) and xie (斜)—two different words with same pronunciation, the first meaning “wicked” and the second “oblique.” Moreover, “queer” is now finally synonymous with the “pseudo-Taiwanese” in a seemingly all inclusive yet obviously exclusive sort of self-representation. Armed with all these permutable imaginaries, constellating around the notion of perversity and non-normality, one on top of the other, queer is sanctified as an emblem of absolute difference, a “we against them all” pure entity, unavailable and unintelligible to mundane outsiders, who are taken as the aggregation of the nationalists/colonizers/oppressors. Reacting against the national project of reconstructing historical memory, this queer discourse goes to the other end of the spectrum by replacing history and local specificity with what Aijaz Ahmad has called “the hyper-reality of an eternal and globalized present” which is “both opaque and wholly self-referential” (1995: 17).
The invocation of Queer Nation thus comes across as a fantasized encounter with an imagined cultural Other rather than a mobilization of an “international alliance of the disenfranchised,” as promulgated by the post-national activists. Whereas the American Queer Nation, as a resistant force, “was forged on the outside” because “gaining power was out of the question” (Tan, 1998: 243), there has been an ample space for sexual/cultural politics in Taiwan, which may be unimaginable in the presumably more liberal United States. ¹² Unlike the American queer activists, for whom personal safety remains very much a real issue, the academically anchored self-professed Taiwanese queers not only have enjoyed an articulatory position that can have it both ways—radical and safe—but also have often acquired a celebrity status in the public sphere that may be enviable to their American fellow scholars who, despite the enormous success and popularity of queer theory in the academy, still face, as Lisa Duggan laments, the possibility of “perilous and paralyzing assaults” and difficulty in defending their teaching and scholarship “the moment we step outside our classrooms, books, journals, and conferences” (1994: 3, 5). This is because academics in Taiwan have always received more respect and higher expectation from the public than their American counterparts. The close relation between the world of letters and the cultural media in Taiwan also makes it easier for an academic to be a public intellectual.

When re-contextualized in Taiwan, then, “queer,” as a conceptual category in identity politics, has become a useful means for a specific group of educational elites to consolidate cultural authority and power. And this power struggle with the presumed government-dominating cultural force, staged as periphery against center, is not without irony in that a good number of cultural studies projects, particularly those dealing with the seemingly radical counter-national subjects of sexuality and gender, have been facilitated by government funding.¹³ The proliferation of centers for cultural studies and gender studies at national universities as well as of well-funded conferences, workshops, individual research projects, and publications that are engaged in “new” and “politically incorrect” areas in this regard attests to the ambiguous relationship between the so-called “center/mainstream” and “periphery/margin,” or for that matter, the “straight” and “queer” in Taiwan.

**A “Bad” Copy of Nation: Imagining a Homosexual Taipei**

Queer Nation, as an imaginary construct, circulates widely in Taiwan’s counter-national discourses of identity politics. It aims to conjure up a sense of alternative community with a common cause in the image of an underground
nation that appears, in a gesture of subversion, to be a fake/bad/perverse version of the “authentic” one. As we have seen, this oppositional movement has given rise to a new stratum of intellectuals who have made queerness a cultural and ideological weapon against nationalism. Whereas the examples given above are mostly in the form of manifestos and declarations, this section looks at how questions about identity and difference are explored in a largely literary context. Due in part to the difference in discursive mode and site of publication, the cultural intellectuals discussed in this section engage in a seemingly more sophisticated manner with the conceptualization of Queer Nation while sharing similar thematic concerns with the previous cases. A network of intertextual relationships is thus discernible, one which is meshed into a grand narrative. This section investigates further the complex relationship between this oppositional discourse and nationalism, in particular, the significant role that the city of Taipei plays as a geopolitical space of ideological contestation.

**Queer Canon Formation: Cross-Dressing Crystal Boys**

In the field of literary criticism, the deployment of “queer” to identify one’s approach has become very popular in Taiwan’s academy. Efforts to search out queer texts have brought about the canonization of literary works with homosexual themes. The 1990s fad of rereading Bai Xianyong’s *Niezi* (literally, unfilial/shameful/cursed son, best known as *Crystal Boys* in English, following Howard Goldblatt’s translation) is symptomatic of this search for a canonical figure of homosexuality and the practice of literary analysis as a form of cultural critique.

Since its publication in 1983 in book form (first published in serial form in *Modern Literature* [Xiandai wenxue] from 1977 to 1978), *Crystal Boys* has been popular among gay readers, enjoying a cult status in the tongzhi subculture. But its reception in the literary establishment in the last thirty years has been a tortuous one. Bai was a canonized writer of Taiwan’s literary modernism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, best known for his *Taibeiren* (*Taipei People*), a collection of short stories depicting a community of émigré mainlanders who moved to Taiwan after the GMD’s defeat in the civil war but who mentally and emotionally never actually left the mainland. After that, Bai’s canonical aura dimmed under the impact of the extremely influential *xiangtu wenxue* (native literature) movement in the late 1970s. The “obsession with China” theme—to use C. T. Hsia’s celebrated phrase (1971: 563)—pervasive in Bai’s oeuvre, seemed to be out of tune with the rapidly changing social climate at the time.
Crystal Boys came quietly into the literary scene at a historical juncture when Taiwan was undergoing a series of social and political events that eventually led to the island’s dramatic transformation on various levels, and when the literary climate was becoming increasingly polymorphous. Crystal Boys did receive some serious attention from a few literary critics who approached it, understandably, from a formalistic/humanistic perspective, still not unfashionable in the 1980s and one to which Bai himself was strongly attached. Also understandably, the novel’s homosexual theme was not a major concern for the literary critics in the 1980s as homosexuality then was not quite a “subject” yet, certainly not a hot topic in the public sphere as it is now.

It is worth noting that at the time when Bai’s literary fame in Taiwan was in decline, he was discovered by literary critics on the other side of the strait and highly regarded not only for his literary achievement, but more important, for his “obsession with China,” taken as hard proof of the Taiwanese people’s nostalgia for their motherland China—a discourse frequently seen in Chinese critics’ study of Taiwanese literature, articulated in line with the PRC’s political language of unification. Partly incited by the re-canonization of Bai in China, but mostly inspired by queer theory, a new generation of Taiwanese literary critics rediscovered Bai in the 1990s, particularly his Crystal Boys, which has been refashioned into a queer text through which Bai is reclaimed as a Taiwanese writer but—and this is important to my discussion here—a Taiwanese writer with a “difference.”

Crystal Boys tells the story of A Qing, the adolescent hero, who is driven from home by his father after being caught in a sexual act with a male counterpart at school. He drifts into the life of the underground world in Taipei’s New Park (Xin gongyuan), where he finds friendship among his kind. The park, as a cruising ground for young gay hustlers and their clients and patrons, is enlivened by a communal atmosphere and the nightly nostalgic storytelling about a tragic love affair between two of their members. After the park is put under night curfew (as all public places in Taiwan were in the martial law era from 1947 to 1987), the community moves its activities to a bar run by an older member, but that, too, eventually closes. The story ends with the coming of a new generation of young gays. After an emotional catharsis, A Qing warmly receives a homeless lad as he himself was once received by his gay friends.

Whereas the readings of the novel in the 1980s focus mostly on A Qing’s relationship with his father, the re-readings in the 1990s are more interested in the gay community that congregates every evening in New Park. A Qing is thus viewed as a sexual citizen in the underground world of homosexuality rather than as a homeless son. One of the first queer readings of Crystal Boys, an article by Ye Dexuan (1995), is an instructive example of this new critical
interest in investing homosexual texts with a cultural politics. Following Eve Sedgwick’s (1990) call for an epistemological shift from viewing homosexuality as a matter of individual subjectivity to viewing it as a category of knowledge, Ye explains how the previous critics’ “ignorance” of homosexuality is produced by “knowledge” circulated as a regime of truth in the homophobic mainstream cultural establishment, which leads to the sanctification of a familialism that is phallocentric and heterosexist in nature.14 Ye challenges the bourgeois ideologies of familial structure and reproductive sexuality, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-Oedipal theoretical theme that defines man as constituted by “desiring machines” rather than by family institutions ([1972] 1983), as well as on Guy Hocquenghem’s metaphorical reading of the un-reproductive anus as an alternative mode of social relation ([1972] 1993).

It is this emphasis on the relationship of sexual identity to the patriarchal structure of family that made Ye’s reading particularly relevant at the time. It touches on the question of filial piety, the core value of Chinese societies, and hence opened the way to using Crystal Boys to construct an anti-institutional critique on a cultural and ideological level. Later discussions of Crystal Boys’ homosexual subject have all more or less continued Ye’s line of argument. Zhang Xiaohong’s reading (1998), for example, echoes Ye’s, while attempting to highlight the institutional connection between family and state and thus to situate Crystal Boys’ homosexual theme in the larger context of nationalism. For her thematic purpose, Zhang puts heavy emphasis on the “phallus vs. anus” antithesis and its hierarchic structure, polarizing two relationships in the novel, one centering around the “phallic father,” the father of symbolic order, and therefore a legitimate relationship ensuring the succession of generations, and the other centering around the “anal father,” or “father of enjoyment,” and therefore a purely sexual relationship that threatens familial reproduction and continuity. It is important to note that Zhang also deliberately treats these two relationships as two sides of the same coin, maintaining that the “anal father,” functioning as the surrogate father in the novel, is the “shadowy double” of the “phallic father,” the real father. And it is here that we realize that Zhang is working from the political dialectic of the “pseudo-Taiwanese” discourse that was examined in the previous section.

Zhang plays with the concept of parody and constructs a queer family, characterized by perversity and obscenity, as a mock twin to and on a par with the legitimate family in Crystal Boys: “The [homosexual] desire is expressed in the form of a pseudo-father-son relationship. This interaction between adoptive fathers and sons, male patrons and hustlers, thus establishes a subcultural pseudo-kinship network” (Zhang Xiaohong, 1998: 170).
As such, sexuality is again conceived as an emancipatory force of excess and crossing that offers more possibilities than the “fixed” institutions, and therefore, in Zhang’s argument, the sexually “perverse” queer family in Crystal Boys is, by implication, much happier than and even culturally superior to its unenlightened heterosexual counterpart. Thus Zhang makes it clear that the pseudo-family may resemble the “authentic” one, but in spirit it cannot be more different. On this ground, she reminds her readers that after all, “unfiliality” (buxiao, 不孝) in Chinese means and sounds the same as “unlikeness” (buxiao, 不肖). A Qing, the son who cannot produce offspring, is both “unfilial” and “unlike (the father),” hence unworthy of his father, for he breaks that sacred Chinese creed of generational continuity and, by extension, “fidelity” to the nation, as family is taken as the microcosm of nation in the Confucianism-based Chinese cultural tradition. It then follows that Bai Xianyong, the creator of A Qing, is also an unfilial son, unlike his father, a father that has clearly a metaphorical rather than literal meaning. Here we see how Bai provides a locus of cultural identity by which a sense of differentiated community is formed in the cultural politics of certain second-generation Taiwanese mainlander critics like Zhang in the 1990s.

Zhang concludes her argument with the question of Bai’s position in both Chinese and Taiwanese literary history. On the one hand, she dismisses the political reading of Yuan Liangjun, a Beijing critic who, in his book on Bai (1991), attempts from a high vantage point of national/cultural sovereignty to define Bai’s “Chinese” roots by placing Crystal Boys in the classical tradition of Dream of the Red Chamber and Water Margin and, most important of all, in the modern tradition passed down by Lu Xun, the “father” of modern Chinese literature. On the other hand, Zhang also rejects another type of political reading by the Taiwanese literary historian Peng Ruijin (1995), who sees Bai’s literature as “rootless” because of its lack of a “Taiwan consciousness,” a quality Peng cherishes as the distinguishing mark of the modern Taiwanese literary tradition, inaugurated by Lai He and his contemporaries in the Japanese colonial period and subsequently inherited by the xiangtu writers. On the issue of “roots,” Zhang (1998: 198) asks, “Could the unfilial sons take the ‘dark kingdom’—that damp and dirty Taipei New Park—as their site for ‘national identification’? . . . Could Crystal Boys be an alternative kind of rootless and non-reproductive literature, a ‘transvestite song’?” Zhang’s attempt, in the final analysis, is to construct a Bai Xianyong, in terms of national/cultural identity, as neither Chinese nor Taiwanese, by being neither Lu Xun’s nor Lai He’s literary son. In other words, Bai is imagined here as a “niezi,” a “pseudo-Taiwanese” like those with mainlander origins who feel out of place in a “Taiwanized” Taiwan and who are reluctant to be part of this
changed family/nation. The gay cruising ground—Taipei New Park—is then conjured in this reading as their Queer Nation, a nation within the nation, the symbolic trope for a cultural diaspora within Taiwan.

Thus refashioned by queer theory, Crystal Boys becomes a self-conscious political text of self-exile. It is given cultural value as an anti-familial and anti-statist statement. In this ideological interpretation, the characters are explicitly dislocated socially and their complex connection to their heterosexual families is made vague except for their functioning as a “bad copy”; they are envisioned as enacting the closure of a queer family vibrant with a Lacanian jouissance.

Such political reading, effected through the psychoanalytic model of deconstruction, has not gone unchallenged. Anthropologist Antonia Chao, the most acute critic of Taiwan’s queer studies, has questioned the scholars’ tendency to prioritize “the over-determining efficacy of ‘the family’ in molding queer identities” (2005: 42) and has made various attempts in her studies of Taiwan’s working-class lesbian/gay communities to demystify the notion of the queer “cultural belonging” by emphasizing the importance of the material context that has been generally overlooked in the field (Chao, 1999, 2000, 2001).

I would push Chao’s criticism further by saying that it is one thing to create the image of the “cultural queer” (Chao, 2005) in order to make a claim, but it is another to make “cultural queer” the norm in order to institutionalize the homosexual culture. We see the culmination of this discursive trend in studies that are marked by a camp aesthetic, such as Zhu Weicheng’s (1998) and Ye Dexuan’s (1998), which continue with Zhang’s use of parody as a tactic of resistance and extend it to the notion of performance, drawing on Judith Butler’s (1990) theoretical concept of drag. To stage a polemic positionality, they reinforce a collective image of Bai’s characters as the dazzlingly theatrical transvestite showman. The burden of representation is then to shift the thematic concern from shame and guilt to ecstasy and from sexual repression to triumphant enlightenment. Implicit in these readings is a demand for a fully conscious queer subjectivity as a prerequisite to the membership of a culturally correct Queer Nation. In order for queer to be meaningful, hence “subversive,” they couch their identity politics in a master narrative of evolutionary development in which queer is perceived as progressing from an earlier stage of ideological innocence to a post-gay period of sophisticated self-awareness. At this point, queer finds itself defined against not just the heterosexual but the insufficiently queer.

The most striking instance of this demand for a polemic positionality occurred when Bai himself “came out” and expressed how he viewed Crystal
Boys in interviews. Some younger critics were not happy with his remark that the novel “was about homosexuals, not homosexuality” (Cai Kejian, 1988; Chen Bai, 1988). Obviously to Bai, A Qing and his ill-fated friends are not meant to be the enactments of an identity politics but individuals struggling to come to terms with their homosexuality as well as their relationship with their families. But to certain queer critics who favor a conception of the homosexual as a symbolic figure of cultural difference and epistemological intervention, what matters is an appropriate subject position that justifies the meaning of one’s homosexual experience. Bai’s unfavorable responses to the radical politics of American gay activism and its accompanying assumption that homosexuals are of a superior category (Cai Kejian, 1988; Chen Bai, 1988) were considered retrogressive.

Thus, ironically, the icon himself turns out for his younger comrades to be an embarrassing case betraying signs of deviation and genealogical incongruity that fail to sustain a coherently transcendental queerness. Bai’s case reflects a discursive trait in which the very pursuit of the centrality of difference is in fact deeply embedded in an apprehension of difference. One can certainly understand that the younger readers in the increasingly liberal environment of the 1990s may not have shared the gender anxieties of Bai’s generation. What is more difficult to accept is that the theoretical paradigm of margin against the center on which these discourses are based serves in effect to hierarchize the “developed” and “underdeveloped” homosexuals. The queer critics not only appear presumptuous to presuppose that certain identities are proper and ultimate, they also unwittingly put themselves in a position from which it becomes impossible to do justice to a writer who is hailed as a queer icon on the one hand and displaced, even denied, as an individual on the other.

From Crystal Boys to New Park

Meanwhile, in another discursive field, the “epistemology of the closet” has turned spatial. In his 1996 study of the “erotic geographies” of New Park (exemplifying the recent “cultural turn” in Taiwan’s urban studies), Wang Zhihong, a scholar of urban planning and architecture, uses Crystal Boys to study the historical development of the park’s spatial semiotics. His study has pioneered the application of a sociology of urban landscape to Taiwan’s best known gay cruising site by incorporating Galen Cranz’s approach in her influential The Politics of Park Design (1982) with poststructuralist and gender/queer theories. By documenting the history of New Park from the 1890s to the 1990s and by extending Judith Butler’s notion of “gender performance” to “spatial performance,” Wang reads the park as a Foucauldian
“heterotopia,” a site of conflicting spatial imagination and memories. The park itself thus becomes the real protagonist of *Crystal Boys*.

Cranz’s study provides a comprehensive overview of the development of American urban parks from the 1850s to the 1970s in four stages: the pleasure ground, the reform park, the recreation facility, and the open space. Using New York, Chicago, and San Francisco as case studies, it argues that park design has always been intricately tied to social policy and therefore has reflected and served social values in different eras. This analytical model was useful to Wang’s study, which traces transformations of New Park—also in four stages—in terms of its social function: the temple site in the late Qing, the museum and green park during Japanese rule, the Chinese-style architectural showcase in the 1950s, and the then newly installed “February 28 Memorial” (on which more below) as well as open space in the 1990s. Wang’s study of the physical, political, and ideological history of New Park over a century is at its best when it deals with the nation as an unstable construct.

However, when it comes to the relationship of the homosexual community with the park, his conception of the historical soon shifts to the discursive performativity of language, resorting to a familiar rhetoric of reversal and inversion, infiltrated with a Manichean sense of opposition and struggle. The park is neatly divided into two irreconcilable worlds, one of the day and the other of the night. The gay users of the park are conceived as one spatially embodied entity under a single nation-like sovereignty, completely equipped with its own “territory, boundary, people, president, and enemies” (Wang, 1996: 201). And since “nation-state” is a most unpopular term nowadays, Wang insists that the gays’ park is by no means a nation-state but a “kingdom” (*wangguo*), and, moreover, a “dark kingdom,” drawing on the much-quoted opening passage in *Crystal Boys*: “There are no days in our kingdom, only nights” (Bai, 1983: 3, Goldblatt trans., 17). Here the trope of night, blending readily with that of closet, is well encoded into the ethnographic and territorial contexts of the imagined queer nation—the park, the night, the streets, and the city belong to the queers. This set of images has created a fable of a diasporic collectivity bound by a quasi-mythical origin. While the park culture is shown to be changing with time, the gay society in the park is represented as an eternally intransigent otherness, which seems to have no social history of its own—it is at once ancient and postmodern, jungly and urban, whose darkness or secret is its essence, competing with the “legitimate” daytime reality of the “national” Taiwan where all the other “ordinary” citizens reside.

Wang’s study of the spatial politics of New Park has generated a number of graduate theses on the same topic. This unprecedented academic interest in the park’s gay subcultural topology is attributable, on the one hand, to the
renaming of the park as “February 28 Peace Park” (Er-er-ba heping gongyuan) by the Li Denghui administration in 1996, in memory of the massacred victims of the bloody crackdown on February 28, 1947 by the GMD army, and on the other, to the Taipei city government’s urban redevelopment plan during Chen Shuibian’s 1994-1998 term of mayorship. Some of the thesis authors were participants in “The New Park Oral History Task Force” (Xin gongyuan koushu lishi xiaozu), an organization that was founded in 1996 and that has interviewed older generations of the tongzhi community and researched gay activities in the park, specifically those from the late 1940s to the 1980s. Most of the New Park studies were conducted in the spirit of sudden discovery, associating changes in urban spaces with the destruction of collective memory and loss of identity.

A representative example would be the highly nostalgic work by task force member Lai Zhengzhe ([1998] 2000). What concerns us here is not the undisguised sentimentalism in what purports to be an empirical research study, for in this high time of disappearance of the old and familiar city landmarks, it is natural that a keen sense of each imagined community’s unique historical and geographical experience would be aroused. What needs to be pointed out is that in the last thirty years or so, the mushrooming of gay bars, clubs, and tongzhi societies on university campuses (and more recently on the Internet) has greatly transformed tongzhis’ socializing patterns; in other words, the practical function that New Park has played for this community has diminished with time. Yet Lai’s study presents this cultural change within the gay community in the era of late capitalism and digital technology as an exclusively political issue. It both evangelizes and deflates the homosexual subject as almost a matter of the past, if not a pre-cultural given, subsumed by a narrative that periodizes history into a romantic “once upon a time” and a bleak political present. What is also striking is that despite the interviewees’ accounts of police harassment of the community in New Park (known as a “landscape of fear” [Wang, 1996: 203]) during the martial law period, when civilian group activities and behaviors were constantly under military surveillance, the author highlights the renaming of the park and the building of Taipei’s mass rapid transit system in the 1990s as the tout ensemble of “national oppressions” that “forcefully chased away the severely discriminated gay community who had cruised in this area in the last forty years” (Lai, [1998] 2000: 180).

Lai’s emotionally charged and hyperbolic anachronism threatens to erase all social content from Taiwan’s democratic development by postulating an abstract divide between the national—representing the state—and the social—representing the people. In fact, one could very well argue that the
counter-national discourse of identity that informs such studies has only become possible under the specific historical conditions of the 1990s (among them the rise of the notion of secular citizenship) that, in conjunction with the changing political discourse of the nation, have enabled the mobilization and competition of various self-representations in Taiwanese society. As Taiwan is shaking off its traumatic past of the martial law era, nationhood has come to be defined more in terms of civil rights and less in terms of centralized state power. Thus, “a very delicate and protracted renegotiation of the social contract is underway in Taiwan, where for the first time social forces and not the party-state are determining the agenda and pace of change” (Gold, 1994: 47).\(^{21}\) The emphasis on citizenship has certainly helped facilitate the emergence of this heightened consciousness in regard to public space in both official and resistant discourses.\(^ {22}\) But once the symbolization of domination and exclusion has been established as a paradigmatic mode of interpretative concern, to tell a queer story becomes a reiterative process of allegorization in a ceaseless battle against symbols and icons that are taken as the homogenizing national signifiers.

Since this battle draws its sense of significance from a reading of the spatial performance by the gay bodies in their transgressing of the park’s “official” meanings, it comes perilously close to a sensationalization of otherness. Lai encapsulates the gay community in a tightly closeted space and presents the park as a spectacle of sexual orgy where its kingdom’s subjects perpetually perform their esoteric system of cultural codes. He identifies the different sexual functions of the various areas of the park and categorizes the gays frequenting the park into types according to their sexual behaviors, tastes, bodily attributes, and ages, sometimes with reference to the fictional characters in Crystal Boys (Lai, [1998] 2000: 160-64, 177-79). The fetishized queer body is turned here into a world of images, signs, and information bits. As Taiwan’s queer discourses strive for a higher visibility for this minority group, the homosexual community is increasingly at the risk of being admitted into the public domain in the form of allegory, a subject to be explored further below.

**Consuming Homosexuality: The Case of Notes of a Desolate Man**

Queer is hot in Taiwan’s cultural market; it is not accidental that the winners of Taiwan’s most prestigious literary awards during the 1990s were mostly works that deal with the theme of homosexuality.\(^ {23}\) The circulation of queer images in both high and popular culture helps to manufacture a homosexual subjectivity as urban, Taipei-centered, sexually sophisticated, and promiscuous.
As queerness becomes primarily a matter of fashion statement or attitude—currently one of the most stylish attitudes—it becomes an identity that anybody can toy with. Moreover, not only does it tend to slide into Baudrillard’s “simulacrum” (1994), this cultural cloning of queer bodies in the age of mechanical/theoretical reproduction can be performed in a highly flaunty manner.

I will examine this flaunty simulation of homosexuality in one notable example: the winner of the China Times Million-Dollar Award for the best novel in 1994, Notes of a Desolate Man (Huangren shouji) by Zhu Tianwen, one of Taiwan’s most famous and critically acclaimed writers. Here we have an emblematic case in which gay stereotyping is alchemized into art. Notes is a catchall pastiche of fragments of queer signifiers and themes widely circulated in Taiwan’s culture industry. Every imaginable coded indicator of homosexuality, its identity politics, and its lifestyle is simulated in an encyclopedic manner in this semi-autobiographical work narrated from a first-person “gay” point of view.24 Furthermore, this simulation of homosexuality is supported by a showy semi-erudite display of bits and pieces of Euro-American philosophies of subjectivity and queer and cultural theories that the implied author deems modern or postmodern. The appropriation of gay cultural codes in Notes is so thorough and the gay image is brought to such an aesthetic height that almost all the responses from Taiwan’s most visible gay critics manifest a love–hate sentiment toward the work.25 Indeed, Notes is a most revealing example of the irony that mainstream homosexual subculture has become a cultural commodity available for consumption precisely because it has been so codified and overplayed. Notes is symptomatic of the postmodern obsession with the depthlessness of the surface—“the cultural logic of Late Capitalism,” in Jameson’s celebrated phrase (1984).

But an even greater irony is that homosexuality, while reproduced in Notes as a privileged sign of radical chic, finds a strange home in a self-deconstructive text that is striking in its sexual and political conservatism. In particular, the widely circulated queer post/anti-nationalist position is repackaged in such a way that it takes a cyclical detour back to a most disturbing world of patriarchal authoritarianism. As a result, Notes sends out mutually contradictory messages that eventually cancel out each other.

On the one hand, the homosexual figure is reiterated in Notes as an archetype of the “stranger” outside of Taiwan’s socio/political structure in a set of familiar queer signifiers. The first-person gay narrator, an intellectual professional from Taipei, is defined and exalted as “nation-less,” “rootless,” “outlawed,” “nomadic,” “asocial,” “heretical,” “father-less,” and “ancestor-less,” “unrestrained by the duty of familial reproduction and the network of
relational and human relationships” (Zhu Tianwen, 1994: 145, 202), who lives in a pure state of art and pleasure, where “all barriers no longer exist” and “sex is far removed from its primitive function of childbearing and so sublimated that it becomes its own objective, a sensual, artistic, aesthetic, erotic nation” (pp. 64-65). On the other hand, he is also presented—and this is the most unsettling aspect of Notes—as a sinner pleading guilty for what he is; in fact, he is metonymically envisioned as the depraved city in which he lives. He is, most suggestively, forty years old, created as a living proof of the spectacular downfall of his city’s “civilization” after four decades of development. The novel is thus written as a confession of a sinner who bears the sins of his city, which is desperately in need of a spiritual purification. The desolate man is Taipei, a sterile wasteland in human form (the term huangren is an allusion to huangyuan, the Chinese translation of the title of T. S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland”). Most alarmingly, AIDS is taken for granted as the gay plague and thereby a convenient symbol for the city’s fin-de-siècle decadence, disease, and death.

This internalized homophobia is the reason for the many critiques of Notes. Indeed, the novel is extravagantly (homo)erotic only in appearance; it is in spirit thoroughly anti-(homo)erotic.26 But more important for our purpose here, homosexuality in Notes is mainly functional, used as a platform for the production of other ideas, which have little to do with the subject of homosexuality. Huang Jinshu (1996) points out that behind the gay mask in Notes is a manifesto of morality embedded in an essentialist Sinocentric culturalism, and he has traced meticulously the sources of Zhu’s fundamentalist world view. Undoubtedly, Notes is a work in search of a political and cultural self-positioning in a fast-changing society, which is represented as threatening and chaotic; it is at bottom a lament for the past—both personal and national—rendered in Zhu’s characteristic style of lavish lyricism.

The past here is far from remote; it is Taiwan’s martial law era in which the narrator and the implied author have lived through their childhood and adolescence, a period nostalgically described as “those happy days when there were no doubts but belief, when there was no identity problem” (Zhu Tianwen, 1994: 55). The narrator, although only forty, views himself as an aged chronicler of his people and culture, who possesses a historical memory that is lost to the young and who has seen what it was like when the world still had its “Great Man” (pp. 54, 203, 204)—referring to Chiang Kai-shek—and even when the spoken Chinese was still “pure” (p. 95). Despite a keen awareness of the mythologized nature of the “Great Man” discourse under the older GMD rule, Notes is marked by a lack of irony that allows it to convey outright a profound longing for a timeless and transcendental cultural
essence—specifically, the *authentic* and capitalized Chinese “Culture,” once the symbolic capital of the nationalism discourse of the “Great Man’s” authoritarian regime but now losing its privileged status in the culturally hybrid, hence impure, Taiwanese society today.

Here we have an implied author self-consciously assuming the position of a confessor and a cultural/spiritual custodian of Taipei/Taiwan and declaring the death of her city because the national cultural myth that she and her community were brought up with has become a thing of the past. Only through a repentant “desolate man,” haunted by the ghost of the past, can the “wasteland” of the millennial city be redeemed and hence spiritually renewed. And only through his incessant traversing of the ruins of his city—its streets and parks (including, of course, New Park)—can Taipei be spatially and historically reclaimed. Only then can Taipei be called home, a city regained through literary imagination, an aestheticized socio/political space of the “other” for those who still faithfully adhere to a vanishing cultural myth with its concomitant centrism and assumed superiority.

The foregrounding of Taipei is significant here for the city is presupposed as a cultural site of sophistication, set apart from the relatively naïve rural south, the heartland of the Taiwanese indigenous cultural tradition (also a theme in Zhu’s 1990 short story, “Fin-de-Siècle Splendor” [*Shijimo de huali*]). The contemporary Taiwan in transition is conceived as a “lack” to be filled by the ghostly presence of an already worn-out, but now updated and reconsolidated, set of cultural and ideological certainties. A blatantly elitist right-wing ultraconservatism deeply rooted in a patriarchal tradition of cultural authority is resurrected, attired anew, and circulated in a postmodern garb of urbanity. At this point, the queerness that the novel takes great pains to construct finally turns against itself. All its imaginaries of “difference” are turned inside out only to be engulfed by a higher patriarchal order and value system that it denounced in the first place.

In *Notes*, then, we see how queer can be used as a radical means for a most conservative end and how a cultural and political naivété can be actually performed by route of sophistication. To a great extent, the novel’s theme of discontent with the cultural changes in contemporary Taiwan echoes that in the examples I examined earlier, but the way it is presented creates different effects. Whereas a latent cultural chauvinism lurks, to different degrees, in the other examples, it becomes manifest in *Notes* and is even loftily—as well as innocently—put forward in an apocalyptical manner. As a result, in Zhu’s hands, the resistant “pseudo-Taiwanese” are forced out of their queer/post-nation to reveal their true identity as an endangered species of a higher civilization and to announce to the world that they are, after all, the “authentic Taiwanese.”
Conclusion

We have seen how the representation of queerness in Taiwan can be easily forming a link with or becoming a vehicle for the articulation of other concerns in which issues of culture, ethnicity, sexuality, and nation-state overlap and transect one another. Two distinctive features of this cluster of cultural interventions can be summarized here. First, these queer discourses are so focused on forging an oppositional practice that homosexuality is conceived mainly as a discursive position of transgression and thus is allegorized into an ideologically functioning figure of cultural difference. Second, despite their efforts to resist categorizing, these emphatically “marginal” and “incorrect” discourses actually redraw new social categories based on political correctness in terms of positioning, thus promoting a politics of exclusion and inclusion. There is a double bind here: they need to be viewed as subversive or even “perverted,” but they also need to be viewed as essentially “correct” in an avant-garde fashion.

Queer politics in Taiwan is at its strongest on the strategic level, which gives an edgy dimension and a witty touch to ideological critique in cultural debates. But it would be difficult for this politics to claim agency on behalf of “the disfranchised” if it continues to operate with a highly hierarchical agenda. Currently its formation of an alternative cultural space is built on the imagination of a “postmodern” subjectivity that privileges the notions of drag, camp, and performance as the ultimate signifiers of queer sensibility, and hence models of liberation. As gender is theorized as play and as shifting identities, otherness tends to be understood uncritically in terms of artifice, crossing, desire, pleasure, and cool at the expense of the invisible and the truly marginal who cannot fit in the picture. While it may be entertaining or intellectually stimulating or self-empowering for the cultural elite to play with homosexuality to give weight to their libertarian stance, homosexuality is hardly an unproblematic domain of liberation or subversion, equally open to all.

Although I have raised questions about the academic and semi-academic practices of queer theory and politics in Taiwan, this article is not arguing against intellectual elites’ production of cultural knowledge as a means of intervention in local politics. On the contrary, I wish to suggest that precisely because of the increasingly close relationship between academic interests and political topics and the public influence of intellectuals in Taiwan, a politics of knowledge would have to put forth an even greater effort to make cultural knowledge an important force to change certain established modes of thinking that have shaped images of self and society. To politicize more effectively its ideal of “difference,” it should resist the tendency toward an intellectual
absolutism, now prevailing in its totalizing and binary-structured discourses, and address more thoroughly the complexity of both the discursive and social conditions that profoundly affect our understanding of difference, lest “queer” become a stock position of abstract negation rather than a site of conflict and social struggle. This cultural politics should also confront and not evade the historical realities. To engage with Taiwan’s cultural and social reconstruction, it is especially important for the intellectual elites to push against some complacent and overly simplified views of cultural identity by leaving open the contradictions and disjunctions that the struggle for identity has entailed. This article argues for an intellectual culture that would strive to go beyond a self-celebratory mode of cultural difference which, implicitly or explicitly, reinforces the ideological competition for cultural authenticity and political correctness prevalent in Taiwan today. To ignore the historical dimension and the complexity of Taiwan’s cultural and social lives for whatever strategic reason is to risk reproducing the very conditions that Taiwanese society seeks to change. We must, after all, remind ourselves that a radical discursive performance of high sophistication is radical not for the outlandish drama it enacts but rather for what it says that challenges and even changes our ways of seeing.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article:

Funding was provided by a research grant from Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

Notes

1. This is, by no means, to homogenize Taiwan’s homosexual discourses. Certainly discourses of same-sex experiences have been and continue to be produced in various sectors other than the university. In addition to printed publications, internet communication has played a key role in shaping Taiwan’s gay/lesbian culture since its general availability in the early 1990s. For studies of Taiwan’s gay web culture, see Berry and Martin (2000, 2003). But I must emphasize that, in terms of cultural intervention, homosexual identity politics in Taiwan has been dominated by the writings of academics and intellectual elites. As my subject here is the construction of homosexual subjectivity as a cultural politics, it is these discursive practices that are the focus rather than everyday gay/lesbian culture.
2. Editorial, *Daoyu bianyuan* 8, July 1993: 2. Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations from Chinese materials are my own. *Isle Margin* (the journal’s official English name) was founded and edited by a group of college professors, students, and cultural critics. It ceased publication in 1996.

3. The term was translated by three self-identified gay/lesbian young writers, Ji Dawei, Dan Tangmo, and Hong Ling, who were then undergraduates at the National Taiwan University. They edited this special “queer” issue in which they also included their jointly written piece, “A Mini Queer Encyclopedia” (*Xiaoxiao ku’er baike*).


5. The term *tongzhi* has been embraced wholeheartedly by Taiwan’s homosexual community since its appearance in 1992. It is now generally agreed that the term was an import from Hong Kong, first introduced at Taipei’s Golden Horse Film Festival where the “New Queer Cinema” category was translated as “Xin tongzhi dianying.” For an account of the initiator of the term, see Lim (2002: 70-71). The appropriation of “ku’er” for a post-tongzhi identity was of course in line with the anti-essentialist positioning of American queer politics, which deemed gay/lesbian identity politics to be insufficiently radical and which sought to replace a politics of minority interest with a politics of difference.

6. Both the older ethnic fundamentalism and the “New Taiwan” discourse coexist in the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the ideological differences between them have led to internal strife in the party. The “New Taiwan” discourse, promoted in the early 1990s, is intended to shed the sentimental essentialism of the older generation of native Taiwanese cultural elites and to reconstruct a national identity as forward-looking, young, vibrant, and most important, hybrid in its components. As a political/cultural corrective to the older Guomindang (GMD) regime’s highly hierarchic racist practice, it seeks to integrate the different ethnicities and assimilate into Taiwan’s ethnic/cultural map the Hakkas (immigrants from Northern Guangdong since the seventeenth century) and the Aborigines (the Malayo-Polynesian inhabitants of Taiwan before the arrival of all others), the two ethnic groups long neglected by both the GMD government and the Minnan (Hokkien/Fujianese) fundamentalists, hence the rhetoric: “four major ethnic groups” (*si da zuqun*)—Minnan, Hakka, Mainlanders, and Aborigines. In its reorientation of cultural identification, this “New Taiwan” discourse is a strategic move to a Taiwan ethnically and culturally separate from China, which is
considered as old, backward, exclusive, and essentialist. It has been most popular in the last two decades, forcefully promoted by both the DPP and the increasingly “Taiwanized” GMD. One significant change in this discourse is that mainlanders in Taiwan are no longer viewed as oppressors or enemies to the native Taiwanese, but instead as the “New Taiwanese” who are in the same boat with everybody else, sharing the same national destiny. The “hostile other” to the “Taiwanese” is thus shifted to the Chinese government on the mainland. For a comprehensive study of the emergence and development of the “New Taiwan” discourse between the late 1980s and mid-2000s, see Chang Hui-ching and Rich Holt (2009).

7. The original text has an insert of six pictures of a man exposing his private parts in various postures. Most of the Isle Margin issues abound with obscene pictures, indecent language, and fake ads, which together form an important part of the magazine’s in-your-face, confrontational cultural politics. Isle Margin in this aspect was obviously inspired by the queer politics of dirty words in certain American underground “zines.” For the political language of the zines, see Berlant and Freeman (1992: 176-80).

8. I borrow the words from the editor’s introduction (p. vi) to the Positions issue in which the English translation of the “Pseudo-Taiwanese” article (Chang and McArthur, 1996) was published.

9. This October 1993 issue (no. 9) of Isle Margin was co-published in Ai bao. The article was jointly written by Wang Ping (feminist activist) and Ding Naifei (professor of English at National Central University); they took “Pingfei” as their shared pseudonym. It was later reprinted in Ji (1997: 77-81) with their full names restored.

10. Elsewhere in Chen’s longer list of “people” (1996a: 107), gays/lesbians are teamed up with “women, the aborigines, bisexuals, animals, the poor, the black, and the Africans.” The list seems to be endlessly multipliable. A similar case can be found in Ka Weibo’s (1997: 241) queer/a-statist list which includes “gays/lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, adulterous homo/bi/transsexuals, intruders to love relationships, singles, people with multiple partners, adulterers, the incestuous, sex workers, the promiscuous, and surrogate mothers.”

11. The Ang and Stratton article was a response to Chen (1996b) where Chen criticized their proposal for an “Asianing of Australia” as “essentially an Australian nationalist project at heart” and therefore “uncritically bound up with the nation-state”—another example of Chen’s application of a stock formula to all different cases. For a critique of Chen’s notion of “post-nation,” see Liao Binghui (1994).

12. A notable example is the high recognition that Isle Margin received from the DPP. The journal’s no. 8 issue (July 1993) recorded an important event in which its publisher and editorial members were invited to present papers and participate in the
DPP’s 1993 National Conference on the Cultural Agenda. Some of the journal’s members have later served in government institutions. Sebastian Hsien-hao Liao, for example, was the Taipei city government’s Commissioner of Cultural Affairs (2003-2006). In regard to the gay/lesbian representation, Taiwan’s mass media has also played a pivotal role. Gay/lesbian news and writing frequently appear in newspapers. A 1990s regular weekly column on homosexuality in *China Times (Zhongguo shibao)*, Taiwan’s media conglomerate, was actually placed in the family section, side by side with the children and teenage section. For discussions of the unique co-existence of ideological diversities in Taiwan’s mass media, see Sang (1999) and Tan (2001).

13. A major funding source for university research is the National Science Council (Guoke hui). Chen Kuan-hsing’s (1998) acknowledgments give a good sample of various local funding sources for research. On the top of his long list of public and private funding sources are government institutions: Ministry of Education, National Science Council, Council for Cultural Construction, and Government Information Office.

14. Ye’s main targets are Long Yingtai (1985) and Cai Yuanhuang (1987). The former interprets the conflict between father and son in *Crystal Boys* as one between “soul” (ling) and “physical desire” (yu), and the latter psychoanalyzes the work as a “search for the father” story. Ye criticizes both readings for “displacing” and “sublimating” the homosexual theme in an attempt to construct the novel as a story of redemption.

15. In calling A Qing (and, by extension, the novel *Crystal Boys*) a son “unlike (the father)” (buxiao), Zhang obviously is borrowing Hu Shi’s term *buxiao wenxue* (unlike/unworthy literature), which Hu used to refer to the subversive “vernacular” (baihua) literature against the “literary” (wenyan) tradition in the early twentieth century. See Hu (1931: 3-4).

16. In fact, this allegorical reading of New Park as a “nation” has a precedent, which appeared more than a decade before Zhang’s study. An article by Yuan Zenan (1984) renders *Crystal Boys* as a political allegory from a very different perspective. Although the article is a perfect example of the suppression of the homosexual subject, interestingly, its conclusion is somewhat similar to Zhang’s. Yuan reads the father–son relationship, geographically represented by A Qing’s home on Longjiang Street and A Qing’s other home in New Park, as symbolic of the PRC-ROC estranged relationship. New Park is seen as contemporary Taiwan, banished like A Qing by his father—the Chinese Communists—from mainland China, and therefore an “unfilial son” to the father/fatherland.

17. These are only two examples out of many in the construction of this evolutionary narrative. In historical accounts of the development of Taiwan’s tongzhi culture, one often encounters statements about how young queers differ from the older generation
of gays/lesbians. For example, Jian Jiaxin (1997) in her study of lesbians in 1990s Taiwan emphasizes how “cool” and carefree the “new” generation is. She quotes the manifesto of the 1995 publication, “We Are Lesbians” (*Women shi nütongxinglian*) by the National Taiwan University’s lesbian society (Lambda):

We’re neither self-pitying nor sentimental. We study hard, we make love, drink our milk, eat our Kellogg’s corn flakes for breakfast, tell our mommies and daddies that we won the tennis game yesterday and also received a scholarship achievement award this term, and by the way, we’ve discovered last month that we’re lesbians, and nobody is making a big fuss about it. (Jian, 1997: 68; also see Yuxuan and Zheng [1997])

18. It is most revealing that Bai should have written, years after the publication of *Crystal Boys*, a reflective piece entitled “A Letter to A Qing” (*Xiegei A Qing de yifeng xin*). I quote the concluding paragraph:

A Qing, you may not be able to return home now because your father is furious with you. After a while, when he has calmed down, perhaps he will be missing you. When that time comes, I think you should go home and console your father. The pain he has gone through is definitely not less than yours. You should make every effort to ask for his understanding. It’s not easy but you must try because your father’s understanding is an amnesty, which will be extremely important to your personal growth in the future. I believe your father will eventually soften and accept you because, after all, you were once his beloved son and his pride. (Bai, 1988: 57)

19. Ye (1995: 85): “Humanism for him seems to be the only channel for tongzhi liberation, which is mild, sentimental, and without any powerful impact or damaging effects.”

20. The task force was a follow-up to a series of tongzhi protests against the Taipei city government’s redevelopment plan. For accounts of some of these protest activities, see Zhang Xiaohong (1996: 50-77) and Martin (2003a: 94-99).

21. It is worth recalling that in response to the protests of some gay organizations, the Taipei city government proposed in late 1995 that the historic Hong Lou theater district, also an older famous gay cruising site, located in the Ximending area, be renovated for gay activities. Although the proposal was not appreciated by the gay community, such a conciliatory gesture would have been unimaginable before the 1990s. For a brief account of the event, see Wang Zhihong (1996: 215).

22. Thus essential to the Taipei city government’s project of restructuring Taipei during Chen’s term of mayorship was to “lift the spatial martial law” (*kongjian jieyan*),...
that is, to reshape the notoriously rigid image of the national capital under GMD rule, and to reclaim it as a “city of the citizens” (shimin chengshi). Meanwhile, this attempt to realize the idea of the city space as secular and the public as residents/citizens rather than militarized subjects has also opened the way for the re-conceptualization of civil spaces in oppositional movements. Articles that debated Taipei’s spatial issue, often with cross-referencing titles such as “Whose Night?”, “Whose City?” etc. and with a mixture of gender perspective and anti-government position, abounded. He (1997) and Bi (1997) are good examples. A coalition of gay and lesbian organizations that was formed in 1995 to protest the city plan for the New Park area actually called itself the “Tongzhi Space Action Network” (Tongzhi kongjian xingdong rexian) and soon updated its name to the “Tongzhi Citizens’ Space Action Network” (Tongzhi gongmin kongjian xingdong rexian).

23. For a list of these major award winners, see Martin (2003b: 5-6).

24. Zhu Tianwen was apparently concerned about the verisimilitude of her homosexual portrayal; she said in interviews: “I’m quite confident in my realistic representation of homosexuality, based on my twenty-two years of writing experience and my research on this topic. For instance, I’ve watched every queer movie in the Golden Horse Film Festival. I believe what I wrote would have no problem of being ‘unrealistic’” (Zhang Qijiang, 1994). Also see Zhang Juanfen (1994).

25. Zhu Weicheng’s self-conscious comment epitomizes the anxiety over the appearance of this replica of homosexuality; he cautions,

It is not without peril and reservation if we view Notes as a tongzhi text. . . . For Notes’s mainstream cultural position is too powerful, compared with the tongzhi position that has just begun to be formed, and as a result of this incompatibility, it is difficult for the latter to debate with the former. On top of this, in terms of its “reader-effect,” Notes’s autobiographical form and heavy doses of theory lead to the danger that Notes may become the most prominent “representative” work of tongzhi experience. . . . We may be short of counter versions powerful enough to challenge the representation of tongzhi consciousness in the novel and this is where the problem lies. (1995: 145)

26. For readings of Notes as homophobic, see Zhu Weicheng (1995); Ji (1995); and Zhang Zhiwei (1997).

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Biography

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