

**Gender Relations in Chinese Comrade Literature: Redefining Heterosexual and Homosexual
Identity as Essentially the Same yet Radically Different**

Rachel Leng

*“The Revolution has not yet succeeded;
Comrades, we must struggle still.”*

- Sun Yat-Sen

“革命尚未成功，同志仍需努力。”

- 孙中山

Throughout the twentieth century, homosexuality has been and remains a highly sensitive and controversial topic in China where homosexual people were actively persecuted under Communist rule. It was not until the advent of the Internet in the mid-1990s that Comrade Literature (同志文学 *tongzhi wenxue*), an indigenous genre characterized by fictions of homosexuality, came into existence in China. Comrade Literature swiftly became popular as a medium for modern Chinese homosexual people (*tongzhi*) to express powerful emotions and protest the dominant heterosexual standard. The explosive outburst of Comrade narratives online coincides with the official removal of homosexuality from government regulation in Mainland China, but as we will see, the stories are often preoccupied with the heavy discrimination and stigma against same-sex intimacy that persists in Chinese society and depict characters grappling with their sexual identity. In this paper, I will discuss *Beijing Story* (1996) and *The Illusive Mind* (2003), two texts that have appealed to a large number of readers under the genre of “Comrade Novels.” While this selection is only a small sample of the hundreds of thousands of stories published on the Internet under the title of “Comrade Literature,” they both share a common characteristic in that they portray ambiguous relationships between and identities of characters to destabilize the dichotomous homo/hetero paradigm of sexuality in Chinese society. These blurred boundaries and indefinite identities expose that the standard for opposite genders in intimate relationships is a socially constructed convention and criticizes the strict expectations of sex-roles enforced by an oppressive heteronormative system. By situating fictional representations of homosexual relations within a hegemonic heterosexual paradigm, these texts illustrate the tension that exists where the pressure to assimilate to heteronormative ideals contradicts the desire of Chinese homosexual people to assert the legitimacy of a discrete *tongzhi*

identity. The fictions contest the distinction between homo- and heterosexual identity to reveal that dichotomous gender roles and/or sexuality are mere social constructions, thereby problematizing and subverting the heterosexualized, binary discourses of gender dominated by patriarchal values in modern Chinese society.

The novels exhibit various themes and motifs that describe homoerotic behavior within a heteronormative society to challenge the rigid gender binary that dictates the culturally accepted ideal for relationships, marriage and the nuclear family structure. A comparison of the two stories reflects changes in the social and political environment for gay people in China as homosexuality is decriminalized and removed from the official list of mental diseases. However, they also reveal how the *tongzhi* community is still afflicted by the same problems of stigma, discrimination, guilt and uncertainty when struggling to understand their sexual identity. On one hand, the stories normalize or harmonize homosexual identity with heterosexual practices to blur the distinction between homoerotic and heteroerotic desire. In this way, Comrade narratives anecdotally assimilate homosexual identity within the dominant heteronormative hierarchy of sexuality to elucidate that they are comparable and compatible in contemporary Chinese society. On the other hand, the stories accentuate differences between same-sex and hetero-sex associations to assert the genuine nature of homosexual love and affirm the legitimacy of a discrete queer identity.

These Comrade novels comment on issues of sexuality and repressive social practices in two distinct but interrelated ways: as a plea for others to understand that homoerotic desire is essentially the same as heteroerotic desire, but also as an affirmation of the legitimacy of homosexual relations as radically different and even more ideal than dominant heterosexual practices in Chinese society. By examining the sexual and emotional attachment of the male protagonist to his male and female subjects of desire in these Comrade texts, I will explore how these differing viewpoints simultaneously coexist yet contest each other. I posit that it is possible to borrow from Western queer theory to understand the emergence and logic of Comrade Literature in China, demonstrating that queer texts converge across national and cultural borders in the way they challenge the dominant heteronormative categorical order of sexual hierarchy. Nonetheless, Comrade novels also exhibit divergence from texts produced in the Euro-

American milieu to address dilemmas specific to *tongzhi* in China's sociopolitical environment.

How do Comrade novels portray fictions of homosexuality to subvert the public misperception of same-sex relations among men? How do they shape discourses on gender and sexuality by redefining the homo/heterosexual dichotomy? To understand the significance of Comrade Literature and its interaction with Chinese society, an understanding of the history and sociopolitical conditions that have shaped the experiences of gay people as a specific community in China is necessary. This paper will first identify and explain the history of homosexuality and describe the context from which Comrade Literature emerged in China. I will briefly introduce queer theory in the Western context and explicate how they offer compelling models to analyze Comrade novels, focusing on the critical theories of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler on the productive practice of sexual storytelling and notion of understanding gender as performance.

My aim will be to scrutinize how *Beijing Story* (1996) and *The Illusive Mind* (2003) respond to the social and political struggles of homosexual people in contemporary China by attending to performative aspects of the texts that challenge the binary homo/heterosexual definition. Both Comrade novels depict the emotional experiences of a male first-person narrator as he navigates his social and sexual identity through both homo- and heteroerotic relations. I will thus investigate how these texts portray blurred boundaries between homo/heterosexual behavior and identities to reveal the social construction of gender roles in relationships as well as challenge the patriarchal forces that marginalize the *tongzhi* community in Chinese society. I will conclude with a reflection on how Comrade stories parallel fictional same-sex and opposite-sex relationships to blur the distinction between them and expose essential similarities yet at the same time also suggest a gay-affirmative paradigm for sexuality.

The History of Same-Sex Relations in China: Cultural and Legislative Background

To better understand the social and political implications of Comrade Literature – and by extension, the Comrade community – in contemporary China, a historical analysis of the status and trajectory of same-sex relations in the Chinese context is necessary. The specific histories and experiences of Chinese queer people during the Imperial era and China's revolutionary past up to the pervasive globalization and consumerism in contemporary society today have undeniably resulted in a *tongzhi* population that identifies themselves as fundamentally different from their Western gay counterparts. Before an analysis of the Comrade texts themselves can be

adequately addressed, it is imperative that the contextual background from which this genre has emerged is examined.

Most Chinese people, even among the educated themselves, are now unaware of China's long-standing tradition of same-sex relations (Samshasha 1984). Given the extent of homophobia and "gay-bashing" that still pervades Chinese contemporary society, it is unsurprising that most would find it hard to believe China's long history of relative tolerance for same-sex practices (Brown 2008). Because classical Chinese lacked a medical or scientific term comparable to the Western constructs of "homosexuality" or "homosexual," extra care must be taken to distinguish male same-sex practices in the traditional Chinese context from the conception of homosexuality in the modern understanding. In effect, the notion of homosexuality as a discrete sexual identity simply did not exist *per se*, and it was only with the influence of Western ideology that the term was named and incorporated into the Chinese lexicon.

However, the absence of any formal reference to same-sex relations does not imply that they did not exist. Because the classical Chinese sexual world was based upon hierarchical class lines between the powerful upper-class and social inferiors, it did not divide people into the homo/hetero binary characteristic to the modern world. As such, same-sex activities were portrayed in predominantly social terms (Chiang 2010; Lau 1989; Tsai 1987; Wu 2004). While Chinese traditions of same-sex eroticism should not be romanticized as wholehearted or supported, it was tolerated as part of the social hierarchy where upper-class males sexually dominated social inferiors, such as his wife, concubines or servants (Lau 1989; Wu 2004). It was only with the Qing dynasty that acts between members of the same sex were first persecuted under China's legislation as sexual offenses, but most of the court cases against same-sex behaviors during this early time period focused on the specific act of sodomy and same-sex rape as "illicit sexual intercourse" rather than an inborn perversion (Sommers 2000). Chinese terminology therefore focused on same-sex behavior as a set of actions, tendencies and preferences rather than emphasizing an innate sexuality. In fact, investigations of contemporary medical texts have consistently ruled out the possibility that homoerotic desire was perceived as an illness or pathological disease (Furth 1988).

The Chinese term for “homosexuality” (同性恋 *tongxinglian*) did not exist prior to translation in the late nineteenth century (Samshasha 1984). However, neologisms were consistently deployed throughout China’s history to refer to same-sex attraction, often originating from classical Chinese texts that mention or allude to homoerotic themes and elements (Zhang 2001; Zhang 2008). In *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (1992), Bret Hinsch traces the history of such euphemisms that are still recognized in contemporary Chinese society, including “the cut sleeve” (断袖 *duanxiu*), “the split peach” (分桃 *fentaoyao*), “male practice” (男风 *nanfeng*) and “adoptive older/younger brother” (妻兄/妻弟 *qixiong/qidi*). Although this book has been identified as the first serious English language treatment of same-sex behaviors in China's past, various scholars have severely criticized it for being “unidimensional” and “deceptive” in its misinterpretations and misunderstandings of the Chinese texts examined (e.g.: Dikötter 1992; Williams 1994).

Reviewers have also questioned Hinsch’s passive acceptance of the Western liberationist dialectic of toleration versus repression without questioning whether its application would be appropriate in the Chinese context (Furth 1991). Because of this, Hinsch (1990) overlooks the complexity of China’s Imperial past to provide an overly simplistic and distorted conclusion that the homophobia prevalent throughout twentieth-century China resulted from the adoption of Western sexual discourse. The contrary account other scholars have proposed claims that the introduction of legislation against same-sex acts were due to a rise of intolerance and sexual conservatism during the Qing dynasty, forming part of a local political campaign to preserve a strict hierarchal social order (Ng 1989). Nevertheless, this important topic still requires a more comprehensive investigation, but for the purposes of this paper it is important to recognize that China was not always a “homophobic” environment.

The combined influences of Westernization and Communism during the Republican period (1912-1949) fueled China’s abandonment of its age-old cultural tolerance for homoeroticism (Bullough and Ruan 1989). Upon the founding of the PRC in 1949, the new government fervently regulated familial and sexual institutions to establish the nuclear family as the bedrock of socialist renewal and eliminate all nonprocreative, nonmarital associations (Sieber 2001). Under Communist ideology, homosexuality was classified as a clinical condition in the Chinese *Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Diseases* and criminalized under the “Hooliganism Law” (流氓罪 *liumangzui*) in the official Penal Code. Any persons exhibiting or

suspected of same-sex behavior could be arrested and sent to prisons, labor reform camps, electric therapy clinics or even executed (Lau 1989; Wah-Shan 2001). The entire topic of homosexuality was taboo, and China's laws, mass media, and scientific reports never mentioned it (Chou 2000). It was only when Deng Xiaoping ascended to power in the late 1970s to introduce market economy reform and opened China up to the outside world that the situation began to change.

Although homosexuality was decriminalized in China in 1997 and removed from the official list of mental disorders in 2001, the Chinese government has maintained an official silence on the issue of homosexuality. Until now, the social and political status of homosexual people in China is ambiguous and they still face widespread legal discrimination (Mountford 2010). The Social Order Statute and laws on harmful sexual acts have often been used to imprison men showing homosexual behavior. These laws criminalize behavior that is “deleterious to fine customs” (妨害善良风俗 *fanghai shanliang fengsu*) or “deleterious to moral decency” (妨害风化 *fanghai fenghua*) and imprison people considered to be influenced by a “diseased state” (病态 *bingtai*) or “abnormal” (变态 *biantai*).

In general, however, the preferred state tactic was a guarded silence. Rather than criminalizing same-sex relations outright, the Chinese government instead acted as though it did not exist (Tan 1998). No direct reference is made anywhere in the legal code to either sodomy or homosexuality, and the denotation of lesbianism or even the suggestion of the possibility of sex between women is absent. This regulatory disposition is often expressed in Chinese as the “Not Encouraging, Not Discouraging, Not Promoting” (不支持, 不反对, 不提倡 *buzhichi, bufandui, butichang*) approach. However, the Chinese government's cautious policy is not a neutral policy, and the combination of official policy and official silence creates a homophobic environment where homosexual people lack legal recognition and protection (Ma 2011).

As China's economy boomed, social change has been propelled by sustained nation-wide urbanization, the rise of electronic media and information technology in everyday life, and an explosion of new literary and cultural journals and magazines (He 2008; Ho 2010). Entering the 1990s, the tide of homosexual visibility sweeping Chinese society became one of the most energetic and influential forces of cultural representation

and political intervention. As the condition of Chinese lesbians and gays gradually became known to the outside world, Western institutions such as Amnesty International and the World Health Organization began placing pressure on China's government to adopt more liberalized attitudes towards sexuality (Bullough & Ruan 1989; Wan 2001).

The spread of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases also prompted the scholarly world to pay greater attention to the homosexual community (Qiu 1997). With the increase in public visibility and discussion on homosexuality in China during this time, local scholars began publishing work on the subject in historical, medical and social science discourses (e.g.: Hua 1985; Li and Wang 1992; Fang 1995; Li 1998). Concurrently, China witnessed dramatic changes in its popular culture with a surge of queer novels, films, art work and feminism (He 2008). The last two decades have seen the marked development of a semi-public culture of gay bars, restaurants and cruising zones, as well as the continued efforts of gay activists (Jackson and Sullivan 2001; Wan 2001).

Nevertheless, many different statutes are still being used indirectly to arrest or detain homosexuals and crack down on gay activities (Wan 2008). While new discourses and movements concerned with homosexual rights and sexual equality are becoming popular, traditional oppressive ideals continue to exert strong influences on conforming individual homosexual desires to normative heterosexual pressures. In a country where conventional forms of mass media such as television, radio broadcasts and newspapers are still predominantly government regulated, there is sparse factual coverage of the homosexual community. People in China, in general, and the Chinese homosexual population, in particular, were thus quickly drawn to the Internet as a novel medium that provided more freedom. As such, individuals express their repressed desires and sexual identity through the web-based *tongzhi* fiction to assert legitimacy, equality and recognition as well as challenge exclusion and stigma (Ruan 1988).

The Internet: Facilitating Communication and the Growth of Unconventional Communities

Since the first Internet connection was established in 1994, this new medium of communication has proliferated at an astounding rate. By 2008, China had surpassed the U.S. as the world's largest Internet market (Zhang 2009). As of April 2012, China currently has approximately 513 million Internet users (Internet World Stats 2012).

The Internet offered new possibilities of sharing information in many interactive forms, of which chat rooms and discussion boards quickly became the most popular instruments used for mass communication (Zheng 2008). Individuals had the opportunity to communicate in real time with others who shared the same interests or belonged to the same peer group without in-person contact (Zhang 2009). Given the precarious social position of Chinese homosexuals in the mid-1990s, the option of anonymous communication drew many gay people to online communities. Numerous studies have indicated the rapid emergence of a gay space on the Chinese Internet with a large web-based *tongzhi* community since the 1990s (Chou 2000; Cristini 2005; Ho 2010; Martin 2003 [2]). By now, there are numerous Chinese gay websites that function as sources of information and facilitate important connections for the gay population in China. These websites predominantly have discussion boards and/or chat rooms in which members communicate and contribute to the websites' contents. As such, the gradual popularization of the Internet in China enabled a small but quickly growing online gay community to engage in constructive dialogue with each other and voice their perspectives. Chinese gay people had more opportunities to interact and bond with other gay people without the danger of being exposed and facing political ramifications; from this, a covert Comrade (*tongzhi*) subculture was born.

This upcoming space for Chinese *tongzhi* on the internet has since been regarded as a strategic sphere “to challenge the hegemonies of local regimes of sexual and gender regulation” and “provide imaginative resources for urgent and intensely local struggles” (Martin 2003 [1], 21). For this reason, the *tongzhi* community and their literature deserves attention as a revolutionary force influencing Chinese society on issues of politics, sex and gender.

The Tongzhi Movement: On Defining “Comrade”

The term “Comrade” (同志 *tongzhi*) literally translates as “same will” or “of the same intent.” It was originally used in Chinese communist discourse as a generic and politically correct term to address everyone in China regardless of social class or gender. Today, *tongzhi* still refers to the sacred ideal of an equal society where people share a self-less vision of fighting for the collective interest (Chou 2000). The word is closely associated with Sun Yat-Sen, the “national father” of modern China whose famous sentence, “the revolution has not yet succeeded; comrades we must struggle still” has

been appropriated for the political struggles that *tongzhi* face to advocate for a sexual revolution. *Tongzhi* is now the most popular Chinese word for lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in contemporary China. In contrast, the medical term “homosexual” (同性恋 *tongxinglian*) is rarely used within the queer community as it bears the clinical undertones of a mental disease (Kong 2011, 14).

Unlike “homosexual” or “heterosexual,” *tongzhi* counteracts the negative stigma of homosexuality in mainstream Chinese society and pluralizes sexuality: the word itself is not restricted in definition by the gender of one’s erotic subject (*tongzhi* can denote either male or female) and describes a range of non-heteronormative sexual practices (including transgender and bisexual behaviors). In this way, *tongzhi* does not privilege the self or the individual, both in reference to gender and sexuality and the broader social context (Bao 2011). It is intrinsically queer in the way that it dramatizes the incoherencies of homosexual relations vis-à-vis gender, sex, sexuality, cultural traditions and national identity. As Chou Wah-shan (2000) elucidates, the reappropriation of *tongzhi* is widely accepted by the gay community for its “positive cultural references, gender neutrality, desexualization of the stigma of homosexuality, politics beyond the homo-hetero duality and use as an indigenous cultural identity for integrating the sexual into the social” (2). As such, *tongzhi* effectively symbolizes a strong sentiment for integrating issues of sexuality, politics and culture in Chinese society. The term is symbolically significant and politically subversive; it underscores the ideological fissure between China’s revolutionary history and neoliberal gay consumerism.

The *tongzhi* culture has been seen as a Chinese equivalent to the “queer politics” in Western sexual discourse. The Chinese term for queer is its phonetic transliteration “*ku’er*” (酷儿), which plays a pun on “cool” (酷 *ku*) in Mandarin to mean “cool kid” and hence also has a positive inference. While both *tongzhi* and *ku’er* are widely used by Chinese gay people, they are not synonymous: *ku’er* does not achieve the same political influence as *tongzhi* in the Chinese context. Although popular, “queer” still connotes an association with the pathological term “homosexuality” as they are both received as foreign constructs in Chinese society. By referring to themselves as *tongzhi* instead, Chinese homosexual people adopt one of the most revered titles from mainstream Chinese culture. In this understanding, it is unsurprising that *tongzhi* identity was accepted as an effective indigenous strategy of proclaiming one’s sexual self (Tsai 1988). Furthermore, the absence of official reference to homosexuality by the Chinese government fails

to formally institutionalize it, thereby enabling the homosexual population to form and label their own coherent and substantial group of behaviors and persons (Farrer 2006). To this end, they appropriate the socialist term to construct their own identities as homosexual people in transnational China, an identity that they often believe to be profoundly different from the Western “global gay” identities (Bao 2011).

Since the beginning of the postsocialist era, however, there has been a steady elimination of the term *tongzhi* used in China’s public discourse, an active attempt to stifle the rise of an LGBT culture together with an expunction of the nation’s socialist past. As Lisa Rofel (1999) lucidly describes, gender and sexuality lie at the core of constructing and imagining a postsocialist modernity that will liberate repressed desires in China. The forgetting, or rather, conscious erasure, of China’s socialist past is central to this objective. The emergence of a *tongzhi* LGBT identity in postsocialist China thus coincides with the nation’s endeavor to leave behind its socialist past and enter into global capitalism. As such, the conflation of the two meanings of *tongzhi* (“Comrade” and “gay”) serves a good exemplar to China’s postsocialist condition (Rofel 1999, 13). In this view, it is possible to attribute the privileging of “gay” over “Comrade” to China’s postsocialist condition, which is characterized by the continuing existence (and gradual erasure) of China’s socialist past and the state’s active incorporation of neoliberal capitalism. *Tongzhi* can be seen as an articulation of and analytic through which to examine divergent forms of sexual subjectivities, governmental power and social imaginaries produced in this shift in China (Jian 1997).

Comrade Literature has played a key role in enhancing the self-awareness of many Chinese gays and shaping the “*tongzhi*” identity with most homosexual people on the Mainland identify with today (Li 2009). The evolution of the definition of *tongzhi* thus challenges the heteronormative sexual paradigm that dominates Chinese society and indicates a shift from homosexuality as behavior to homosexuality as identity. In this way, the socialist “Comrade” becomes a foundation of, and indeed a catalyst for, the postsocialist subject of homosexual bodies, desires and identities. Chinese Comrade identity and politics reflect the changing social structures and increasing inequalities and injustices in China today that not only affect the *tongzhi* population, but also the broader Chinese society. An investigation of Comrade texts, as such, can offer us a more

complex and nuanced understanding of identity, power and politics in contemporary China. Both within the *tongzhi* community and outside of it, Comrade Literature opens up possibilities for alternative non-heteronormative forms of identity, subjectivities, discourse and sociopolitical ideals.

On Comrade “Literature”: the Politics of Storytelling and Borrowing Queer Theory Analysis

In China, Comrade Literature exists primarily online as an informal discursive practice when Chinese netizens write and post stories on the discussion boards of popular *tongzhi* websites. There are now hundreds and thousands of novels and short stories designated as “Comrade Stories” (同志小说) and specific websites have been created to compile and archive these texts. However, this genre has only recently progressed from its relatively obscure presence on the Internet to edge into more mainstream Chinese literary trends (Li 2009).

The Internet’s accessibility as a public space for the storytelling of private matters provided a forum for people to write about and voice their personal experiences and perspectives related to homosexuality. These stories presented as “fictions” frequently contain reasonably realistic and even (auto)biographical elements. Comrade novels thus provide insight into the issues of sexuality, love affairs and emotions that affect the burgeoning web-based *tongzhi* community in contemporary China. The texts communicate a message about the rapidly changing social/sexual norms and government policies in contemporary Chinese society as they relate to the experiences of gay netizens both online and in real life (Huang 2009). Consequently, many Comrade novels serve a communicative function that is often more important than its aesthetic aspects as an artistic literary product (Cristini 2005).

To examine how Comrade texts serve a social role in communicating messages about the paradoxes and complexities that *tongzhi* in China grapple with, it will be necessary to highlight some key concepts of queer literary discourse relevant to my analysis. Although queer studies was first established in Western literary discourse as scholarship on issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity centered on LGBT people and cultures, there are several parallels that can be drawn and applied to critically examine China’s emergent Comrade Literature. The field examines the intersections between gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class, focusing on queer resistance to the inequalities constructed by society. The fundamental premise of queer studies is the notion that “sexual orientation,” “gender” and “sex” itself are not just private

experiences but are essentially political and public issues that have important implications in social, economic, legal/political and cultural spheres (Green 2007).

Queer theory developed as an analytical viewpoint to deconstruct the socially structured categories of sexual identity between what is “queer” and what is “normal” (Jagose 1996). By analyzing the “queerness” of a given text, queer theory seeks to undermine genre conventions and aesthetic forms to open up new representational possibilities of sexual categories. In the context of Chinese Comrade Literature, the theories of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler are compelling frameworks from which to analyze how *tongzhi* texts comment on male homosocial desire in a homophobic environment and deconstruct the modern homo/heterosexual definition.

Foucault’s work on *The History of Sexuality* (1976) offers a persuasive model that is useful for understanding how Comrade authors generate messages about sexuality and repressive social practices through the practice of telling personal and sexual stories. Although theoretically based on the Western experience, his explanation of how stories about sexuality represent an urge to seek a sense of self-actualization and liberation by speaking out against repressive social practices can be applied to emergent Comrade narratives in China to understand their communicative purposes (Ho 2010). In his work, Foucault (1976) observes that Western literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflect a history of how discourses of repression develop concurrently with the rise of capitalism. His repressive hypothesis thus points out that the intensification of repression leads not to silence but to “a veritable discursive explosion” (17).

As the state law seeks to confine, limit or prohibit the discussion or practice of sexuality, that restriction is accompanied by “a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex” due to “an institutional incitement to speak about [sex]...through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (18). Ironically, the process of articulating and elaborating legal prohibition itself provided the discursive juncture for a resistance and potential subversion of that law. Rational discourse about sex subsequently led to the increasing encroachment of state law into the realm of private desire, where “sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered” (24). In the case of sexuality, however, prohibitive laws actually run the risk of eroticizing the very practices that the law is intended to suppress. On these grounds, we can see the

relationship between the enforcement of laws prohibiting homosexual practices in China and the resultant explosive production of erotic *tongzhi* novels depicting same-sex behaviors. As a result of the Chinese government encroaching into the realm of private desire to regulate sexuality, Comrade Literature emerged as a discursive medium to subvert that prohibition by naming and describing sexuality in the specific sociopolitical landscape of contemporary China.

For Foucault, the political struggle over homosexual rights and freedom always seeks to establish individual authenticity, articulating the complex relationship between repressive power systems and the production of truth about identity expressed via storytelling. In this view, Comrade novels provide a means for the *tongzhi* community to claim a sense of self-identity and freedom of expression. The Foucaultian account would posit that repressive structures enforced by the Chinese government with the enumeration of prohibited practices ironically brought those practices into a public, discursive domain and generated a space for contest and divergence through the genre of Comrade Literature. By sharing personal and sexual stories on the web-based domain of the public sphere, *tongzhi* can voice defiance against the heterosexual gender binary that dominates sexual and reproductive matters in contemporary China. Portrayals of same-sex behaviors in Comrade fictions thus enable the *tongzhi* community to affirm the authenticity of a homosexual identity despite the dominant heterosexual paradigm in Chinese society.

A primary object of critique in this essay is Judith Butler's theory of gender performance arguing that the binary definitions of gender and sex are mere social constructions. Although Butler's original theorization of the performativity of sexed and gendered positions were based on Western discursive practices, a reading of the figuration of subject formation in Chinese Comrade fiction lends itself to the same critique. Butler (1988) advanced the notion that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (519, emphasis in original). In Butler's view, gender identity is the result of reiterated acting, one that produces the effect of a static or normal gender while obscuring the contradiction and instability of any single person's gender act.

This effect produces what “true gender” is through a narrative sustained by "the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" (Butler 1988, 522). She employs a deconstructive methodology to look at gender, using transgender and drag performance as examples to explain the underlying logic of gender as a mere iterative act that has no essential biological basis. As Butler (1988) explains, “gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control” (528). What is significant is that “gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (Butler 1988, 531) In this way, the very act of performing gender constitutes who we are, and one’s learned performance of gendered behavior (e.g.: binary masculine/feminine roles in sexual relationships) can subvert the confines of ideals imposed by a normative heterosexual society.

Comrade fictions often depict unstable and uncertain gender attributes and/or sexual identity of characters to show that dichotomous gender roles are a social construction enforced by an oppressive patriarchal system. By doing so, Comrade narratives destabilize the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual behaviors and dismantle the binary gender construction of man and woman. These distorted identities of and relationships between same-sex and hetero-sex characters in Comrade fiction essentially overlap and merge, suggesting that there should be no distinction between sex and gender, and by extension, between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* Butler (1993) expands upon her ideas about gender performance in the form of discursive practices. She interrogates the notion of queer in association with materiality as a site of “*generation or origination*” with the “certain capacity to originate and compose” (31). As the body is clearly matter, then how it comes to materialize, mean or matter is contingent on its origination, its transformation and its potentiality. Butler (1993) posits that the body’s intelligibility in relation to sex and gender is not a given but is produced at the site of

performativity or “specific modality of power as discourse” (187). As such, she maintains that all sexual identities are constitutive repetitions of a “phantasmatic original” working through a normative force – the practice of reiteration – to establish itself. In this way, recognizing that performativity exists has the potential to “open the signifiers to new meanings and new possibilities for political resignation” (187). In its inchoate stage, Comrade Literature on the Internet can be seen as a space that opens these signifiers to new meanings and new possibilities. Performative elements in Comrade novels depict subjects inextricably caught in a web of oppressive heteronormative power relations and assimilating to specific gender roles. However, fictional narratives and discursive practices also allow subversive gay-affirmative and non-heteronormative gender identities – the “bodies that matter” – to be fabricated and reshaped at will to challenge that system. This is manifest when biologically male characters adopt feminine traits, or vice versa, to parody and invert gender role expectations.

In general, the Foucauldian account suggests why Comrade stories have been shaped by repressive social and political ideologies regulating sexual practices in Chinese society. The repressive hypothesis provides a framework to understand the sociopolitical influences that have affected the production of Comrade texts and their position in society as a literary genre. In this view, the generative practice of storytelling through Comrade Literature is read as a subversive response to challenge the repressive social enforcement of a heteronormative hierarchy of sexuality in China. Additionally, Butler’s theory on gender instability and performance provides the dominant mode of analysis to recognize the logics of the Comrade texts themselves. Her ideas illuminate how Comrade novels contest the boundaries between homo/heterosexual identities and relationships to emphasize that the standard for distinct and complementary heteronormative gender roles are solely the result of iterative practices. The performative aspects of Comrade fictions distort gender identities in sexual and marital relations to challenge the expectations, demands and constraints produced when heterosexuality is seen as the normal sexual paradigm. This paper will therefore draw upon both Foucault’s repressive hypothesis and Butler’s conception of gender performance in association with Chinese Comrade Literature. Using these theories, it is possible to investigate why and how selected Comrade stories represent the desires of the *tongzhi* community to simultaneously assimilate homosexual identity into yet differentiate it from the mainstream heterosexual paradigm in China.

The two stories that I have selected, *Beijing Story* (1996) and *The Illusive Mind* (2003), each reflect key phases in the evolution of Comrade Literature that parallel political developments directly affecting the homosexual community. Specifically, a comparison of both texts reveals the experiences of the *tongzhi* community before and after homosexuality was decriminalized and removed from the official classification of mental disorders. As we will see, each novel depicts homosexual and heterosexual intimacy in different ways to highlight the complications of sexual desire, making same-sex eroticism a main concern. The stories are both told from the perspective of a self-conscious narrator who repeatedly reflects upon the possibility of establishing a homosexual self and sexual identity independent of pressures from a hegemonic heteronormative Chinese society. Deliberations about whether to pursue a homosexual ideal or assimilate to heterosexual constructs consistently haunt the narratives as the characters fluctuate in their ambivalence between traditional approbation and modern apprehension towards same-sex attraction.

Beijing Story: Gender Performance to Reenact the Traditional Tragic Love Story

Prior to the 1980s, no full-length queer novels describing homosexuality set in modern society (as opposed to Imperial China) existed in contemporary Chinese literature (Liu 2010). It was not until the first two Mandarin queer novels were published in Taiwan with Bai Xianyong's *Crystal Boys* (*Niezi*) in 1983 and Chen Ruoxi's *Paper Marriage* (*Zhihun*) in 1986 that queer topics were brought to the forefront of discussion. Other Taiwanese fictions such as Chu T'ien-wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man* (1994) and Qiu Miaojin's *The Crocodile Journal* (1994) have since drawn attention to the lively interaction between *tongzhi* texts and their social or political contexts. The onset of an HIV/AIDS epidemic and gay activism in recent years has also contributed to increased attention on the *tongzhi* community and their literature. As more Comrade novels appeared in Taiwan and Hong Kong, *tongzhi* writers in the PRC began questioning the status of a homosexual identity through indigenous literary works as well.

With the advent of the Internet, *Beijing Story* (1996) was the first publicly available gay love story when it was published and circulated online anonymously. It spread rapidly through China's gay community to become the most widely read text

originating from the nation's "underground" literary world (Kong 2004). The story, now with Beijing Comrade¹ attributed as its author, pioneered the idea of publishing illicit fiction on the internet, setting a precedent that has since led to the overwhelming popularity of gay novels in China's micro-blogging sphere (Juniatop 2010). In 2001, the famous gay Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan adapted the novel and released it as the film *Lan Yu*. It was an immediate commercial success and received significant public attention to win numerous awards in various movie festivals throughout Hong Kong and Taiwan (Scott 2002), attesting to the appeal of the story to both gay and straight audiences.

The novel tells the tragic love story of two men, Lan Yu and Han Dong. Set in 1988, Lan Yu is a college student from rural China who has just arrived in Beijing to attend university. When he is short of money, he prostitutes himself and begins to explore his sexual inclinations. Han Dong, a wealthy businessman and the "child of a high-ranked government official," happened to be Lan Yu's first customer and first sexual encounter (1).² After a one night stand, the men become lovers, but while Lan Yu treats the relationship as a life-changing commitment from the start, Han Dong initially only considered it a casual diversion. The older man takes good care of the young student by showing affection in a material way, but does not allow himself to get emotionally involved and repeatedly warns Lan Yu "not to be too serious"(5).

When Lan Yu finds out Han Dong had started seeing Zhang Jian, another male college student, Lan Yu is crushed by Han Dong's infidelity and breaks off their relationship. However, several months later, Han Dong discovers that Lan Yu was one of the students who took part in demonstrations against the Communist leadership that culminated in the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Worried about Lan Yu, Han Dong tracks him down and they resume their relationship. After a year of secretly living together, Han Dong begins to fear that his homosexual affair would become public knowledge and ruin his reputation. He breaks it off with Lan Yu and announces that he will get married to Lin Jing Ping, a woman he had worked with on a business deal, in a bid to become more "respectable" and convince himself that he is a "normal man" (6). After several dramatic twists and turns, in which Han Dong gets a divorce and also gets investigated for his company's illegal activities, both men finally acknowledge that they are gay

¹ Most Comrade novels are published either anonymously or pseudonymously. The authors of both Comrade novels discussed in this paper also follow this practice.

² As the texts I am analyzing in this paper are only available to me in the Chinese, all quotations are my own translation. Additionally, as these novels are published online and not paginated, all citations refer to the relevant chapters rather than actual page numbers.

and in love with each other. Just when it appears that they have overcome all obstacles in their relationship and can be together, Lan Yu dies suddenly in a car accident.

The author's language is straightforward and colloquial, indicating that the novel is significant for the messages it conveys about same-sex relationships and Chinese society rather than its aesthetic value. The story itself largely consists of long dialogues and visual, explicit accounts of lovemaking and sexual encounters. In the mid-1990s when *Beijing Story* first appeared, these types of explicit sex scenes would already have been controversial on their own as the subject of sex was rarely publicly discussed. Consequently, the socially controversial theme of homosexuality made the early Comrade novel even more shocking. Furthermore, the overt description of the Chinese policemen's violence towards university students during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, which occurs at the turning point in the story when Han Dong realizes that he is undeniably in love with Lan Yu, is also controversial.

Considering that any references to the protests are still censored in China today, early analyses of *Beijing Story* focused on the novel's political undertones to scrutinize it as a homoerotic love story turned into a tableau of China's tumultuous recent history (Wang 2005). In contrast, scholars such as Rey Chow (1991) have pointed out that it is possible to "read" the Tiananmen Square massacre in terms of gender, where the event represents the "de-gendering" of all Chinese men and women. As she explains, the massacre was such an abysmal political crisis that "at the moment of shock Chinese people are degendered and become simply 'Chinese'" (Chow 1991, 82). In this view, the symbolic significance of Tiananmen Square necessarily entails a reference to the breakdown of gender distinctions and thus challenges Chinese society's heteronormative paradigm where sex and gender roles are clearly delineated. Even if Beijing Comrade had the intention of using the homosexual theme as a literary trope to comment on the larger sociopolitical turmoil in Chinese society to some extent, ultimately, the story's overarching sexual content cannot be ignored.

Beijing Story directly addresses the challenges that homosexual people in China face in having to hide their sexual preference and conform to the strict confines of a dominantly heterosexual society. By providing a poignant account of the emotions and practices associated with same-sex relations, the author reveals the nature of homoerotic desire in a way that readers – both gay and straight – are able to sympathize with. At the

same time that the story homologizes homosexual to heterosexual relationships, it also consistently elucidates how they differ, and at times appears to endorse male same-sex love as an ideal – one that involves “no obligations, complete enjoyment” and genuine passion rather than the “money-driven” and “planned” objectives in heterosexual marital relations (1).

Through the detailed characterizations of and dialogue between main characters, *Beijing Story* criticizes how human sexuality is trapped within the dichotomy of male and female genders within a patriarchal Chinese society that only acknowledges heteronormative behaviors. By comparing homo/heterosexual relationships and scrutinizing the appropriation of conventional male/female behaviors in the story, it is possible to examine how the *tongzhi* novel challenges the sex/gender binary to assert that homosexuality is essentially the same as heterosexuality and show that the hegemonic heteronormative conventions of sexuality are mere social constructions. In this way, the novel assimilates homosexuality within the heterosexual paradigm by deconstructing gender conventions of opposite-sex relationships and creates a space for non-normative sexuality to emerge.

Beijing Story is told in retrospect through the first-person voice and perspective of Han Dong. It begins with Han Dong lamenting his visions of Lan Yu in “the memories of [his] dream” as he wakes up next to his “new wife” (1). Immediately, the story situates the reverie of a transcendent homosexual love (embodied by Lan Yu) against the reality of mundane heterosexual life (symbolized by the new wife). *Beijing Comrade* caricatures the concept of marriage as a metaphor to co-opt the conventional gender norms of heterosexual marriage. Instead of its original meaning signifying a naturalized relation, the normative convention of heterosexual marriage in *Beijing Story* has been paradoxically deployed to symbolize the alternate homosexual relation that was denied. The ambivalent notion of heterosexual marriage, then, serves as an early point of departure for the text of *Beijing Story* to introduce and focus on homosexual relations vis-à-vis the homo/hetero binary. This demarcation between the homo- and heterosexual worlds – between the private and public spheres – is an evocative theme throughout the novel. By addressing the normative categories of private/public and secrecy/disclosure as they relate to same-sex behaviors, *Beijing Comrade* challenges the prevalent homo/hetero dichotomy in modern Chinese society by illustrating shared aspects in both sexual domains.

With an understanding of the history behind same-sex relations in China, the storyline of *Beijing Story* draws many parallels in the depiction of Han Dong’s sexual encounters to the

traditional Chinese sexual world where sexual acts of men were defined by social roles of penetrator/penetrated and superior/inferior, regardless of the sex or gender of his partner. Han Dong's sexual promiscuity with multiple male and female sex partners can thus be construed as an enactment of his elite position in the social and sexual hierarchy due to his superior wealth, age, employment and education. In the story, Han Dong recounts his sexual experiences with both male and female partners in detail. He takes care of all of his partners in a material manner by giving them money and buying gifts, making it possible to view his sexual relations as one where he takes on the traditional role of an active male and main penetrator to dominate social and sexual intercourse. At one point early in the novel, Han Dong ponders how same-sex relations give him "a strong desire to conquer... to dominate a man like eating a piece of cake" where "a woman is nothing" in comparison (5). This statement affirms Han Dong's outward position as a dominant male and explains his homosexual pursuits in social terms, seemingly conforming to the classical Chinese model of sexual hierarchy.

However, it would be superficial to render *Beijing Story* to such a limited interpretation; Han Dong's attitudes towards and perspective of his own desire is complex and speaks more to the current social and political struggles that homosexual people experience in contemporary China instead of its history. The narration of his sexual encounters with both male and female partners compares same-sex and opposite-sex relationships to show that they share essential experiences, suggesting that the homo/heterosexual dichotomy is socially constituted and imaginary rather than a biological fact. *Beijing Story* has clear references to the performative nature of gender, where characters act in ways that are expected from and attributed to specific genders. The process of rendering such a performance reveals that the enactment of gender traits is performative and unnatural, demonstrating the scripted nature of heterosexual desire and destabilizing the normative convention of gender and sexual identity itself. This performative aspect of fixed gender roles in sexual relationships is manifest when the story visually describes Lan Yu and Zhang Jian as men who exhibit feminine features and Lin Jing Ping as a hyper-feminized woman. The recurring emphasis on distinct masculine and feminine gender traits in both same-sex and opposite-sex arrangements induces clear references to Butler's notion of gender performance to dismantle the conventions of

gender and blur the homo/heterosexual distinction. The novel calls appearances into question and, through the disruption of normative gender relations by situating homoerotic desires in a heterosexual romance plot, reveals them as arbitrary constructions.

Perhaps what stands out the most about *Beijing Story* is that as a love story, it brings to bear a thematic universality that renders the characters' homosexuality merely incidental, or casually irrelevant. The plot of *Beijing Story* follows a standard romance novel formula: man meets woman, man loses woman, man and woman realize their true love for each other and end up together. Certainly, when stripped to the core, all romantic relationships – in highs and lows, in security and jealousy, in passion and monotony – share the same recognizable emotional experiences as depicted in Lan Yu and Han Dong's affair. However, the irony is manifest when readers recognize that the "woman" in the story is actually another man. By borrowing the heterosexual romance plot, the novel attempts to create a fantasy world where same-sex bonding can be normative rather than aberrant, central rather than marginal. In fact, Beijing Comrade describes Han Dong and Lan Yu's furtive love affair physically taking place in a utopic world when they live together in a private house named "Scandinavia" – an obvious reference to a distant foreign land disengaged from China and the rigid heteronormative hierarchy in Chinese society.

Throughout the novel, the narrator draws attention to Lan Yu as a man characterized by recognizable feminine traits, breaking down the public stereotypes of gay people in China and problematizing his gender identity. Lan Yu is introduced as a college boy who was "not too tall and ordinary looking" and described as a "pure," "extremely intelligent and sensitive" virgin to defy the misconception of homosexuals in the public Chinese perception as an immoral criminal "hooligan" or a pathologically unstable barbarian (2, 4). At the same time, the narrator also depicts Lan Yu in detail as having conspicuously feminine traits with "a delicately pretty face," "fair and smooth skin" and "long lashed bright eyes" (2,4,8). The performative nature of Lan Yu's gender is further emphasized when Han Dong formulates a "theory about Lan Yu thinking about himself as a girl" supported by his belief that "it was true that Lan Yu loved [him] a little like a woman" (15). *Beijing Story* includes numerous scenes where Lan Yu declares his absolute devotion to loving only Han Dong and his adamant refusal to get married or find another lover (e.g.: chapters 6, 11, 15, 25, 28). In this manner, Lan Yu's gender becomes malleable and

unidentifiable seeing as he is biologically male but appears to embody femininity and fulfills key female stereotypes of a faithful woman or wife loyal to Han Dong.

Similarly, Han Dong's other same-sex affair makes a direct reference to gender performance when the male drummer Zhang Jian is described as "lik[ing] to put on some makeup" with "velvet-colored eye shadow" before engaging in sexual intercourse. Lovemaking scenes also describe Zhang Jian as acting a feminine role with his "soft caresses," "women-like moans" and his fondness of "putting on burgundy-colored lipstick and then kissing [Han Dong] all over" (5). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler outlines the role of drag and cross-gender dressing or behaviors as imitation of performance that functions as opposite to "heteronormativity" by denaturalizing a set of relations between sex, gender and desire. In Butler's view, drag and cross-gender scenes undermine the assumption of coherence and originality of heterosexuality to emphasize that there is no "proper" naturalized gender or sexuality (Butler 1990). As such, the depiction of feminine attributes in Han Dong's male sexual partners reveals the fictive nature of gender coherence to show how gender and sexuality is fabricated. In this way, the story exposes the social construction of the homo/heterosexual definition to suggest that they share essential features and there should not be a stark distinction to marginalize the homosexual community.

The characterization of Han Dong's first wife, Ling Jing Ping, also reinforces the idea that gender is performative rather than natural. She is described as an ideal stereotype for women with hyperfeminine traits; a woman that Han Dong admits "no man can refuse" (16). Han Dong pays close attention to her physical embodiment of the female gender, and Ling Jing Ping's sexual appearance as a woman is singled out as the only aspect that offered him a "kind of satisfaction Lan Yu could never give" (13). Her character is stereotypically feminine: she is described as a "beautiful woman" who is "so innocent and lovely," seducing Han Dong with her "girlish coyness" and "natural grace" (13). As such, Ling Jing Ping represents a physical standard of female and feminine that contrasts the gender personality traits of Lan Yu and Zhang Jian. She epitomizes a successful naturalization of femininity within heterosexuality, but her hyperfeminized character also deconstructs and denaturalizes heterosexuality by reversing the gender roles of seducer and seduced. By seducing Han Dong with her femininity, she awakens

him to his true homoerotic desires where he finally comes to terms with an initial hypothesis of how he “likes men because they are male” more than he “likes women because they are female” (5). The failure of his first marriage allowed Han Dong to “gain the evidence that [he]... was undoubtedly a homosexual” and that “no woman [would be] suitable for him” (21). This depiction of a dystopic heterosexual experience dismantles the heteronormative sexual ideal, illustrating that presumptions about distinct bodily differences in sexual relationships are caused by surface stylizations through which gender is performatively constructed.

In the case of Lan Yu and Zhang Jian, woman and feminine might just as easily signify and embody a male body as easily as a female one. This blurred boundary between male and female challenges the conventions of gender and sexuality to claim that gender cannot be limited to just one particular sex: there is no clear distinction between what defines feminine or masculine. In other words, the portrayal of homo- and heterosexual relationships in *Beijing Story* expose that gender identities are unfixed and not determined by biological roots, but rather are largely fictitious and performative. As such, the Comrade novel contests the exclusive opposite-sex attraction and stereotypical conventions of heterosexual romance enforced by the dominant Chinese patriarchal system. By doing so, the text creates a space for the emergence of new non-heteronormative sexual orientations (i.e.: homosexual and other queer identities).

Another major theme in *Beijing Story* addresses the extreme pressure Chinese gay people face in having to meet the expectations of a dominant heterosexual society led by Confucian values of the nuclear family. In recent years, scholars have analyzed Comrade Literature from Taiwan and Hong Kong to point out that the virtue of filial piety (孝 *xiao*) is a frequent theme in *tongzhi* novels (Martin 1999). Filiality is central to the traditional Chinese patrilineal family model where children, once economically independent, are obligated to support their parents emotionally and financially to repay them for bearing the cost of their children’s education and living expenses. Additionally, male children are fully expected to produce male children or heirs and transmit the paternal surname. This traditional model of the family still continues to exert significant influence in contemporary China as well, imposing significant burdens on children with homosexual inclinations. As Gu Min-Lun (1995) summarizes, *xiao* is a contract where “any deviation from these expectations break the rules of behavior specified... is ‘unfilial’ and ‘the greatest offence’,” and unfortunately, “being homosexual” is one of the most “depraved” ways of breaking this contract (4). This analysis exposes the irresolvable conflict between familially

inflected subjectivity and the claiming of homosexual identities that applies across all *tongzhi* populations regardless of location in Taiwan, Hong Kong or Mainland China. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the apparent moral struggle over accepting homosexuality in relation to the importance of marriage and filial piety is a disquieting motif throughout *Beijing Story*.

Considering that homosexual behavior was still considered a severe criminal act and pathological illness at the time of the story's online publication, this preoccupation is particularly potent. Despite these salient pressures in reality, however, the fictional story attempts to affirm the legitimacy of same-sex attraction by depicting it as an ideal for "true love" by contrasting homo/heterosexual relationships.

Throughout the novel, the marked divergence in description of homosexual versus heterosexual attraction is evident: descriptions of homoerotic scenes are characterized by "wild sex," "intense passion," "obsessive addiction," "eternal love" and "making love as if there were no tomorrow" (5, 7, 11, 16, 28); in contrast, Han Dong's sexual experiences with his wife, Lin Jing Ping are detached at first but turns into "a disaster" towards the end of their marriage, where his "sexual desire [is] far from aroused" and he "had to rely on [his] imagination" with sexual fantasies of Lan Yu or masturbation to reach his climax (20). The vivid imagery of passionate lovemaking scenes between gay characters juxtaposed with the terse and business-like tone that pervades Han Dong's attitude towards his sexual encounters with women serves to accentuate differences between and even advocate the advantages of same-sex over opposite-sex relationships. Moreover, Han Dong muses that "the biggest difference between men and women is that women make love with you because you are talented, wealthy or dependable. Sex for them is like a reward they give their men. Whereas men make love for love, acting out of their most essential need" (5). These comparisons portray homoerotic love favorably as one that is "pure" with "genuine emotions" and "not just based on sex" while suggesting that heterosexual relations are to be discarded as "calculative" and disillusioned (9). This contrast undermines the heteronormative sexual ideal to portray homosexual relations as a legitimate alternative.

Han Dong's narrative consistently reflects upon his frustration at not being able to reconcile his love for Lan Yu with his obligation as a "decent man" in Chinese society to marry and fulfill his "responsibility of passing on his genes" (15). The contrast in

responses from Han Dong and Lan Yu to this societal pressure elucidates the extreme choice that gay people have to make to decide their public sexual identity in contemporary China. On one hand, Han Dong forces himself to sleep with women and marry to “prove that [he is] a normal man” even though he confesses that he “[has] not yet fallen in love with a woman” (15). He cannot bear to face the consequences of his family’s condemnation where he believes “they would have killed me if they had known my relationship with Lan Yu” (4). Instead, Han Dong persuades himself to conform to the heterosexual ideal by repeatedly asserting that he “is a normal man,” “not a homosexual” and was merely “playing a game...for a new kick” (15, 18). On the other hand, Lan Yu chooses to abandon any attempt to appear heterosexual by acknowledging his homosexuality from the start. While Lan Yu sacrifices his social status and is slandered as a male prostitute, he nonetheless manages to achieve “independence and happiness” as a gay person (19).

Han Dong initially upbraids Lan Yu repeatedly for not trying to conform to the expectations of heterosexual society. Although he urges Lan Yu to “practice playing with girls” so that he could “look for a wife later on,” Han Dong is also preoccupied with his own sexual identity where he considers his “affair with Lan Yu [being] absurd and too abnormal” and expresses anguish over his inability to stop “loving another man” (9). Faced with these ambivalent emotions, he justifies his decision to get married and end his relationship with Lan Yu because it would be “good for both of [them]” (9). It is evident that even when Han Dong is clear about his feelings for Lan Yu, he is neither capable of expressing such emotions publicly nor of envisioning such a relationship without placing Lan Yu in the role of a woman. Han Dong and Lan Yu are aware of the potential danger of their relationship, where “even though [their] love was overflowing, [they] could still not reveal it in public” (15). Furthermore, at several points in the novel Han Dong laments that Lan Yu is not – and cannot fulfill the role of – “a girl,” implying that if he had only been biologically female, their relationship could work (3, 10, 13). By figuratively placing Lan Yu into a feminine role, *Beijing Comrade* reinscribes the gay lovers back into the confines and conventions of the heterosexual male-female romance plot. However, instead of limiting the boundaries of a same-sex relationship, *Beijing Comrade* juxtaposes the sequence of homoerotic desire with the traditional heterosexual romantic narrative trajectory. By doing so, *Beijing Story* opens up a space for the potential subversion of the heteronormative masculine/feminine dichotomy by exposing that the binary is merely performative.

When it is clear that Lan Yu is willing to sacrifice his own reputation in society to identify with his homosexuality, he begins to serve as a role model for Han Dong. Although Han Dong eventually acknowledges his own gay inclinations as well, he laments that he “does not have the kind of courage like Lan Yu had to face [his] homosexual identity” (32). After Lan Yu’s tragic and sudden death, Han Dong inevitably falls back onto the path of least resistance by getting remarried. This final plot development reflects the dejected reality that gay people in China are still trapped within the strict confines of a hegemonic heteronormative society that criminalizes homosexuality and considers it a mental disorder. Lan Yu’s tragic corporeal death and ghosted presence serves as a textual martyr and lingering symbol for the punishment and stigma that gay people in China have to contend with if they were to publicly acknowledge their homosexuality. As such, the novel demonstrates how gay individuals cannot escape the control of the heteronormative paradigm, and are only able to embrace their homosexuality either in dreams or upon death.

It is significant that Han Dong’s narrative in *Beijing Story* begins and ends with a dream or vision of Lan Yu’s ghostly apparition. In Chinese fiction, ghosts have traditionally been portrayed as lustful and seductive creatures (Sieber 2001). They exist in a liminal state as beings that have the capacity to evoke such strong passion in humans that they would disregard social taboos of engaging in “immoral” sexual acts. Ghosts are thus suspended between being harbingers of death and destruction and agents of social transformation (Zeitlin 1997). In this sense, Lan Yu’s ghost symbolizes both the destructive and liberating consequences of embracing homoerotic desire: it problematizes the possible demise of “facing a homosexual identity” at a time where same-sex relations were still criminalized and considered pathological in China, but also illuminates how Lan Yu was able to liberate himself from the mental frustration that plagues gay people when they force themselves to conform to heterosexual ideals (32).

The novel ends with very positive and almost holy vision of Lan Yu smiling and bathed in “chrysanthemum-orange sunlight” while walking towards Han Dong in his mind. This vivid imagery of Lan Yu as a sanctified presence coupled with Han Dong’s prayers to God to forgive him for “falling in love with someone he shouldn’t” and having “an affair...considered preposterous, shameless and decadent on Earth” reveals how the

novel explicates that homosexual behavior should not be extirpated (32). Moreover, the fact that Han Dong becomes religious by converting to Christianity and the novel's plain indication that "God [has] accepted [him], a homosexual, into His flock" to absolve him of sin criticizes the pervasive political and religious discourse that dooms homosexual people to tortuous, painful punishment both in life and death (32). These descriptions serve to affirm the legitimacy of same-sex relations as "pure, innocent and eternal" and challenge the public misconception of homosexuality perpetuated by hegemonic patriarchal values and political discrimination in Chinese society (32).

During the mid-1990s when *Beijing Story* first circulated in the Chinese web-based literary world, new institutionalized taxonomic discourses – medical, legal, sociological, psychological – centering on the homo/heterosexual definition had proliferated and crystallized with exceptional rapidity for more than a decade. Although the novel is presented through the subjective perspective of a first-person narrator, *Beijing Story* provides readers a novel lens to view their own relationships and explore gender identity from a radically different perspective. Notwithstanding its simple language and formulaic structure, the novel suggests something powerfully revisionary: that same-sex intimacy, because it is the first heartfelt bond, the first experience of genuine love, intimacy and desire, for both Han Dong and Lan Yu, their relationship serves as a template for an ideal love. Although *Beijing Story* makes no claim to stylistic innovation – it is linear, incremental and literal – it does problematize the notion that there is no romance plot other than a heterosexual plot. The story of Han Dong and Lan Yu offers a structure that parodies and destabilizes the supposedly necessary exchange between two oppositional positionalities, the "masculine" and "feminine," in traditional conventions of romantic relationships. The story not only characterizes gay people as ordinary individuals in Chinese society to challenge discriminatory stereotypes against people who are attracted to the same sex, it also goes further to normalize homosexual relationships by illustrating elements of gender performance.

Contesting the strict sexual binary through illustrations of performative and fictional gender identities, the novel circumscribes a shift in discourse concerning homoeroticism within the popular heteronormative domain of sexuality. By stressing the nature of homosexual behavior as essentially the same as the rest of heterosexual society, the novel destabilizes the distinction between the homo/heterosexual experience and identity in contemporary Chinese

society. At the same time, however, the issue of whether it is socially or legally possible for gay people to establish a self and sexual identity independent of and radically different from the dominant heterosexual paradigm is a recurring leitmotiv. The juxtaposition of homo/heterosexual relationships allows readers to see the similarities and differences between them, where the novel ultimately promotes a gay-affirmative message to influence the public perception on the legitimacy and even wholesomeness of homosexual identity.

The Illusive Mind: Abstracting Gender Identities and Elusive Sexuality

The Illusive Mind (2003) was published online anonymously seven years after *Beijing Story* first appeared. During this time, significant political developments had taken place to allow for an emergent *tongzhi* presence and movement. Two cornerstone events altering the landscape for homosexuality in China include: (1) the lifting of the “hooligan” law used to criminalize homosexual behavior in 1997 and (2) the deletion of homosexuality from the Chinese official list of mental illnesses in 2001. However, despite these landmark legal achievements for the *tongzhi* community, the Chinese government perpetuated an official silence on and informal repression of the issue of homosexuality, contributing to heavy stigma and discrimination against homosexual behavior (Liu 2005; Nieland *et al.* 2007). Until now, the social and political status of homosexual people in China is ambiguous and they still face widespread legal discrimination (Yao 2010). The Chinese government also introduced and enforced increasingly strict laws on censorship to regulate the Internet, suppressing the ability of the *tongzhi* community and culture to develop online.

By 2002, the Chinese State Order Council had promulgated content restrictions for Internet content providers and the first stage of the Golden Shield project, an extensive censorship system also dubbed “The Great Firewall,” was initiated (Zheng 2008). Furthermore, “Self-discipline Regulations” enforced upon Internet websites to “suppress the spread of obscene (淫秽 *yinhui*)...[and] pornographic (色情 *seqing*) information” had recently gone into effect (China Online 2003, 1). Any narrative descriptions of sexuality, in general, and of homosexuality, in particular, were considered “content with an aim to provoke people's sexual desire but [with] no artistic or scientific value... caus[ing] the degeneration and perversion of common people” (2). Under this law, numerous *tongzhi* websites were shut down and Comrade stories with any

reference at all to sexuality were heavily censored or deleted without warning (Davis 2005). After an early appreciation of the Internet as a site to freely publish literature and voice opinions, this intense return to strict censorship and erasure of any content considered unfavorable by the Chinese government engendered significant criticism and discontent. As such, the Comrade novels that appeared during this period, including *The Illusive Mind*, poignantly address an additional dimension of issues concerning freedom of speech and expression in relation to China's increasing modernity and socialist market economy.

At the same time, great strides were made in the Chinese literary realm, partly due to increasing influences from Western discursive practices but also as a result of the indigenous literary exploration in the 1980s. With the end of the Cultural Revolution and a ten-year absence of any literary production, those literary ideals, methods of creation, and even writing techniques, which had long been oppressed, became active, and stimulated literary creation in an even broader context (Zhang and Ming 2007). However, it was not until the turn of the twenty-first century that Chinese writers began to witness a maturing and moving away from traditional literary conventions to embrace contemporary discursive practices such as post-modernism, reflexivity and self-consciousness in writing.

Scholars have highlighted that, immediately following the end of the Cultural Revolution, political objectives came first and artistic aims second, and works prioritized commenting on or documenting past history to “make up” for the ten-year absence of literary production (Wang and Lin 2011). In contrast, when China experienced rapid development that transformed the nation's social, political and economic landscape, an exclusive concentration articulating political objectives was abandoned and “the understanding of ‘art’ and ‘literature’ became the new criterion of concealment and revelation” (237). With the intensification of market reforms, Chinese literature and culture turned increasingly commercial and escapist, and writers increasingly recognized the role of literature in exposing social problems and activating future social change (Woesler 2008).

In the age of globalization, new categories of writing that highlight the impact of modernization and consumerism in China's sociopolitical environment began to develop on the Chinese literary front. In general, new Chinese writings across all genres exhibit an increase in conscious attention to aesthetic detail and artistic style (Woesler 2008). Texts that were produced under the genre of Comrade Literature also bear the mark of this progression. As Comrade

writers themselves matured with increased exposure to different literary works and the Chinese online *tongzhi* culture, both new but rapidly changing phenomenon, the stories produced mirrors the growing self-awareness and even self-acceptance among Chinese gay people (Simon 2001). Whereas the earliest stories (with *Beijing Story* as the foundational novel) served as a refuge from reality, later works reflect that there is a lesser need for these types of stories. More and more, authors of Comrade novels could not just rely on explicit homosexual content to engage and impress their readership, and had to develop their literary writing skills. This is evident in the increased thematic diversity with inventive plots and poetic language of stories published at the turn of the century.

Even though more than a decade has passed since *Beijing Story* (1996) was first circulated, few Comrade novels from the Mainland have garnered the same level of attention and enthusiasm. In comparison, *The Illusive Mind* (2003) is relatively obscure: even though the novel has attracted a substantial readership and continues to be a popular topic for discussion on *tongzhi* websites and forums today, its influence is still largely confined to the online *tongzhi* community. The etymology of the title in the Chinese, 《迷思》 (*misi*), originates from the Greek word *mythos* and directly translates into the English as “myth.” However, this translation does not capture the connoted meaning in Chinese where the phrase “迷思的爱情” (*misi de aiqing*) is popularly used to describe a romance story about a pair of young star-crossed lovers that hedges on the realm between reality and imagination. The title itself is already an indication of how the Comrade novel reappropriates the heterosexual love story for a homosexual relationship. *The Illusive Mind* (2003) specifically normalizes homoerotic desires by assimilating it into an apparently heterosexual paradigm. Through dreamlike narratives, the story blurs the distinction between binary categories prescribed by the heteronormative tradition. As such, a preoccupation with the distinction between private/public, imagination/reality and secrecy/disclosure as they relate to homo/heteroerotic desires haunts the novel.

Unlike the straightforward language in *Beijing Story*, however, *The Illusive Mind* uses a reflective writing style with noticeably heightened attention to aesthetics and presentation. While both novels are presented in first-person narrative, *The Illusive Mind* exhibits an artistic literary approach to address issues of *tongzhi* identity and political struggles from an anonymous and abstract perspective. This is in direct contrast to the detailed descriptions of concrete characters, dialogues and defined settings in *Beijing*

Story. *The Illusive Mind* is about two boys who have known each other since secondary school and are now living in the same city where they attend different – “A” and “B” –universities (1). Early on in the story, we learn of the protagonist’s fondness of the sea and his emotional attachment to Z, even though for the first few chapters there is no indication that their relationship would be anything more than friendship. One night, they meet for dinner and the narrator spends the night with Z after they stay up very late recollecting shared memories. In the early morning, Z suddenly confesses that he is in love with the narrator, but the narrator is confused and asks for some time to think about his response (6). That day, the narrator decides to go to the seaside to reflect on how to deal with his situation, and runs into X as she is struggling with her own emotions as well after a fight with her boyfriend (7). The rest of the story essentially articulates the narrator’s thought process as he reflects on his feelings: on how to understand and express his feelings to Z, or if he should pursue a relationship with X, who is also attracted to him.

After many long episodes of self-conscious and ponderous reflections, the narrator makes up his mind to tell Z that he loves him. When they meet, Z gives him a beautiful golden pen and the narrator uses it to write the words “I love you.” However, Z’s attitude changes abruptly and immediately advises the narrator to pursue a relationship with X (17). Later on that day, Z unexpectedly refers to that morning in his room to tell the narrator that he probably had a nightmare, because he was tossing and turning. The narrator is struck with the sudden revelation that Z’s love confession was only a dream, and feels heartbroken and dejected. At a loss for what to do, he begins to write a love letter that he wants to send to both X and Z, but realizes that it would make things more complicated and instead goes to the sea. Standing on a cliff, he thinks about throwing the pen that Z gave him into the sea; however, he cannot find the courage and holds on firmly to it. The story ends at this wavering moment, and we do not learn anything further about what becomes of the narrator, Z or X.

What immediately stands out to the reader is the anonymity sustained throughout the novel: an unnamed protagonist is the first-person narrator of the story, and the entire story comprises of him narrating his ambivalent emotions for X, a beautiful girl in his university, and Z, his male best friend. This type of writing carries what has been defined as the “clear characteristics of youth living in the age of globalization” influenced by the Internet’s mass culture and market (Li 2008, 5). Scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature has termed this

writing style as one of “rejuvenatism” where “the plot lines are extremely obscure, and very often there is only the extemporaneous penning of some blurry fragments of daily life or the mere rise and fall of emotion.” Additionally, the content of these stories predominantly display “a mixture of rebellion and conformity” to place “an emphasis on self” in making a choice (Zhang and Ming 2007, 16).

The Illusive Mind exhibits these general characteristics with a fragmented plot and story where the protagonist’s perspective unfolds through dreamlike narratives centered on the disjointed clustering and flow of emotions. This surrealistic writing style blurs the distinction between the public and private worlds, the real and the imaginary, fact and fiction. The scope of experience in the novel is primarily restricted to the private life and trivial matters of the narrator, including the capricious feelings of adolescent youth and melancholic restlessness. However, artistic portrayals of seascapes, which the narrator is excessively fond of, and mundane obligations of everyday life as a university student are juxtaposed against the heavy emotional pressures of making a life-changing choice concerning individual sexual identity. Furthermore, the use of anonymous, vague characters denoted by a single, capitalized Romanized letter (X or Z) deploys a storytelling technique that instructs readers to concentrate on the personal journey and emotional struggle of an implicated character – the unnamed narrator.

Unlike *Beijing Story* where characters are presented with concrete identities, the characters in *The Illusive Mind* are open to interpretation, fuelling readers’ imagination to visualize themselves in the narrative of the story itself. In this way, the story reads like almost like an autobiography or journal entry, where the author-narrator projects his own desires and thoughts into the minds of readers, regardless of their hetero- or homosexual orientations. The story becomes a realistic merger between the fictive world of the narrator and the real-life world of readers where individual narratives are all self-narrated and constitutive of the self. Individual readers are able to partake in sharing the same kind of experience that the author has written, and the characters in the narrative resonates in a way they would not if they were more clearly defined.

Where readers enter and regard the text as a site of definitional creation and rupture in relation to their own lives and particular institutional circumstances, this ambiguous narrative style highlights performative aspects of the text – and by extension, of the real world – with

regard to the ideals and expectations of romantic relationships in contemporary Chinese society. Physical aspects of gender performance is hinted at in the narrative: Z is described in stereotypically feminine forms as being “fair-skinned” with “soft lips,” “long-lashed eyes” and “soft, sexy arms” (2, 7, 16, 18); in turn, X is characterized with extremely feminine traits such as “long, beautiful hair,” “enchanted eyes” and as an “ideal beautiful woman” who exudes “quiet elegance” (3). Such representations serve to expose the social construction of fixed gender roles in sexual relations to challenge the homo/heterosexual dichotomy, emphasizing the inherent irony of how feminine traits can be personified by both male and female bodies and are not assigned on any biological basis.

The fact that characters are anonymous or merely denoted by a solitary, disconnected letter accentuates the way stories and people change and recognizes how, too often, we hide behind fixed identities and names and let them shape who we are instead of asserting individual desires and identity. Through an ongoing effort to explore and question the normative ideas of sexuality, gender and identity, the story is full of recursive introspective interrogations where the protagonist disrupts conventional narrative forms to reinvent, revise and re-envision traditional narratives of gender and sexuality. In this way, the narrator in the story is positioned indeterminately between homo/hetero identities and desirer/desired subject positions to search relentlessly for stability and certainty. In his mind, he is able to envision a world where he pursues a fulfilling homosexual relationship with Z; in his bodily experience, the narrator’s homoerotic desire for Z is translated into a heterosexual attraction to women (X), the only option physically available to the narrator. As such, the narrator himself is a liminal being suspended between imagination and reality, here and there, where he is and where he wants to be.

However, the story breaks down barriers within the sex/gender and homo/hetero categories further with its anonymous and self-reflective structure. The dream narratives that recur throughout the story blur reality and imagination to reveal public heterosexual attraction and private homosexual desires simultaneously. Thus, the human *mind* rather than the body is relegated as the primary site of sexual drama and contention. This type of storytelling does not supply us with the kind of “body” (the sexualized homoerotic subject) that would embody a material perversion, repudiating the very figures that symbolize the differentiated positions of homosexualized abjection and normative heterosexuality. The lack of bodily confines due to the abstract style of characterization is at once deconstructive and reconstructive, taking the notion

that gender is visually performative to a new cognitive level by removing or abstracting all physically performative and visual aspects. In Butler's (1993) terms, the body is the site and symbol of sexual prohibition, the "materiality...at which a certain drama of sexual difference plays itself out" (49). By focusing on the mind, *The Illusive Mind* disentangles and dislocates the materiality of the body to actually deprive the feminine/masculine and homo/heterosexual of a symbolic shape altogether. This absence of a concretized physical body and sex/gender identity in the fictive world of the story exposes and breaks down the fixed and constrained character of sexuality that is enforced in the heteronormative real world.

Thus, the author-narrator's formless narrative undermines the "bounding [and] forming of sexed bodies...[as] a set of enforced criteria of intelligibility" to "refigure, redistribute and resignify the constituents of that symbolic and, in this sense, constitute a subversive rearticulation of that symbolic" (55, 109). This forces readers to focus on the nature of human behaviors and existence to notice at a fundamental level, individuals share many essential aspects regardless of their sex, gender or sexuality. Throughout the novel, the narrator creates vagueness between the sexed positions of X and Z – between male/female subjects and homo/hetero relationships – to emphasize that there is often no distinction between them. He constantly compares his feelings for X and Z with each other, and towards the end of the novel, comes to the realization that "when [he] closes his eyes to think about it, to imagine each of their eyes, one is clear and transparent; the other is shrouded and distant. Slowly, however, [he] cannot tell which pair belongs to X, which pair belongs to Z. They have become one and the same" (20). The identities of the characters are fluid, malleable and undefined, and this ambiguity effectively homologizes same-sex and opposite-sex relations. Therefore, this passage captures how the novel attempts to inscribe a space for homosexual love in the heteronormative paradigm by providing insight that both homosexual and heterosexual desires can overlap and merge. The message conveyed is that gender exists only in imitation and in appearance, and there is no being behind the doing and no reality to the claims gender, sexuality and biology purportedly make if one were to only consider the essence of human emotion.

What is most remarkable is that in this story, homosexuality is presented with a relatively natural and subconscious ease. Not at one point do we get the impression that gay love is innately abnormal and should be condemned, or something to be especially secretive about. The narrator's deliberations about identifying and accepting his feelings for Z do not hinge on their

homosexual nature but rather on the very existence of whether he is truly in love. Although the narrator does mention doubts concerning how he “can’t accept Z’s love” because he “thinks [he] is normal,” apprehension about the specific psychology of same-sex love does not harrange him the way they affected Han Dong in *Beijing Comrade* (9). Rather, the narrator’s thoughts in *The Illusive Mind* fixate primarily on his own general capacity to love or be loved and his doubts about the sincerity of Z’s love. For example, in one of the narrator’s reflections on his feelings for Z, he articulates that “to be honest, [he] wanted to maintain relations with Z like before. [He] would like to hope they could be intimate, but do[es] not want to risk a breakup” (11). He fears that “it was likely that Z confessed only on impulse” and “will find a girl to take him away from these feelings of [him] in the near future” (11). These are all problems and self-doubts that can apply indiscriminately to any relationship, indirectly instructing how same-sex and opposite-sex love should not be differentiated, subverting the heteronormative paradigm that enforces a strict sexual hierarchy that excludes homosexuality. Furthermore, the narrator reveals at the end of the story that the reason he was not able to pursue a homosexual relationship with Z, even after he realizes that he is truly in love with him, was not because of external societal pressures. Rather, the narrator’s love was unrequited by Z – a predicament that all humans who yearn intimate connection with others have experienced, homologizing same-sex and opposite-sex relationships on the basis that they share the same emotional difficulties.

Paradoxically, it is the narrator’s heterosexual relations with X that is presented as covert and a misdemeanor since X already has a boyfriend, who is actually the narrator’s roommate. The fact that the very first time the narrator talks to X is after he walks in on her hiding in a classroom to avoid her boyfriend and promises to “help [her] keep it a secret” sets up their relationship as elusive and suspicious from the start (3). These developments invert the perception and stereotypes that people have about the distinction between homo/heterosexual relationships where opposite-sex relations are considered “ideal” and normative in Chinese society. Moreover, the main problems addressed in the story seem to revolve around how to express your affection for someone without knowing what his reaction will be, in the case where the narrator persistently tries to “find a way to tell Z how [he] truly feels” (18). Or, how to find out about someone’s possible interest in a relationship, represented by the narrator’s thoughts on how “[he] should find out if X has feelings for [him]” (19). No strong emphasis is made on the distinction between homoerotic and heteroerotic desire on its own, once again insinuating that

there should be no perceived fundamental difference and accentuating that binary gender categories are mere tautological social constructs.

The Illusive Mind does not attempt to create a fantasy world where same-sex love can exist in isolation. Throughout the novel, there is a constant acknowledgement of the sociopolitical pressures that repress the freedoms people have to express and embrace their sexual identity. The theme of silence recurs throughout the story, and have ominous references to government policies and social pressures that oppress the voices of *tongzhi* people in China. The story begins with the narrator stating: “Just like how perfection does not exist in human life, a perfect novel does not exist. I have always firmly believed in this point. So in my life, I have not had many luxuries, and have been called someone who has ‘no ambition in the heart.’ I might not be a perfect man, but I just want to live my life simply. Over the years, I have been repeatedly misunderstood and ostracized, countless people have come hastily towards me, like the loads of cars crossing bridges, bringing their noises across my back; I can only silently bear their burdens, until the day the bridge collapses” (1).

This opening effectively sets the narrator’s plaintive tone and prefaces the story as one that is flawed; an inconsistent reflection of a shifting reality. The problem of silence and silenced desires – the ‘ambition of the heart’ – is also immediately brought to bear, and readers are made aware that the love story about to unfold will not be likely to have a happy ending. Silence is used both thematically within the narrative and as a literary device by the author to highlight ways in which sexual oppression and victimization have been treated in public discourse. Throughout Chinese history, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism have traditionally placed great value on the sacredness of silence as a higher form of communication (Kenney 2011). With the particular regime of repressive social control in China, it has been noted that “silence can serve the purpose of resistance for those who are subordinated or excluded from power relationships” (Shaw 1996, 195).

In contemporary China, the price of assimilation into and acceptance within the heteronormative society for homosexual people has often been enforced silence. However, even breaking such silence has effected few and limited changes in the sociopolitical landscape for the *tongzhi* on the Mainland. Speech is neither guaranteed nor necessarily liberating, and the marginalized homosexual community has been forced to develop alternative strategies of

resistance. Silence itself becomes a strategy of such resistance, operating both as a form of discourse and a will to “unsay,” and is not to be mistaken as a quiet acceptance of or a passive submission to control by a hegemonous society (Shaw 1996). As a form of protest, silence is non-provocative; it does not involve open confrontation, but it can transmit an idea of refusal and resistant in a clear and persistent way.

In *tongzhi* literature, silence becomes an emblematic trope around which multiple themes and questions revolve – relationships among desires, gender, sexuality and society; between queer and traditional heteronormative positioning; on official and unofficial histories. Silence is popularly featured as a method of confrontation and resistance, questioning the realities of experience, history and memory through language and an absence of language. *The Illusive Mind* is told from the subjective perspective of an anonymous twenty-one year old college student. In the story, he hardly speaks and is largely silent, commenting that he “hardly says seven sentences a week” and enjoys going to the sea because when he “face[s] the sea there is no need to speak” (2, 8). Furthermore, he narrates a recurring dream he has in which he sees himself “transformed into a very large bird,” a “mute bird that cannot make any noise,” as it “struggles flying over an endless rainforest” with a wounded wing (3). As the bird, he describes himself as being surrounded by an “ominous blanket of darkness” where he “tries to call for help from its kind, but no matter how hard [he] tries [his] throat feels like it is stuffed with cotton balls and cannot make any sound” (3).

This emphasis on silence and being silenced invokes Foucault’s ideas about the relationship between sexual repression and discourse. In his book, Foucault (1976) interprets the act of confession as part of a will to knowledge, a form of seeking “truth” whereby speaking is both demanded by and a demand for power. He posits that power is both productive and prohibitive, where prohibition, or not speaking, is also part of the production of power. Foucault’s theory suggests that silence, too, is productive, and it is not to be understood in opposition to speech but as a portion of generative discourse itself. In his words, “there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault 1976, 27). Therefore, silence is used as a form of difference that undermines the normative conventions of sexuality and sexual relations institutionalized by the state.

As a leitmotiv, silence is associated with the unspoken and unspeakable concepts of sexuality, in general, and homosexuality, in particular. Being homosexual and the act of coming out or speaking out itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence. As such, the presence of silence in Comrade Literature serves to relocate *tongzhi* subjectivities within the dominant discourses that suppress them. The simple lack or silence of the homosexual in the rigid heteronormative sex/gender system cannot be maintained since any reliance upon this silence to obfuscate *tongzhi* subjects merely materializes its absence and, in the Foucaultian view, guarantees their reemergence in a different register.

The recurring references to being silent and the act of being silenced in *The Illusive Mind* problematizes the enforced silences surrounding sexuality on issues of sexual desire, pleasure and same-sex intimacy in Chinese society. These ominous allusions to silence also criticize the Chinese government for suppressing marginalized *tongzhi* voices through the control of language and speech. Silence for the author in *The Illusive Mind* contextualizes a private narrative recounting intimate experiences of same-sex and opposite-sex love against the backdrop of a domineering official regime and oppressive public rhetoric on sexuality, signifying a refusal to participate in the dominant heteronormative apparatuses that excludes the *tongzhi* population.

Presented as a central theme in the text, silence is symptomatic of how the queer subject is silenced by the very language he speaks, similar to what Butler (1993) calls a “performative contradiction.” Although silenced, the queer narrative is not voiceless for, according to the logic of Foucault’s repressive hypothesis, what is prohibited inevitably returns in new and resignifying forms, reshaping and recontextualizing the manifest content of the text. The presence of a series of silence in the text itself operates metaphorically and literally, historically and ideologically, as reality and lived experience, challenging the binary divisions that define heteronormative systems of sexuality.

The recurring references to silence signifies the sexual silence that readers experience in real life, provoking them to rethink sexuality, sexual desire and same-sex eroticism within the Chinese cultural context. In addition, silence is also symbolic of power and great strength, a common trope in liberation and social-justice movements linked with the process of “speaking out,” “finding a voice” and “breaking silence.” This theme is evident when Z advises the narrator on pursuing a relationship at several points in the novel, saying that there should be “no ‘No Entrance’ sign in front of the door to love” and that “even if there is always a guard obstructing

your entry, it does not mean that you cannot still score a goal” to obtain love (2, 16). The notion of a guarded silence in *The Illusive Mind* thus places liberatory aspirations within the text, appealing to an unspoken/unknown realm of non-heteronormative desires and sexuality with physical, psychological and emotional consequences. By doing so, the novel subverts the sexual censorship enforced by the Chinese government to protest the marginalization and suppression of homosexual people and same-sex love. The very act of naming and portraying the silence that exists creates a space where *tongzhi* people can form solidarity and affirm the legitimacy of homosexual relations.

With all these literary devices signifying sexual desire and the nature of same-sex relations, one may find it unusual that there is a not one single description of sexual intimacy or even physical closeness throughout the novel. It is likely that on a practical level, *The Illusive Mind* is devoid from any explicit sexual scenes and descriptions same-sex relations to circumvent being banned by the Communist government as "spiritual pollution." However, on a deeper level, the typical Chinese reader will actually recognize that the whole story is saturated with sexual overtones and an overflow of sensual imagery. This is manifest in the rich vocabulary used to describe the subtle nuances in colors, shapes, sounds and moods of seascapes. Furthermore, the frequent references to water in the form of rain, the sea, fountains, snow and even sweat soaks the narrative in a constant wetness that invokes strong erotic emotions.

Traditional Chinese literature has frequently used water to symbolize desire and passion. This metaphor originates from a saying by the famous Ming dynasty Chinese philosopher when he compares the relation between feelings and desire with water. He describes the mind to be like water: its original natural state is comparable to tranquil water, sex (性 *xing*) is the principle of water, feelings (情 *qing*) cause the water to flow, and desire (欲 *yu*) is water animated by waves that can begin to flood (濫 *lan*) (Stone 2003, 49). Water is also a major element of *yin* (阴) in the Chinese cultural conception of a *yin-yang* world balance, where flowing water can be a symbol of purification and the regeneration of life or the distortion and overwhelming power of sexual passion. In particular, vigorously moving water (e.g.: incessant rain and breaking waves) alludes to sexual climax and the full arousal of carnal passion, but also emphasizes the destructive power of water (and erotic emotion) to envelope and destroy. Imbued with sexual meaning, water has thus been used discreetly in traditional Chinese texts, particularly poetry and paintings, to refer to erotic passion (Huang 2001 28).

Literal or figurative, descriptions of water and weather conditions in modern Chinese literature have also been appropriated as a metaphor of entrapment and despair, calling attention to problems embedded in Chinese modernity. Water is deployed to create a paradoxical moral and political situation in which water no longer purifies, but instead suffocates, expressing the tensions and difficult transitions of Chinese modernity (Liao 2007). Applied to sexuality in Comrade Literature, then, water is a complex but powerful symbol that alludes to the nature and beauty of sexual desire, but also the conflict and apprehension associated with embracing a sexual identity.

The narrator in *The Illusive Mind* frequently goes to the beach, alone, to sit silently and reflect on the internal struggle he experiences over his feelings and desires for Z. Sometimes, he goes together with X to the seaside to look at the sea, but his thoughts are always fixated on his relationship with Z. As such, the story is punctuated with detailed portrayals of seascapes:

You could only vaguely see the contours of the mountain chain on the other side of the misty bay. It was early Autumn, and the surface of the sea was serene. Brilliant sunlight and a few cotton white clouds float in the azure sky.

Even the smallest waves smashed to pieces when they crashed onto the shore. The moment just before they shatter, their bellies, yellow like orioles, would swell as if they had taken on the burden and all the unhappiness of the seaweeds.

The swelling water reflects glinting spots of light on its endless ripples. The arch of the horizon stretched out endlessly, as if it were a blue hoop, firmly holding the sea together. In a sudden moment, a white wave would suddenly rise like a gigantic wing, but in the next, it would disappear again with a spontaneous and refined dance, a hint of vitality; but also of life and death.

With the rising tide, the waves rise higher and higher. The beach would silently give in to this assault and slowly shrivel. A shaft of light would slowly extend over the water surface, from west to east, like a folding fan opening up. The face of the fan is rippled, and at the base of the fan the darkness of the mountains would blend in the dark green plane. The waves roll incessantly, never surpassing the boundaries of the shores, and always obedient to the distant moon (1).

The beautiful imagery of water and waves throughout the novel can be read in terms of the sexual desire that preoccupies his mind when he thinks about Z. In fact, almost every single encounter the narrator has with either X or Z is “wet”: the narrator’s memories of him and Z always mention falling snow (2); the narrator and X meet alone when it is raining where they walk together in the rain (8); the narrator takes walks with both X and Z on the beach, next to the

sea (14, 16). The “wetness” of the entire story reinforces the fluidity of the characters, their sexual identity and desires set forth by the ambiguous narrative.

Interestingly, the only character that is given a name in the whole story is X’s boyfriend, who is referred to as 雨 (*yu*), which literally means “rain,” but also plays a pun on 欲 (*yu*), which sounds similar in pronunciation but means “desire.” With this pun, the author makes a direct reference to desire in association with both same-sex and hetero-sex relations when the protagonist contemplates his feelings for X and Z. He deliberates that X gives him “an opportunity to try a normal relationship” and he should “try to court this girl as his girlfriend” in disregard of what will happen to “Yu” (literally indicating X’s boyfriend who is in love with her, but implicitly talking about his true sexual desires for Z). The narrator continues to say that he “just hopes that ‘Yu’ will not rise up to suffocate him” if he were to try dating X (9). Moreover, he laments that “if only ‘Yu’ would retreat” he could confidently tell Z that “the person [he] loves is X, a woman, and not him” instead of having to tell Z outright that he is “unable to accept his love” (9). In this way, the narrator insinuates that his encounters with both X and Z are saturated with sexual attraction and intimacy, but it is his homoerotic feelings for Z that reflect his true desires and the intensity of his passion. The vibrant imagery and poignant descriptions of a purifying and inspiring sea of desire illustrating the narrator’s feelings for Z is starkly contrasted with the dreary, incessant rainfall that the narrator associates with X. This contrast illuminates how the author-narrator affirms that the passion homosexual people experience should not be marginalized or socially discriminated against, as it has the potential to be more intense and pure than any heterosexual desires.

It is also significant that the narrator’s intimate homoerotic encounters with Z take place in the dark. Like water, darkness is also closely associated with *yin* and sexuality in Chinese culture. The night that the protagonist stays the night in Z’s room and mistakenly believes that Z confesses his love, they spend the evening having dinner and recounting past memories in darkness as the electricity had been cut off. The narrator also describes how he and Z “like to swim together” but “always only in the dark,” a relatively direct sexual allusion that emphasizes both water and darkness (5). Also, the most climatic part of the novel is when the narrator describes his experience wandering with Z into the “absolute darkness” of a deserted bunker (16). At this point, the narrator has decided to “pour out his love” to Z, but in the darkness of the bunker the words escape him and he is only able “to sit quietly next to Z, in the dark” (16).

Darkness in this case signifies a venture into an unknown space of homoerotic desire, symbolizing a journey to discover who they are and how they might grow up and overcome the eternal, terrifying plight of being alone. These scenes of darkness also reinforces central themes of silence, isolation and desire, to highlight the internal struggles the homosexual people face in grappling with identification/anonymity and visibility/concealment amidst stigmatization and suppression. In this way, the vivid imagery of sexuality throughout the novel also serves to affirm that powerful homosexual emotions do exist, inherently also contesting the heteronormative standard that represses them.

The story ends with another vivid portrait of the narrator at the sea. Acknowledging that his love for Z is unrequited with the sudden realization that Z's confession was merely a dream, the narrator is now aware of his subconscious desires. When the protagonist discovers that his own mind has deluded him, he has to make a decision about how to act upon his latent affection. He recognizes that there is no way to deny his feelings any longer, and stands on the edge of a cliff thinking about throwing the golden pen that Z gave him into the sea below him. In this instance, the pen becomes a metaphor of homosexual love and functions as the necessary psychological and rhetorical means for objectifying – and ultimately embracing – that love which could otherwise not be acknowledged. The love that has no name, the love that is silenced and rendered non-existent in Chinese society, is materially represented by the “brilliantly golden” pen – the “golden cocoon” of their same-sex love (20).

By attempting to throw the pen into the waves, the narrator tries to liberate himself from what he now perceives to be a “hopeless” love, but by throwing it into the depths of a figurative sea of desire, the narrative unwittingly sustains the eroticism it seeks to foreclose. Readers are left questioning whether the act of throwing the pen would truly result in the drowning of a homosexual love, or rather merely allude to a rejuvenating and almost blessed homoerotic release. Nonetheless, the narrator ultimately does not have the courage to throw the pen away, and the story ends with the comment that he “firmly grasps that golden pen” in the palm of his hand (20). The golden pen has a luminous presence, and by holding on to it, readers are left with the impression that the

narrator does not give up hope for the possibility that he will be able to embrace homosexual love and will be together with someone like Z again one day.

With this inconclusive ending, the story comes full circle, implying that the narrator's courage to hold on to the pen has resulted in the writing of *The Illusive Mind* as almost a diary of his experience. Although the narrator does not have the opportunity to experience love in the end, it does not seem to affect him to the extent that he loses all hope of finding future love or happiness. Compared to *Beijing Story*, *The Illusive Mind* actually projects a more balanced point of view that is instructive to readers as they navigate their own internal struggles and despair. The ambiguous structure of the story presents readers with a narrative that is dispersed over the categories of fiction and non-fiction to lead them through problems with the institution of sexual difference and heterosexual norms.

Considered experimental at the time, *The Illusive Mind* deploys a disjoint and surrealistic narrative that blurs imagination and reality to deconstruct dominant social structures. The novel informs people that they are not alone in imagining a sexual world beyond the status quo that allows for non-heteronormative behaviors, and establishes a shared vision for that world becoming a plausible reality. This writing style allows readers to enter the world of *The Illusive Mind* to relive the described events and emotions from a similar personal experience, providing useful insight by allowing readers to gain instruction from the process of seeing oneself depicted in fiction. *The Illusive Mind* is constructed as a story where readers not only empathize with the literary plot and characters in a fictive world, but actually play an active role in *identifying* those very characters in the "plot" of their real world. Ultimately, *The Illusive Mind* invites readers to join the narrator on a personal journey and discovery for an interior space where the imagination reigns, rendering experience and reality as new, alive and complex. Readers partake in the construction of a world that has no physical barriers to embracing one's true sexual identity and situates homosexual behaviors as equally legitimate, if not even more desirable, than heterosexual practices.

In China, where people are governed by strict social control and a heterosexual hegemony, the structure of sexuality, gender and identity enforces restrictive binary categories. Art and the Imagination are the source of our ability to look through and beyond what are defined as "normal" and "ideal" to inscribe a space for non-heteronormative behaviors and categories. Writing, story-telling and personal narratives through Comrade texts challenge

traditional conventions about gender, sexuality and identity, disputing universal claims to truth by replacing them with a diversity of perspectives and standpoints. Both *Beijing Story* and *The Illusive Mind* are stories of maturation and self-discovery as they contest the heteronormative paradigm of sexuality. Through fiction, the novels show readers that, even in the real world, what we refer to as necessary components of sex or gender identity – the categories of “male/female” or “masculine/feminine” and the distinction between homo- and heterosexual behavior – are all socially constructed conventions established through superficial performance and do not have a biological basis.

Both novels assimilate homosexual relations into a heterosexual paradigm to show that as a form of romance and love, they are all the same in the end. The narratives themselves are disruptive to the dominance of conventional ideologies as they destabilize normative concepts of gender and sexuality while constructing and naming queer genders and sexualities, ones that do not fit within the heteronormative paradigm. In a society where queer identities are rendered non-existent and invisible, reading and writing about it meant a lot for the *tongzhi* population. Both texts – as well as the countless other Comrade stories – inform *tongzhi* readers that people do imagine something other than the status quo, and they struggle in different ways to attain and validate that difference through literature.

By homologizing same-sex to opposite-sex relations, *Beijing Story* and *The Illusive Mind* attempt to harmonize homosexual and heterosexual behaviors. However, through various themes and literary techniques, the Comrade novels also inscribe a space for non-heteronormative behaviors to emerge and affirm the legitimacy of *tongzhi* as a discrete identity. Ultimately, the important issue is if *tongzhi* passively accept and live by the fiction they are given, or if they are able to create one of their own in the form of active resistance to heteronormativity. Both texts suggest the possibilities for agency, in one way or another, to subvert and undermine the heteronormative conventions of gender and sexuality. In this way, Comrade readers use texts and Comrade texts use readers in a process that aims to establish the presence of a *tongzhi* community and potentially affect social change.

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