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Author/s:

Martin, F

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Contemporary Taiwan

CHAPTER 11

Stigmatic Bodies

The Corporeal Qiu Miaojin

FRAN MARTIN

Introduction

Qiu Miaojin (1969–1995) is Taiwan’s best-known lesbian author. In local lesbian (*nütongzhi*) subcultures, Qiu’s books are frequently cited as classics, particularly her 1994 novel *The Crocodile’s Journal* (*Eyu shouji*), the first novel in Taiwan’s modern literary history to be written by an author commonly known to be a lesbian that takes erotic relationships between women as its central theme. Qiu’s fiction is much celebrated, too, in the mainstream literary establishment; *The Crocodile’s Journal* won the prestigious *China Times* Honorary Prize for Literature for Qiu posthumously, following her suicide in mid-1995. Qiu’s unique literary style—mingling cerebral, experimental language use, psychological realism, biting social critique through allegory, and a surrealist effect deriving from the use of arrestingly unusual metaphors—is strongly influenced by both European and Japanese literary and cinematic modernisms. Although her fiction has been compared, in its principal subject-matter, to Radclyffe Hall’s 1920s classic of lesbian alienation, *The Well of Loneliness*, most frequently cited in Qiu’s writings are male modernist and postmodernist “masters” (many of whose work shows a strongly homoerotic aesthetic) including Andre Gide, Jean Genet, Kobo Abe, Yukio Mishima, Haruki Murakami, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Derek Jarman—locally, Qiu’s work has been critiqued for this apparent masculinist bias.¹ Qiu’s early short stories “Zero Degree” (“Linjiedian,” 1988) and “Platonic Hair” (“Bolatu zhi fa,” 1990), to be discussed in this chapter, appeared in her first collection, *The Revelry of Ghosts* (*Guide kuanghuan*) in 1991, following their earlier serialization in local daily

newspapers. They are Qiu's first works to treat thematically homoerotic desire between women.

While Qiu remains an iconic figure for Taiwan's lesbian readerships, the fact that her writing frequently depicts erotic relationships structured around the dimorphous feminine genders of "T" and "po"—comparable though not reducible to the English terms butch and femme—has also made Qiu somewhat controversial among local critics. Some feminist scholars, including Liou Liang-ya, have taken Qiu to task for her narrators' purported "male identification" and the apparent pessimism of her representation of sexual relationships between women.² In this essay, however, I want less to chastise her for these tendencies in her work than to explore these two aspects further and consider possible links between them by focusing on what I will call the *stigmatic bodies* of the narrators in her two early homoerotic stories.³ Elsewhere, I have argued that Qiu's *Crocodile's Journal* is exemplary of a particular mode of representing homosexuality (*tongxinglian*) in 1990s Taiwan that lavishly exhibits a subjective injury that, it suggests, constitutes the foundation of *tongxinglian* subjectivity.⁴ The injury posited in Qiu's fiction, I argued, is constituted by shame: a shame that at once catalyzes *tongxinglian* identity and inscribes within that identity the irresolvable problem of this foundational injury. Here, I will further develop that discussion of shame as a foundational injury that both inaugurates and fractures the *tongxinglian* subject by relating it to the concept of stigma. As I hope to demonstrate, consideration of the degraded sexual subject in Qiu's fiction, in particular how shame and subjective degradation are figured in Qiu's representations of stigmatic bodies, allows us to formulate a series of interesting general questions about abjection, stigma, and sexual subjectivity—questions that currently also occupy some theorists of sexual minority cultures in Euro-American contexts.⁵ This approach additionally reveals the particularities of the local historical context of Qiu's work in late twentieth-century Taiwan, where popular, academic, and subcultural discourses and gender and sexual practices were undergoing rapid transformation. As I have argued elsewhere, such transformation leads on the one hand to an efflorescence of new and enabling identities under the aegis of the new lesbian and gay—*tongzhi*—politics and culture.⁶ But these tectonic shifts in discourse on gender and sexuality also inevitably result in violent epistemic clashes with previously prevalent systems, clashes that have real consequences for actual sexual subjects. The period in which Qiu wrote the two stories analyzed here—between the lifting of martial law in 1987 and the rise of the *tongzhi* movement in the early 1990s—was a time of immense turbulence vis-à-vis the meaning of gendered bodies in Taiwan's public cultures. These stories powerfully register this sometimes calamitous turbulence.⁷

Context I: Indigenized Sexology

As Tze-lan D. Sang has recently shown, modern Chinese representations of female homosexuality (*nütongxinglian* or *nütongxing'ai*) as marked by stigmatic and masculinized bodies may be traced back to the translation and indigenization of European sexology in the 1920s.⁸ At that time literary representations of love between women drew simultaneously upon folk beliefs about feminine sexual deficiency and on the translated sexological theory of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and others to construct locally inflected and markedly phobic versions of the “mannish lesbian.”⁹

One notable example of this phobic modern *nütongxinglian* representation is a 1932 story by the male modernist author Yu Dafu (1896–1945), “She Was a Weak Woman” (*Ta shi yige ruo nüzi*).¹⁰ The first part of Yu’s story takes place in a girls’ school, where the girl Li Wenqing seduces the pretty protagonist Zheng Xiuyue with expensive gifts and an impressive rubber dildo. Li is a personification of the disgrace of *nütongxinglian* conceived as an offense against proper femininity: the terror and hatred of this imagined condition is inscribed on and as the flesh of Li’s frightful body. She is described as “both tall and large,” with a “loud and resonant husky voice” and “snub nose,” while “her face was covered in red-black freckles, and in size outdid that of a normal, huskily-built middle-aged man”;¹¹ she is also described as emitting “a very strange smell of rotting onions that simply suffocated you to death.”¹² The first time Li coerces Zheng into an intimate exchange by forcibly pulling Zheng’s hand over her own naked body, she reveals to the other girl’s touch “skin like sandpaper; a pair of very broad, very saggy, downward-dangling tits; a few straggly hairs in her armpits; and congealed in those hairs, a mass of sticky sweat.”¹³

The influence of Krafft-Ebing’s theory of female homosexuality as gender inversion is unmistakable in the horrifying literary personage of Li Wenqing: Yu’s description attests to the capacity of the translated discourse of sexology to effect a regulatory and markedly phobic corporealization of *nütongxinglian*. Equally, however, the characterization of the monstrous Li also appears to draw on the folk figure of the *enü*, or malignant woman, whom Keith McMahon notes appears both in sex treatises dating back to at least the tenth century and figuring in much later literature and folk wisdom.¹⁴ Possessing several of the inauspicious traits of the *enü*, including coarse skin, masculine voice, and malodorous armpits, Li Wenqing is legible as an amalgam of the sexological inversion theory of the mannish lesbian and local, premodern folk beliefs about the malignant woman who fails to conform to the cultural and corporeal codes of normative, feminine gender.¹⁵

I will argue in what follows that in her early stories, Qiu Miaojin takes up the phobically masculinized female homosexual to explore the conditions of cultural abjection “from the inside,” as it were: from the position of the stigmatic body and “spoiled identity” of masculine-identified *nütongxinglian* itself. By presenting *nütongxinglian* as a form of gender-troubling inscribed on the bodies of their narrators, Qiu’s early short stories indirectly cite the modern figure of *nütongxinglian* as stigmatic body. Yet this citation can be read, in part, as resistance to the corporealization of *nütongxinglian* in the Chinese variant of sexual inversion theory. In Foucauldian terms, Qiu’s treatment of *nütongxinglian* as a series of painfully out-of-control body-parts can be interpreted as taking up the terms by which female homosexuality is made abject in society only to turn those terms around to produce a compelling critique of the dominant power structures.¹⁶ Specifically, this critique comes from the perspective of a sexual subject whose cross-gender identification on one hand precariously aligns her body and sexuality with the abject figure of the masculinized lesbian, but on the other hand also bespeaks her powerfully felt yearning for a livable “T” self.¹⁷

Context 2: Subcultural History

While the broader discursive context for Qiu’s representations of stigmatic bodies extends back to the Chinese indigenization of European sexual inversion theory in the early twentieth century, the more immediate context for her work is late twentieth-century Taiwan, and the changes then taking place in subcultural and academic conceptualizations of *nütongxinglian* gender. T (pronounced *ti*) and *po* constitute a system of secondary gender which, up until about the mid-1990s, structured most of Taiwan’s female homoerotic subcultures. T is an abbreviation of the English term “tomboy,” and the T role in sexual relations between women is frequently, if reductively, described as corresponding to the masculine role in the heterosexual relation. In the subcultural practice of the “T bar” since the mid-1980s, Ts have marked their identity by adopting selected masculine-coded cultural signifiers, including masculine dress (suits, ties, men’s shoes), short haircuts, aftershave, and masculine bodily gestures, language use, and drinking style, as well as by modifying feminine attributes, for example by breast-binding. *Po* is a derivative of the colloquial term *laopo*, “wife,” and *po* style appropriates signifiers of normative femininity (skirts, heels, jewelry, makeup, long hair, revealing clothing, flirtatious behavior) to produce the hyper-feminine counterpart to the dapper masculinity of the T.

Detailed histories and theorizations of T/*po* cultures have been written

by a number of scholars, including Antonia Yengning Chao, Zheng Meili, and Gian Jia-shin.¹⁸ They show that the terms T and *po* were first coined in the mid-1960s by the owner of a gay bar in Taipei, who knew the English term *tomboy* through his acquaintance with American GIs, at that time a constant presence in Taipei as a result of the war in Vietnam.¹⁹ The ethnographic research of both Chao and Zheng suggests that between approximately the 1960s and the mid-1980s, T identification tended to equate quite strongly with transgender masculine identification, with Ts considering themselves men, sometimes undergoing gender reassignment surgery, favoring men's rather than women's public toilets, and frequently passing as men in everyday life.²⁰ Taiwan's first T bar opened in Taipei in 1985, and others soon followed. As Chao's research demonstrates, the fuller development of T/*po* subcultures around the bar scene seems to have led to a shift in many Ts' gender identification. This shift from identity with male-bodied masculinity to a self-reflexively directed achievement of what Chao calls "T-ness" led to a recognizable subcultural style that equates neither to normative femininity nor, exactly, to normative masculinity. Although it certainly draws on masculine sartorial and behavioral conventions, it is, perhaps, a gendered whole qualitatively different from the sum of its masculine and feminine parts.²¹ As Naifei Ding and Jenpeng Liu have argued in detail, and as I will discuss further below, around the end of the 1980s and into the early years of the 1990s—the period when Qiu wrote the stories I will discuss—the existing T/*po* gender system of the bars was challenged by emergent lesbian feminist discourse radiating out from Taiwan's universities and nascent *nütongzhi* activist circles.²² The lesbian feminist critique took issue with T gender as mimetic of the oppressive power of patriarchal masculinity, and in place of T/*po* gendered identity, lesbian feminists began to elaborate new forms of sexual identity such as *bu fen* (literally "not distinguishing," implying outright rejection of T/*po* classification), *lesbian* (using the English term), and *nütongzhi* (literally "woman comrade").²³ Around the mid-1990s, as both Zheng and Gian show, a generation of younger women whose adherence to T/*po* roles was arguably less strict than that of the women in the bar-based subculture a decade earlier had taken up a renewed appropriation and proliferation of T/*po*-modeled subcultural styles. This spawned a plethora of semi-humorous micro-categories like "sensitive new-age T" (*xin hao T*), "nellie T" (*niangniang T*), and "super-*po*" (*nüqiangpo*).²⁴

Context 3: The Emergence of *Nütongzhi*

Once I went to play cards with them. I was curious what it'd be like to play cards with a bunch of Ts, so I went along. There were six or seven Ts there, and we'd just

arrived and sat down to start playing when another T came in, and straight away she started stripping off. It was summer at the time and really hot. It turned out her chest was all flat, with just two scars on it. I did my best to stay composed. And then she undid her belt—she wasn't taking [her pants] off, only undoing her belt on account of the heat, and she sat leisurely down like that and started playing cards. I didn't know where to look, so I just stared at my cards. When we played, the Ts sat at one table and the *pos* at another; the Ts played their game and the *pos* played theirs, you know, it was that notion of "how can women sit at the same table with men?" We played for a while, then someone said "Hey, you women keep playing, we're going to watch a sex show (*niurouchang*)." I didn't want to go—how could they go to a sex show! How could they exploit women that way? I thought the whole thing was completely vulgar (*diji*). But they were very excited, they did go, and in the end they got beaten up! . . . A bunch of men didn't like the look of them—a bunch of men who'd been watching the sex show, the same as them. These guys trapped them in an alley and said to them (in Minnan): "So, you think you look like men, do you?" And some of them got totally beat up.²⁵

This story was related to Gian Jia-shin in the mid-1990s by an informant born in 1964, recalling an event in 1989. When Gian spoke to her, the woman was an editor of *Nüpengyou* (Girlfriend) magazine for "Women zhi Jian" (Between Us), one of Taiwan's foremost *nütongzhi* social and political organizations, founded in 1990. The excerpt speaks to my concerns in this chapter in a number of ways. First, the afternoon described illustrates the specificity of the cultural norms of gendered behavior in T/*po* sociality at this time and in this particular social context. It upholds a rigid demarcation between "men" and "women" (Ts and *pos*) such that the two groups socialize separately, a demarcation that privileges those on the masculine side—who may sit shirtless with belt unbuckled and partake in the leisure practice of attending sex shows. The Ts the informant met enact a mode of T/*po* sociality based on a quite specific form of working-class, Hokkien (Minnan-speaking) masculinity.²⁶ Second, by describing the physical assault on the Ts by male members of the sex show audience, the excerpt illustrates how the hypervisibility of Ts in public space makes them subject to verbal and bodily violence at the hands of a broader heterosexist culture ruthlessly determined to enforce the law that corporeal sex must equate with social gender and, implicitly, must determine the gender of sexual object choice.²⁷ Third, the excerpt demonstrates particularly clearly the epistemic conflict between older-style T/*po* cultures—figured here in the events of the afternoon the informant describes—and the at-that-time emergent discourse of lesbian feminism. The latter is represented in the infor-

mant's own attitude toward the events she describes: she voices disapproval at the rigid gender demarcation between Ts and *pos*, and a feminist but also indicatively middle-class horror at the "exploitative" but also "vulgar" activity of the Ts going to see the sex show. Thus, the excerpt dramatizes the effectively double-abjection of T subjects, *both* by a heterosexist broader culture *and* by the emergent discourse of lesbian feminism.

In an important recent paper, Naifei Ding and Jenpeng Liu make a historicizing argument about Qiu's oft-debated T-like characters. They read Qiu's early works (including *The Crocodile's Journal*) as caught between T/*po* sub-cultural practice and the then-emergent sexual, political, and academic culture of lesbian feminism. They propose that Qiu's narrators appear always in the process of a painful internal dissolution precisely because Qiu was writing them just when the new, woman-identified lesbian feminism was becoming popularized on university campuses islandwide. This greatly complicated the cross-gender identification required for the forms of (proto-)T subjecthood Qiu's beleaguered protagonists struggle to inhabit. They write:

By taking into account an emergent . . . lesbian feminist movement in northern Taiwan at the moment of publication of Qiu's two earlier works (1991–1994), we believe that Qiu astutely yet violently represented the fractures within, both constructing and dissolving the representation of unifying and unified lesbian selves and relations.²⁸

In this very persuasive reading, Qiu's proto-T characters fall apart and are torn apart as a result of being caught between two historically distinct modes of feminine homoerotic identification. Qiu was engaged in writing into being a "T textuality" at precisely the moment when the cultural conditions for the inhabitation of T subjecthood became doubly problematic. As I will elaborate below, I think this dilemma is revealed particularly clearly in "Platonic Hair."

Gender as Somatic Disorder: "Zero Degree" and "Platonic Hair"

For the reasons I have outlined above, in 1988–1990 when Qiu wrote these first homoerotic stories, the question of gender was at the forefront of local discussions about *nütongxinglian* in at least three interrelated ways. First, due to the lengthy cultural shadow thrown by indigenized sexology's construction of homosexuality as gender inversion, the bearer of lesbianism's stigma, in Taiwan as in Euro-American contexts, was (and is) the "obviously" masculine woman.²⁹ Second, in the T/*po* subcultures that were then the dominant forms

of female homosexual sociality, sexual identification was signaled through the foregrounding of secondary gender in *T/po* style. Third, in the emergent discourse of lesbian feminism, gender was the primary category of analysis by means of which existing social relations — including those of *T/po* subcultures — were critiqued. Given all this, it is not surprising that the *nütongxinglian* subjectivity emerges, in Qiu's early works, through painful, internally contradicted gender formations. Although, as many have argued, Qiu's fiction can be seen as centrally concerned with writing into being a particular kind of *sexual* subject (variously interpreted as “lesbian,” “T,” and “proto-T”), in Qiu's early stories it is *gender*, as much as and arguably even more than sexuality *per se*, that emerges as the locus of subjective and corporeal contradiction, disease, and stigma. In their treatment of *nütongxinglian* as a form of gender-troubling, these stories draw attention to the epistemic clashes around gender that persist at the heart of (post)modern Taiwanese regimes of homosexual definition.

In the stories I discuss below, then, representing sexual desire between women becomes to a large degree a problem of representing complex, dynamic, and internally contradictory formations of gender identification. The protagonists in both stories are ambiguously and difficultly gendered: In “Zero Degree,” a “male” narrator provides cover for the subtextual presence of a masculine woman; in “Platonic Hair,” the “female” narrator has her hair cut short, wears suits and aftershave, and finally becomes radically unsure of her/his own gender identity. In “Zero Degree,” the representation of counter-normative formations of gender and sexuality is relatively covert. The questions of masculine-identified femininity and feminine homosexual desire are not overtly present in the text, but are instead connotatively inscribed in extravagant descriptions of the painful stigmata that erupt eloquently on the narrator's mouth and feet. In “Platonic Hair,” written two years later, these questions are closer to the surface. In this case the stigma — unruly and strangely auto-animated hair — overtly refers to the cultural conventions of gender presentation (long versus short hair), and the story concerns a woman who presents herself as a T and sexually desires a *po*-type woman. In each instance, the visibly stigmatized body of the narrator is a staging ground for the ideological and psychic contradictions occasioned by subjectivities whose gendered and sexual identifications run counter to *both* dominant *and* emergent cultural belief systems about what bodies mean. The body becomes dis-integrated into a series of floating signifiers symptomatic of the radical gender displacement entailed in claiming the dangerous identity of *nütongxinglian*.

In my discussion of these stigmatic bodies as expressers of queer shame, I am drawing on Erving Goffman's classic sociological study, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. For Goffman, writing in the United

States in the early 1960s, “stigma” refers to “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” due to any of a range of defiling markers, including homosexuality.³⁰ The identity of the stigmatized individual is “spoiled” as a result of his or her possession of a trait that either visibly and immediately discredits her or his social identity, or potentially does so.³¹ Stigma is intimately related to shame; shame arises in the stigmatized person as a response to the internalized value-system of the broader social collectivity that classifies her or his difference as a degrading one.³² Goffman’s theory thus enables a reading of Qiu’s narrators’ stigmata as the somatic signifiers of the psychic experience of a particular, historically conditioned gendered and sexual shame.

In “Platonic Hair,” the ostensibly female narrator’s difficult relation to normative gender is played out through her peculiar hair, which is animated with a sinister will of its own and can grow instantaneously longer as if by magic.³³ The narrator is a popular romance writer whose boss pays for a female sex-worker to live with her for six months in order to deepen the narrator’s understanding of sex and love from a masculine perspective. After she moves in, the sex-worker, Han-Han, insists on cutting the narrator’s hair and makes her don the T-ish accoutrements of hair-gel, men’s suits, and aftershave, so that she can better approximate Han-Han’s “ideal man.” Han-Han herself, meanwhile, favors the distinctly *po* femme-fatale style: long hair, high heels, sequined dresses and handbags, and plunging necklines. As the two live together, a strong emotional bond grows between them until the narrator realizes that she feels an intense physical attraction to Han-Han. They finally have sex one night when Han-Han returns home after being violently raped by two johns. At the end of six months the contract expires and Han-Han leaves, but the narrator remains obsessed with her and stalks her through the city as she works. As the narrator’s hair grows longer, it begins to act as an expressive vehicle for her ambivalent yearning for Han-Han. Her long hair behaves as though magnetized by the other woman, straining toward her whenever she is near, as though it wanted to embrace her — or perhaps, to kill her.

Throughout this story the mechanism of gender differentiation is signaled most strongly in the symbol of hair and relative hair length, to which Qiu’s text pays sustained, almost obsessive attention. Consider the hair-cutting scene that takes place shortly after Han-Han comes to stay at the narrator’s apartment:

“According to the rules of the contract, you are now my man,” [said Han-Han] “and like it or not you’ve got to look like my kind of man. The first thing we’ve got to do is cut that pretty hair of yours.”

Picking up some scissors, she ordered me to sit down in front of the big floor-length mirror. First she chopped off the length of my hair in one snip, leaving hair reaching just to the nape of my neck. Then she carefully shaped the remaining hair a pinch at a time. She moved around me, entranced by the pleasure of her activity, examining me from different angles, yet seemingly quite forgetful of my existence.

First she trimmed the ends of my hair at the back into a perfect crescent, and then, after cutting two pointed sideburns in front of my ears, she appeared to wake up again. With a cry of delight she hugged my head and impulsively kissed me on the forehead, shouting “My man has appeared!”³⁴

Here, Han-Han (whose self-assurance and strength of personality lead Liou Liang-ya to classify her in Gian’s category of the “super-*po*”) takes it into her own hands to construct from the narrator her “ideal man” — who also, uncoincidentally, has much in common with the subcultural image of the T — and the process of transformation begins with the haircut.³⁵ If the narrator’s role as ideal man/T is defined primarily by her short gelled hairstyle, correspondingly, the narrator’s attraction to Han-Han is catalyzed most readily by the sight of Han-Han’s long, soft, wavy hair: it is enough to rob her of her vision and cause her to feel a sensation like an electric shock.³⁶ As Liou persuasively proposes in relation to this story, “hair becomes an important fetish through which T and *po* demarcate their respective positions.”³⁷

But as well as staging very clearly the workings of T/*po* secondary gender distinctions, “Platonic Hair” also furnishes an exemplary illustration of Ding and Liu’s historicizing argument on the liminal position of Qiu’s early fiction vis-à-vis competing models of *nütongxinglian* gender. On the most obvious level, the narrator and Han-Han’s erotic identities are animated across *gender difference* (man/woman; T/*po*); still, there also lurks in the text a disruptive countermodel of feminine gender identity and sexual attraction, a model based not on the gender difference of relative hair length but on *gender sameness*, whose symbol is the mirror.³⁸ Indeed, the text as a whole is riven by the tension between these two competing models of sexual relationships between women. The narrator tells of her first sight of Han-Han’s body:

After her shower she emerged wearing a filmy purple negligee. I caught fleeting glimpses of her bra and underpants underneath, and the curves of her body showed up as clean as those of a statue. This was the first time I’d ever been so close to a young woman’s body, and though I shouldn’t have, I felt slightly excited. *It was just like the feeling I’d had when I’d looked at myself naked in the mirror for the first time.*³⁹

Here, the narrator's desire for Han-Han is sparked not by her *po*-like difference from the narrator's own T-styled body, but instead by its reflection of the familiar mirror image of the narrator's *own* body. But if in this passage gender-sameness produces a generally pleasant sensation of "slight excitement," at the story's conclusion, the doubling effect of mirrors, this time those found in the sex club where the narrator finally locates Han-Han, is far more troubling:

I follow "her" into the women's washroom, take out my scissors, and before "she" has a chance to scream, *snip snap*, I chop off the hair in great hanks. The fallen hair flies over and winds itself around "her," snatching off "her" longhaired wig. *In the mirrors along both walls I see a bald man, and I can't tell who it is.*⁴⁰

The story's denouement—set, surely not by accident, in that *locus classicus* of gender policing, the "ladies' room"—describes a nightmare vision whose most unsettling aspects are, first, the sudden appearance of a man when both reader and narrator had thought that the bathroom contained two women; and second, the doubling and melding effect of mirroring and the consequent impossibility of differentiating between one gendered body and the other.⁴¹ Is the man in the mirror Han-Han without her wig—enclosed in quotation marks as "her" gendered pronouns have been throughout the sections of the story set in the present—or, is the man the narrator with newly shorn hair? Perhaps most ominously, why is there only *one* figure in the mirror, when, ostensibly, there are two people in the bathroom? What emerges very forcefully from this final confrontation in the ladies' room is not only the monstrosity routinely attributed to gender-deviant T bodies by homophobic and lesbian feminist critics alike; but also and uncoincidentally, the nightmarish vision of a hall-of-mirrors of endless sameness.

Euro-American critics of lesbian feminism's abjection of butch/femme gender have highlighted the limits of the radical lesbian feminist ideal of "egalitarian sex" that celebrates sameness, equality, and the interchangeability of partners and acts and abjures any differentiation of sexual or gendered roles.⁴² As I have discussed, related arguments have been going on in Taiwan since the time when Qiu wrote these early stories. As Lü Jinyuan has recently written, this has meant that increasingly, the gendered specificity of the T subject is minimized by the feminist assertion that "Ts are women, too" (*T ye shi nüren*), with the implication that Ts have more to gain from gender identification with the broader category "women" than from gender differentiation from *pos* and heterosexual women and identification with the specific and limited category of Ts.⁴³ Published in 1990, "Platonic Hair" emerged at a kind of cultural flash-

point for the collision between older, local models of *nütongxinglian* gender differentiation in T/*po*, and the encroaching globalizing discourse of lesbian feminism that emphasized egalitarian comradeship among *all* women. In this light, it is unsurprising that the story should turn on the irresolvable, painfully conflicted definitions of *nütongxinglian* as gender-transitivity versus gender-separatism.⁴⁴

Qiu's story of two years earlier, "Zero Degree," is narrated by a young, ostensibly male narrator who is tortured by two forms of bodily affliction: a crooked mouth, which is a constant source of shame, and feet infected with a severe case of tinea (ringworm) that produces itchiness and painful, pus-filled blisters. The torment of these afflictions is not only physical: The narrator's crooked mouth, in particular, also causes him emotional torment because it prevents him from forming sexual relationships with women. When a relationship does develop between himself and a girl student, his crooked mouth continues to stand in the way of its fulfillment: The woman appears blind to his deformity, but he cannot love her since the feature she overlooks is the one that most defines his own sense of identity. The more the narrator gets involved with the woman, the worse his tinea grows until finally, when she kisses his crooked mouth, he is driven to lock himself up—once again, in a bathroom—and slice at his feet with a kitchen knife.⁴⁵ This narrator has been read, by Liou and by Ding and Liu, as a closeted T or proto-T, such that the narrator's physical pathology stands in as a cipher for the "defect" and stigma of the T subject.⁴⁶

Like "Platonic Hair," "Zero Degree" presents an interesting relationship between the narrator's troubled gender identity and his bodily afflictions. The following passage describes the narrator's second meeting with the female student who loves him:

She was no longer that little sailor wearing khaki shorts, with short hair under a cap. Standing before me was a big girl (*da nühai*) in a long cream skirt and red shoes, with wavy hair down to her shoulders. This new image of her opened up a gulf—a voice saying "she is a girl" peeled out like cathedral bells to all but split my head open, while "I am nothing" echoed back in a thin, twittering cry.⁴⁷

While the girl has changed from her previous cute sailor-boy look to a more feminine—or *po*-like—attire, what torments the narrator is precisely his own seeming lack of *any* gender identity: "she is a girl" (*ta shi nühai*) is answered by "I am nothing" (*wo shenme ye bu shi*). But the narrator's agonizing lack of an inhabitable gender position is addressed again, differently, at story's conclusion:

Suddenly, she gently lifted my head, and sucked deeply down on my mouth—I saw the image of this adhesion in slow motion. “Aaaahh—” Just at the moment she sucked down I pushed her away and began to wail, the consciousness that “I am a crooked-mouth” instantaneously flooding my mind.⁴⁸

The girl’s kiss precipitates the revelation that answers the narrator’s internal voice in the previous passage: no longer “nothing,” the narrator now finds that he “is a crooked-mouth” (*wo shi wai zui*). Reading this alongside the previous passage, “crooked-mouth” emerges, precisely, *as a gender position*: the narrator is neither a “girl” nor a “boy.” The affliction of the narrator’s mouth, then, signifies his troubled relation to normative dimorphous gender.

A related interpretation can be made of the narrator’s infected feet. When the topic of his feet is first raised, the narrator explains:

They began to get infected from the moment [the girl student] reappeared. I was able to get great pleasure from rubbing them: by means of rubbing faster and faster, hotter and hotter, I was able to relieve myself of many a trivial irritation. But this compulsive rubbing led my feet on the path toward inflammation.⁴⁹

The coincidence of the foot infection with the reappearance of the girl and the highly suggestive imagery of frenzied rubbing leading to satisfying release suggest that the narrator’s diseased feet stand metaphorically for his sexual desire—a desire characterized both by its apparently feminine cast, with the evocation of clitoral rubbing, and by its experience by the narrator as pathological. A clue about why this desire may be represented as pathological can be found in the following passage:

When I was moving house I ran about everywhere in slippers, and some fine dust settled on my feet, making me cry out hoarsely in pain. The blisters, originally confined to one place, had by now crept into all of the spaces between my toes, and most of the blisters had broken from the constant rubbing, so that the skin between my toes was as scarred as the bark of an old tree. . . . After moving house, as though driven to compensate for something, I not only bought all kinds of different medicinal ointments and potions, but discovered an ingenious method by which, as if possessed, I could now bandage [my feet]. Each day I checked the progress of their recovery, as if this were a matter of grave consequence—and yet they seemed not at all appreciative of my efforts, and, showing no fear of all the various obstacles in its path, [the infection] advanced ferociously in its territorial takeover, establishing a steadfast occupation. In the end I surrendered, removed the bandages, and threw away the various medications: let them return to their essential state (*bense*).⁵⁰

As well as its exemplary illustration of the excessive, almost salacious manner in which the story lingers on the gory details of the narrator's putrefying feet, this passage is also quite suggestive in its revelation of the narrator's attempts to *bandage* his feet. In the context of Chinese fiction, any discussion of foot bandaging inevitably reminds one that the foot — particularly the painful, diseased, bandaged foot — is a body part strongly overdetermined in relation to gender. The history of footbinding and representations of footbinding means that such imagery inevitably brings with it connotations of femininity — in particular, with femininity understood as a cultural state, a state achieved with difficulty by cultivating a set of culturally prescribed (and sometimes actually pathogenic) behaviors.⁵¹ Following this interpretation, the ostensibly male narrator's festering bandaged feet indicate the subtextual presence of a feminine subject. Such a presence begins to account for the fact that the narrator experiences his sexual desire for the female student as pathological: if the apparently male narrator is, in a sense, an undercover woman, then his desire for the other woman is a homosexual one. In the image that then comes into focus — that of a masculine woman who both loves another woman and is presented as pathological and physically repellant (at least to him/herself) — we discern, perhaps, a vestigial shadow of the abjected “mannish lesbian” of Yu Dafu's era.

If this analysis of the symbol of the infected feet supports the common reading of “Zero Degree” as a closeted “T text” in which the apparently male narrator is legible as a masculine-identified woman pursuing another woman, then the painful, bandaged feet suggest a further association. In light of such a reading, the imagery of bandaged body parts brings to mind the subcultural T practice of breast binding. Antonia Yengning Chao has analyzed this widespread practice in detail in her ethnographic study of early 1990s T/*po* bar cultures in Taiwan.⁵² As Chao's research shows, the physical modification among Ts of their breast shape in order to have it signify “T-ness” rather than normative femininity is an often excruciating practice. Chao quotes one T informant's description:

I started to use scotch tape to bind my breasts at fourteen. In summertime when I tore the tape off, there would pour a basinful of sweat. I was waitressing at a restaurant back then and was required to hold plates above my head while catering to patrons. After a while, my armpits hurt like hell. It sometimes bled after I tore off the tape. Next morning before it was healed up I bound my breasts again. As a result, it was never healed over.⁵³

The entangled chains of association in Qiu's story that link feet, infection, bandages, and sexual desire between women find another point of reference in

this subcultural practice, whose description above recognizably echoes Qiu's narrator's descriptions of his agonizing struggles in bandaging his infected feet. Following this associative chain to its conclusion, the "male" narrator's feet also connote the bound and painful T breast as subcultural signifier of T gender. Once again, the pathological body is symptomatic of the stigma of the ambiguously gendered, same-sex-attracted woman. In Goffman's terms, the T's "spoiled identity" is etched painfully into the very flesh of Qiu's narrator's feet and mouth.

Conclusion

As Qiu's critics have argued, her literary project of representing sexual subjects constituted through spoiled identity does undeniably raise troublesome questions. But as Qiu's fiction itself so powerfully attests, what is required is not the suppression of these questions, relating as they do to what remain among the central experiences of queer life (stigmatization, shame, subjective injury, psychic abjection). Rather, such troublesome questions require further elaboration in order to arrive at more sensitive understandings of the lived experience of variously abjected sexual and gendered subjects, and, through such an understanding, to work toward the transformation, rather than the disavowal, of such negative experience. The strange, violently uneasy bodies that inhabit these early stories by Qiu — painful, stigmatic, out-of-control bodies — can be read as expressive vehicles for the particular cultural contradictions besetting feminine subjects engaged in elaborating counternormative forms of gender and sexuality in Taiwan at the beginning of the 1990s. These contradictions arise not only between dominant and subordinated forms of sexual culture, but also between the various and sharply discontinuous forms of minority sexual culture. In this case, the subjects of local sexual subcultures produced through the secondary genders of T and *po*, may become targets of homophobic abjection by the globalizing rhetoric of lesbian feminism with its emphasis on "woman-identification."⁵⁴ Thus the textual bodies of Qiu's early narrators, bodies both tormented and defined by their alarming supernatural tendencies and pathological symptoms, are themselves symptomatic of a wider cultural crisis over the relations between gender and sexuality in late twentieth-century Taiwan. Haunted hair, infected feet, a stigmatic mouth — all can be seen not so much as symptoms of the T body's inherent pathology and deficiency, but, on the contrary, as a prescription directed at those multifarious forms of cultural regulation that collude to render some selves, some bodies, effectively uninhabitable.

Notes

My grateful thanks to Larissa Heinrich, for her wonderfully smart and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. An Australian Research Council Discovery Grant supported this research.

1. Liou Liang-ya compares Qiu with Hall in *Yuwang gengyishi* (p. 112). Ta-wei Chi criticizes Qiu's reliance on a masculine homoerotic imaginary in *Wan'an* (pp. 137–154). For a discussion of the cultural context in late-1980s Taipei that spawned such a passionate interest in European intellectual and particularly film culture, see the article by Qiu's friend Lai Hsiang-yin, "Youyu Beidi" (thanks to Chen "Deadcat" Yushin and Wang Ying for drawing this article to my attention). To speculate on one possible transnational influence from a less masculinist source: There is a really striking resonance between Qiu's story "Platonic Hair," discussed here, and a painting by Frida Kahlo entitled "Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair" (1940). The painting is of a newly shorn Kahlo dressed in a man's suit, surrounded by the eerily alive-looking fallen ends of her own cropped hair, and the image incorporates the Spanish text of a Mexican song that translates, "You see, if I loved you, it was for your hair, now that you are without hair, I love you no longer"—a theme that is taken up very directly in the opening scene of Qiu's story. The apparent transcultural conversation between Qiu's story and Kahlo's painting is intriguing, but unfortunately unverifiable.

2. Liou, *Yuwang gengyishi*, 83–152.

3. In the remainder of this essay I refrain from calling the sexual subject that begins to surface in Qiu's early stories a "lesbian" one. Although the sexological neologisms *nütongxing'ai* and *nütongxinglian* ("female homosexuality") have been in circulation in Mandarin since early in the twentieth century (Sang, *Emerging Lesbian*, 99–126), nevertheless, in late 1980s and early 1990s Taiwan when Qiu wrote these stories, the politicized discourse of lesbian sexual identity, referenced in the newer term *nütongzhi*, was only just beginning to produce a subculture capable of effectively challenging existing, local, female homoerotic cultures based on T and *po* gender roles. See discussion below.

4. Martin, *Situating Sexualities*, 215–251.

5. See for example Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 111–139.

6. Martin, *Situating Sexualities*.

7. This historicizing argument was initially proposed in Ding and Liu's essay, "Crocodile Skin." Ding and Liu's essay provides a primary inspiration for this chapter.

8. Sang, *Emerging Lesbian*, 99–160.

9. However, as Sang underlines, the "homoerotic school romance" genre constituted another, very different Republican-period tendency and portrayed love between women in a highly idealized manner.

10. Sang mentions this story very briefly in *Emerging Lesbian* (pp. 153–154).

11. Yu, "Ta shi yige ruo nüzi," 281–282.

12. *Ibid.*, 308.

13. *Ibid.*, 310.

14. McMahan, *Misers*, 44.

15. See also Ding, *Obscene Things*, 241; and Martin, *Situating Sexualities*, 119–140, on Taiwanese author Chen Xue's queer redeployment of the *enü*.

16. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 101.
17. Thanks to Wang Ying and Chen Yushin for their timely reminder on the significance of this latter point.
18. Chao, "Embodying the Invisible"; Zheng, *Nü'er quan*, 130–151; Gian, "Huanchu nütongzhi," 79–99. See also Lü, "Taiwan nütongzhi jiubazhi yanjiu."
19. Zheng, *Nü'er quan*, 130–131; Chao, "Embodying the Invisible," 17; Lü, "Taiwan nütongzhi jiubazhi yanjiu."
20. Chao, "Embodying the Invisible," 17; Zheng, *Nü'er quan*, 132.
21. Chao, "Embodying the Invisible," 30, 37–38, 155.
22. Ding and Liu, "Crocodile Skin." See also Chao, "US Space Shuttles."
23. See also Zheng, *Nü'er quan*, 136; Gian, "Huanchu nütongzhi," 99–107; and Chao, "Embodying the Invisible," 137–141.
24. Gian includes a table with twenty-four such microclassifications in "Huanchu nütongzhi," 94–95.
25. *Ibid.*, 80–81.
26. See also Zheng, *Nü'er quan*, 145.
27. Put another way, these T subjects are unintelligible in terms of what Butler calls the "heterosexual matrix." *Gender Trouble*, 16ff.
28. Ding and Liu, "Crocodile Skin," 4.
29. Newton, *Margaret Mead*, 176–88; Newton, *Mother Camp*, xii; and Edelman, *Homographesis*, 3–23.
30. Goffman, *Stigma*, 9.
31. *Ibid.*, 14–15, 57–128.
32. *Ibid.*, 18.
33. See my translation of Qiu's "Platonic Hair," in Martin (trans.), *Angelwings*, 51–73.
34. Qiu, "Platonic Hair," 60.
35. Liou, *Yuwang gengyishi*, 126.
36. Qiu, "Platonic Hair," 55.
37. Liou, *Yuwang gengyishi*, 125.
38. "Erotic identity" is Newton and Walton's term. "Misunderstanding," 167–175. Like the hair symbol, the mirror symbol recurs throughout the story.
39. Qiu, "Platonic Hair," 60 (emphasis added).
40. *Ibid.*, 72 (emphasis added).
41. See Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 20–29.
42. Newton and Walton, "Misunderstanding," 168; Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 129–138.
43. Lü, "Taiwan nütongzhi jiubazhi yanjiu," 6–7.
44. Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 87–88.
45. See note 32 above.
46. Liou, *Yuwang gengyishi*, 119; Ding and Liu, "Crocodile Skin," 7–8.
47. Qiu, "Linjiedian," 8.
48. *Ibid.*, 15.
49. *Ibid.*, 5.
50. *Ibid.*, 13.

51. See, for example, Heinrich, "Handmaids," 267–269.
52. Chao, "Embodying the Invisible," 137–185.
53. *Ibid.*, 151–152.
54. On localizing and globalizing rhetorics in relation to the debate between *T/po* and *bu fen* discourses, see Chao, "US Space Shuttles."



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Author/s:

Martin, Fran

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