Book Reviews

Ta-Wei Chi

_A Queer Invention in Taiwan: A History of Tongzhi Literature_ (同志文學史：台灣的發明), Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2017, 520 pp., NT$750 (hb); NT$650 (pb).

Ta-wei Chi’s magnum opus, _A Queer Invention in Taiwan: A History of Tongzhi Literature_, is the culmination of years of research, writing, and scholarly conversations. It is also a sequel to a more succinct monograph that he published in 2012, _A Short History of Tongzhi Literature in Taiwan_ (Tainan: National Museum of Taiwanese Literature). In the words of Fang-ming Chen, who wrote a foreword introducing the book, it is perhaps more apt to describe the publication of Chi’s study as an unprecedented ‘event’ (p. 7). However, instead of depicting Chi’s book as filling a ‘gap’ in our understanding of Taiwanese (literary) history, as Chen does in his foreword, I prefer to frame it (and its significance) as another kind of event. There is no question that Chi’s study profoundly enriches our knowledge of the history of Taiwanese _tongzhi_ (同志) literature. But its scholarly merit and political message more broadly attest to the changing social fabrics and the context of ongoing scholarly debates in which it took shape.

Chi received his PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Los Angeles, under the supervision of Shu-mei Shih in 2006, and he has been teaching as an assistant professor at the Graduate Institute of Taiwanese Literature at the National Chengchi University in Taipei since 2010. Those who are familiar with his writings before he began pursuing doctoral work may remember Chi as a well-known science-fiction author and a prominent advocate of queer theory in Taiwan in the 1990s. The appearance of _A Queer Invention in Taiwan_ is thus an ‘event’ in many senses of the term: It marks a decisive transformation of Chi’s scholarly focus from promoting ‘queer discourses’ to studying ‘_tongzhi_ literature’; it signals the rapidly evolving political environment of Taiwan in which the feasibility of doing gay and lesbian studies parallels the advancement of queer civil rights (Taiwan is on its way to legalise same-sex marriage by 2019); it inserts Taiwan studies into a new
phase of globalisation in which the field of Sinophone studies (inaugurated by Shih) plays a determinant role in narrating and relating Taiwan to the world; and of course it establishes tongzhi literature and tongzhi history as mutually productive fields of scholarly inquiry that are just beginning to formalise—but in unpredictable ways.

It is impossible to do justice to Chi’s magisterial tome in a short review, so I will highlight some of its major contributions. Above all, the book provides compelling evidence to challenge the long-held status of Hsien-yung Pai’s Crystal Boys (1983) in the Sinophone tongzhi literary canon. In this sense, its temporal reach to the 1950s encapsulates a historical understanding of queer Taiwan symmetrical to Hans Tao-ming Huang’s Queer Modernity and Sexual Politics in Taiwan (Hong Kong University Press, 2011) and the volume Perverse Taiwan that I co-edited with Yin Wang (Routledge, 2016). Yet, organised around seven chronological chapters and an epilogue, the book accomplishes much more. The first chapter orients the book by aligning its theoretical, methodological, and empirical interventions with the relevant debates in literary studies, gender and sexuality studies, Cold War historiography, and Taiwan studies. Most importantly, this opening chapter introduces a model of queer reading called the ‘arousal model’. Chi formulated this to supplement but also exceed the various paradigms of queer comprehension proposed by David Halperin to leverage the practice of historicism in queer literary criticism (see his How to Do the History of Homosexuality published by University of Chicago Press in 2002). Chi’s ‘arousal model’ thus makes the book very much a product of its time, especially given the way it cogently captures the ‘affective’ and ‘temporal’ turns in queer studies writ large.

Chi’s command of tongzhi as an organising principle enables him to genealogise homoerotic literature and backtrack its history to a period before the queer lexicon of tongzhi began to enjoy a wide currency, to entertain the different trajectories of the tongzhi literary scene beyond its most familiar definition and medium from the 1990s (e.g., the rise of internet literature), and to distil non-mainstream forms of tongzhi literature including queer indigenous writings and transgender texts in the new millennium (Ch. 7). Moreover, as a core reference point, the concept of tongzhi provides a platform for integrating literary works with homoerotic themes before Pai (Ch. 2), with explicit lesbian contents (Ch. 3), and with allusions to the American breed of individualism (Ch. 4). In foregrounding this conceptual coherence, Chi persuasively recasts the significance of Pai’s Crystal Boys as a watershed moment in which tongzhi literature began to feature the way queers overturn strict loyalty to patrilineal kinship structures and family systems (Ch. 5). Finally, the epistemic purchase of tongzhi presents Chi an opportunity to rewrite the contours of