

Feature Article 【專題論文】

Infectious Postmodernism in/as *Notes of a  
Desolate Man*  
《荒人手記》中的後現代主義

Nicholas A. KALDIS\*

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**關鍵詞：**後現代主義、病毒 / 傳染性的、愛滋病、非聯想性的、拼貼 / 拼湊、離間（離間化的主體）

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\* Associate Professor, Department of Asian and Asian American Studies, SUNY-Binghamton.  
賓漢頓大學亞洲及美亞裔研究系副教授。

## Abstract

This essay highlights and analyzes postmodern characteristics of Chu T'ien-wen's seminal 1994 novel *Notes of a Desolate Man*. It simultaneously undertakes a close reading of the novel and engages in a critical dialogue with other interpretations and contextual analyses surrounding this controversial text. This essay's main conclusion is that the novel's representation of gay male culture stigmatized by AIDS, in combination with its cosmopolitan postmodern panoplies, encourages readers to view postmodernity and postmodern literature in Taiwan as twin representatives of a debauched, contagious, and invasive foreign lifestyle and literature.

## 摘要

本文彰顯並分析朱天文於一九九四年所發表的種子小說《荒人手記》之中的後現代特徵，於仔細解讀該小說的同時，並與環繞於此具爭議性之文本周圍的其他翻譯和文脈分析進行批判性對話。本文的主要結論是：該小說所代表的被愛滋病汙名化的男同性戀文化，與其世界性的後現代華服美飾相結合，促使讀者將臺灣的後現代性與後現代文學視為墮落的、蔓延的和侵入的外來生活方式與文學作品的雙重代表。

## Introduction

From its first printing in 1994, Chu T'ien-wen's award-winning novel *Notes of a Desolate Man* (荒人手記; hereafter also referred to as *Notes*) has drawn the attention of writers and critics of every stripe. Their reactions have run the gamut from taking the novel to task for its representation of gay culture in Taiwan to hailing it as an unparalleled literary achievement.<sup>1</sup>

The novel reads as an autobiographical quasi-bildungsroman of a 40-year old gay Taiwanese man named Xiao Shao (小韶). In a rambling first-person narrative constantly self-interrupted by tangential discussions, Xiao Shao describes selected events from his past, related to love, sex, friendship, and family. His reflections are prompted by the recent death of his best friend Ah-yao (阿堯, full name Huang Shuyao, 黃書堯), from AIDS, whom he helped care for during the latter's final agonizing days in a Japanese clinic.

In what follows, I present a close reading of the structure and content of *Notes of a Desolate Man*, assess how the extant scholarship has addressed the novel, and simultaneously contribute my own interpretation.

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1 Contributions to the discourse surrounding this controversial text can be found in footnotes and the bibliography below; several are addressed directly in the text of this essay. For a concise summary of the socio-economic history of the era of the novel's writing and contents, see June Yip, *Envisioning Taiwan: Fiction, Cinema, and the Nation in the Cultural Imaginary* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), esp. 211-215. Yip's focus is on the integration of Taiwan into the global economy from approximately the late 1970s to the early 2000s. Although Yip's book was published in 2004, and although her final chapters present cogent discussions of globalization and postmodernity in Taiwan, curiously, no mention is made of *Notes of a Desolate Man*.

## Extant Criticism of the Novel's Contextual Politics

While my interpretation will focus more on the structure and content of the novel, it is important to mention that some local critics have been especially alarmed by particular aspects of its content, namely what is perceived as the novel's negative intervention into the politics of representation and visibility of gay men in Taiwan. Liang-ya Liou, for example, faults the novel for "celebrat[ing] gay men's decadent aesthetic" while "endors[ing] mainstream family values."<sup>2</sup> Among the most pointed of these attempts to reveal and contextualize the actual socio-economic effects of the novel is that of Raymond Wei-cheng Chu (朱偉誠 Zhu Weicheng). Zhu demonstrates that, before a multiplicity of *tongzhi*<sup>3</sup> images and discourses could be given sufficient time and venues to emerge and gain a foothold in Taiwan arts and media, a respected and celebrated (and presumed heterosexual) woman author, with privileged access to and influence on both mainstream and elite cultural discourses, suddenly usurped

2 Liang-ya Liou, "At The Intersection of the Global and the Local: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Fictions by Pai Hsien-yung, Li Ang, Chu Tien-wen, and Chi Ta-wei," *Comparative and Interdisciplinary Research on Asia*: UCLA International Institute: conferences 2000-2001. (<http://www.international.ucla.edu/cira/paper/TWLiou.pdf>), p. 15.

3 *Tongzhi* (同志, lit. "comrade") is a term that "appeared originally in Taiwan Mandarin, via Hong Kong, as a translation of the English term 'queer', [...] it was soon recognized that *tongzhi* approximated more closely something like 'lesbian/gay' identity than queer." (See Fran Martin, "Postmodern Cities and Viral Subjects: Notes of a Desolate Man," in *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2003), pp. 3-4). Martin's entire book, especially the 43-page "Introduction," is a tour-de-force analysis of the origins, histories, and effects—both discursive and concrete—of the various terms involved in the study of queer representations in Taiwan. For another fascinating historical-lexicographical account of a wide array of terms for members of the non-heterosexual community that have appeared in Taiwan discourse in the past several decades, either through local coinage and/or translation, see Liang-ya Liou, "Queer Theory and Politics in Taiwan: The Cultural Translation and (Re)Production of Queerness in and beyond Taiwan Lesbian/Gay/Queer Activism," *NTU Studies in Language and Literature*, 14 (Sep., 2005), pp. 135-142). These and many other relevant Taiwan LGBTQ issues have been treated in numerous studies, most of which are either directly cited or aptly addressed by Martin; see also Liang-ya Liou, op. cit., pp. 123-154, Ta-wei Chi (ed.), *Ku'er Qishilu: Taiwan Dangdai Queer Lunshu Duben* [Queer Archipelago: A Reader in Taiwan Queer Discourse] (Taipei: Yuanzun Wenhua, 1997), and the essays collected in *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* [*Zhongwai Wenxue*] 中外文學, 25, 1 (June, 1995) and 26, 12 (May, 1998). An additional, too-little cited autobiographical-cum-academic treatise in which the author combines, among other approaches to the study of male homosexuality, lexicography, and gay urban (NYC) genealogy, is Daniel Mendelsohn's unique and engaging work, *The Elusive Embrace*.

the subject position of "gay man" and consolidated in the popular imagination her stereotyped image of an effete, effeminate, and promiscuous intellectual homosexual. The novel has thereby impeded already marginalized gay writers who endeavor against many obstacles—often unsuccessfully—to see their works into print and reach a significant audience.<sup>4</sup>

Many other prominent critics of the novel focus more closely on its style and content. These I address at relevant places in the close reading and interpretation below.

## Postmodern Features

Whatever the critic's disposition toward *Notes of a Desolate Man*, there is almost unanimous agreement that it is a thoroughly postmodern text. The I-narrator and protagonist, Xiao Shao, is an exceedingly erudite, widely-travelled,

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4 See Weicheng Zhu, "A Desolate *Tongzhi* Tormented by the Mainstream: A *Tongzhi* Reading of Chu T'ien-wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man*," *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly*, 24, 3 (Aug., 1995): pp. 141-152. I largely agree with Zhu Weicheng's interpretation of the novel's negative effects on the visibility of *tongzhi* culture in Taiwan, and would here add some additional points for consideration: 1) As Zhu's critique makes clear, mainstream society's assumption that an apparently heterosexual[?] woman writer can be the spokesperson for gay male culture is arguably confirmed by the very positive reception the book has received, as evidenced in the numerous awards and positive reviews both the original and the English translation have garnered. However, if a straight male writer were to pen a serious autobiographical novel of a lesbian woman's intimate sexual, emotional, familial, and social experiences, it seems highly unlikely that his work would be met with the same approbation as Chu Tien-wen's novel. Such hypothetical considerations expose how the novel's reception reflects the ways patriarchal ideology underlies and affects many assumptions about male versus female sexuality in reader responses to this and other novels. Brett de Bary has posed this issue in terms of corporeal authenticity: in a novel that claims to represent from a 1<sup>st</sup>-person autobiographical perspective the intimate sexual and emotional experiences of subalternized gay men, should critical interpretations address the issue of the author's access to the bodily experiences represented therein? 2) From the opposing perspective, why can't an ostensibly straight woman writer imagine the intimate sexual, emotional, familial, and social experiences of a gay man? From this perspective, the important issue is not so much Chu Tien-wen's access or aspiration to write from a first-person gay male perspective that stands in question, but rather the disavowed or unconscious attitudes toward homosexual subjectivity that are outed in her fictional narrative. The present essay focuses mostly on the latter.

cosmopolitan, hip, effeminate<sup>5</sup> metrohomosexual man with a Ph.D. in some sort of cultural studies and contemporary academic theory. While Xiao Shao's characterization has been the source of some contention, there is little disagreement over the novel's postmodern style.

Stylistically, the novel's postmodern features include, among other things:

1) The leveling of "high and low" culture that is a trademark of postmodernity;<sup>6</sup> in this novel, I will argue, such a leveling renders psychological depth indistinguishable from superficiality;

2) The celebratory representation of a consumer-flâneur lifestyle, reflected in a cosmopolitan acquisitiveness that constantly places the narrative in the service of a sojourning connoisseur's exhaustive inventories of commodities, tastes, and encounters. As Wang Ban observes, Xiao Shao and his companions are "[...] set adrift on a consumerist spree of 'cultural and historical goods,' blind to each object's "origin or context of acquisition."<sup>7</sup>

3) The third, and perhaps most famous indicator of the novel's postmodernity is found in its non-linear, frequently non-sequitur narration that freely leaps from high to low cultural references in passages that dizzy the reader with their astonishing miscellanies. As Carlos Rojas has noted: "The 'postmodern' quality of *Notes of a Desolate Man* not only is exemplified by the lack of a unitary linear

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5 Xiao Shao repeatedly describes gay men as belonging to the category of the "feminine" (陰/雌). Chapter 8, for example, contains an extensive elaboration of the feminine qualities of gay men.

6 In addition to David Harvey, Zavarzadeh and Morton, and other well-known analyses of postmoderism, see also Jameson's summary of theories of the postmodern in his "foreword" to Lyotard. Among the best summaries of postmodernity in the PRC are those of Tang (1993) and Yang (2002).

7 See Ban Wang, "Reenchanted the Image in Global Culture: Reification and Nostalgia in Zhu Tianwen's Fiction," in David Der-wei Wang and Carlos Rojas (eds.), *Writing Taiwan: A New Literary History* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007), pp. 370-388, 382-383.

narrative at the level of the novel's plot but also is visible in the complex pastiche of allusions making up the work."<sup>8</sup>

## The Solemn vs. the Quotidian

Upon closer inspection, the narrative is largely comprised of an agglutination of seemingly random tangential references around solemn topics. In recurring instances, Xiao Shao's meditations on somber themes such as disease, death, AIDS, sorrow, loneliness, suffering, and alienation are undermined and overwhelmed by the ease and rapidity with which he veers away from any serious probing of these issues into prolix pop culture panoplies and turgid quasi-intellectual treatises. For example, the 12-line first chapter opens: "This is an age of decadence. This is an age of prophecy. I am securely bonded with it, sinking to the bottom, the very bottom" (這是頹廢的年代，這是預言的年代。我與它牢

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8 See Carlos Rojas, "Chu T'ien-wen and Cinematic Shadows," in *The Naked Gaze: Reflections on Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), p. 288. We might here wish to fruitfully contrast the ostensibly similar non-sequitur stream-of-consciousness narratives in *Notes of a Desolate Man* and Wang Wenxing's modernist *Family Catastrophe* (家變), especially those passages in the latter where, in stark contrast to *Notes*, the pastiche of seemingly incongruous topics are clearly interrelated vis-a-vis the narrator's ongoing ruthless probing of his innermost psychological conflicts. See, for example, *Family Catastrophe* Part E and Section 26-43, in which, within a relatively short passage one finds a cornucopia of topics: The search for father, crucifix image, the mother's womb, illness, taste, sound, Hua Mulan, Monkey King, Matrilineal cruelty, Infanticide, filial piety, ancient Chinese poetry, illiteracy of mother, superstition, foreign education, etc. See Wenxing Wang, *Family Catastrophe: A Modernist Novel*, translated by Susan Wan Dolling (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), pp. 44-55; Chinese original, pp. 38-48). Or we could consider passages in *Family Catastrophe* where a meditation on a seemingly random object crystallizes the emotional potency of and connections between the observing narrator and his object, without any of the freewheeling tangential diversions of *Notes*; see e.g. Section 117 on the quilt and the outhouse, e.g. Note also the careful attention to class issues in *Family Catastrophe*—most of Section 117, e.g., is concerned with the theme of poverty (Wenxing Wang, op. cit., pp. 159-164; Chinese original, pp. 130-133). To rephrase: in every instance, when one compares the two novels, one finds in *Notes of a Desolate Man* precisely what Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang refers to as the postmodern "'appetite' for indeterminacy—which is uncongenial to the Modernist temperament" to be a feature significantly absent from *Family Catastrophe*. Wang's novel is a sustained, ruthless *anti-bildungsroman* of how family conflict, class, and history *overdetermine*—rather than deconstruct—subjectivity.

牢的綁在一起，沉到最低，最低了)。<sup>9</sup> After touching upon other weighty matters such as sexual depravity, the Bible, and Buddhism, the chapter concludes with a deadly serious existential declaration: "[...] [l]iving and dying serenely with [...] loneliness, looking death straight in the eye, I am no longer afraid" (安詳的[地]與孤獨同生同滅，平視著死亡的臉孔，我便不再恐懼)。<sup>10</sup> Chapter two continues in this portentous vein for a short while, as Xiao Shao describes his last conversations with Ah Yao as the latter was in the final throes of AIDS. Yet here, but a few pages into the novel, the capricious postmodern bricolage of Xiao Shao's narration already begins to overwhelm the ponderous issues and language with which the novel opened; Chapter two references include: Act Up, Greta Garbo, octopi, the Ganges river, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, the Shih-fen Falls of Taiwan, Brian de Palma, *Man of Lamancha* with Peter O'Toole and Sophia Loren, Tony Orlando and Dawn's "Tie a Yellow Ribbon," Spanish, English, and Japanese words in the Chinese text, Fellini, the wife of Rhodes, Lord Jesus, Noh Drama, Japanese tea ritual, the Epistle of Jude, Ozu Yasujiro, details of Tokyo geography and train lines, Eliot's "The Waste Land," Daoism, Kaposi's sarcomas, the New Testament, the Japanese Festival of the Dead, and more, all within the space of 10 pages. The chapter ends with the narrator mourning for his dying best friend, crying out "'People, people who need people,' as Barbara Streisand sang [...]. My tears were falling; as the wind and rain died out, then returned, I wailed in agony. Ah Yao, he was already gone!"<sup>11</sup>

Not to be upstaged by the tragic memory of his best friend's death accompanied to the tune of Barbara Streisand's melodramatic song, Chapter Three begins: "Ah Yao was gone. Cold, hard reality confronted me. Gone, what does it mean to be gone? [...] Michael Jackson said, I was born to be immortal. This resilient

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9 See T'ien-wen Chu, *Huangren shouji* [*Notes of a Desolate Man*], pp. 9-10; Chinese original, pp. 1-2. Textual references refer first to the 1997 *Shibao wenhua* [Times Culture] 時報文化 Taiwan edition, followed by the 1999 Columbia UP edition translation.

10 Ibid., p. 10; Chinese original, p. 2.

11 Ibid., p. 23; Chinese original, p. 12.



moonwalker from the West [...]."<sup>12</sup> This is followed by an extended discussion of Michael Jackson's superstitions and fear of death, with diversions into Rider Haggard, *Home Alone*, an abrupt discussion of Ingmar Bergman, Luis Buñuel, Mel Gibson, eternal signifiers, and so on. These passages from the first three (of 15 total) chapters exemplify much of the novel's structure. Here and throughout, postmodern bricolage and pastiche<sup>13</sup> all but drown out the gravitas associated with the themes of grief, loneliness, personal loss, mourning, and AIDS ravaging the gay community which the narrator on several occasions proclaims to be the impetus for his writing.<sup>14</sup> This contradiction at the level of both content and form seems to have been lost on most of the novel's readership, for much of the Taiwan and American reception of the novel has hailed it as a profound exploration of contemporary gay culture, mortality, loss and mourning; its literary style is likewise praised as having attained the highest of aesthetic ideals.

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12 Ibid., p. 24; Chinese original, p. 13.

13 Cuddon notes, among the few key features of postmodern writing, "an eclectic approach [...] and pastiche." See *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 690.

14 Among the countless instances one could mention, what could be a particularly offensive passage for some Taiwanese readers might be Xiao Shao's Chapter Twelve comments on his lack of feeling over his father's death, which didn't affect him nearly as deeply as his "lost [1<sup>st</sup>] love"—a passionate sexual affair with the gorgeous dancer Jay that ends when he discovers Jay's infidelity. Amidst his reminiscing on lost love where [Taiwan] readers would expect some expression of filiality, Xiao Shao invokes Western pop culture in the image and upbeat singing and whistling of Walt Disney's Jiminy Cricket. We can productively contrast Xiao Shao's breezy, ludic, postmodern rejection of traditional Chinese familial bonds against the opposite trend in Pai Hsien-yung's (Bai Xianyong) famous modernist classic of gay subculture in post-war (1960s) Taiwan, *Crystal Boys*. In Bai's novel, father-son conflicts, reconciliation, bonding, etc. are central to the characters' identities and identity crises; the concluding passage has an older boy figuratively "adopting" a homeless boy, with the image of them running down "'West Boulevard of Loyalty and Filial Piety'" (trans. in Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan* [Durham: Duke UP, 1993], p. 110. See also Liou's perceptive analysis, "At The Intersection of the Global and the Local: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Fictions by Pai Hsien-yung, Li Ang, Chu Tien-wen, and Chi Ta-wei," pp. 6-10). While characters in Bai's novel and the fiction of many fellow Taiwan modernist writers struggled with an array of angst-ridden identity issues—he burden of received traditional master narratives (filiality, family bonds, socio-economic hardship, e.g.) existential crises, family conflict, etc.—, the postmodern subject of *Notes of a Desolate Man* casually, even flippantly, flaunts his superficial talent for drowning any such angst in a flood of bricolage and pastiche. See Chang for more on the Modernist's concern to examine in depth "the existential metaphysic," "alienation," and "important issues about life". (Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, op. cit., pp. 120, 125)

## Postmodern [In-]alienation

The immediacy of events, the sensationalism of the spectacle (political, scientific, military, as well as those of entertainment), become the stuff of which consciousness is forged.

—David Harvey<sup>15</sup>

Some otherwise excellent scholarly interpretations have also tended to take at face value the invocation of serious themes while downplaying how those themes are undermined by the superficial rhetorical style within which they are couched. In one of the most insightful essays on the novel to date, Carlos Rojas has noted, "[T]he 'desolate man' [...] cloaks himself in cultural and philosophical allusions *in order to fend off and contain the specters of 'desolation' and 'death'*."<sup>16</sup> But contra Rojas, I argue, the narrator's utterances do not merely "cloak" and "fend off" these specters, desolation and death are in fact consistently and thoroughly *undermined at the structural level of the text*, evoked by the narrator only to be quickly dissipated via a narcissistic and magisterial display of an astonishing amount of trivial and scholarly information (knowledge), only some of which can be characterized as "philosophical allusions".

While Rojas analyzes the novel's postmodern style within a quasi-psychoanalytic framework, critics of postmodern narrative—especially those on the left—usually attribute such pastiches of cultural and philosophical allusions to the ideological disavowal of *both* class inequalities *and* alienation in postmodern theory and art. Postmodern [fictional] narrative, it is argued, deconstructs subjectivity in ways that untether it from overarching discursive frameworks which might otherwise provide a critical perspective on the subject's

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15 David. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), p. 54.

16 See Carlos Rojas, "Chu T'ien-wen and Cinematic Shadows," p. 290, emphasis added.

ideological and concrete subjection within the economy of global capital and its local cultural variations. Postmodern narrative presents, in this scenario, "a world free from any imposed scheme of meaning or extracted pattern of significance".<sup>17</sup> With respect to *Notes of a Desolate Man*, this incisive critique of postmodern narrative exposes how the specters of 'desolation' and 'death' are consistently and thoroughly undermined.<sup>18</sup> Traumatic experiences in *Notes* are repeatedly evoked, only to have their impact deprived of significance, dispersed among narcissistic exhibitions of an astonishing amount of information, both trifling and weighty, by the narrator and other subjects who are little more than acquisitive consumer-beings reveling in (the fantasy of) constant plenitude. Rather than "ruthless self-dissection"<sup>19</sup> prompted by his loneliness and despair, the aesthete Xiao Shao finds haven in emotionally nonthreatening clinical narrative taxonomies.

*Notes of a Desolate Man*, in breaching and overwhelming any clear demarcations between the profound and the petty, thereby succeeds in obviating an alienated gay identity whose encounters with AIDS-related premature death and loneliness, and exclusion from mainstream heterosexual society and the Confucian family system might otherwise enunciate a subjectivity that is excruciatingly aware of its estrangement. In this rejection of alienation, the novel is thoroughly postmodern. To borrow from Terry Eagleton's dissection of postmodernism, characters in the novel are *neither* "agonizedly caught up in

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17 Zavarzadeh, cited in Paul Maltby, "Excerpts from *Dissident Postmodernists*," in Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (eds.), *A Postmodern Reader* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 520.

18 The present essay is by no means an attempt to dismiss all postmodernist fiction as unethical or amoral. I intend rather to expose a problematically conservative, chauvinistic impulse underlying the structure and content of *Notes of a Desolate Man*. Some postmodern authors whose novels, I would argue, do *not* glibly elide the distinction between serious existential probing of subjectivity, elitist/high and popular/low culture would, in my estimation, include: Thomas Pynchon, Haruki Murakami, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, William Gass, William Gaddis, Martin Amis, to mention a few.

19 Wu qing mian de jie pou wo zi ji [無情面地解剖我自己], a concept central to Lu Xun's artistic praxis. (See "Postscript to The Grave [Xie zai *Fen* houmian]," *Fen [The Grave]* (Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 1995), p. 277.)

metaphysical depth," *nor* "able to experience psychic fragmentation and social alienation as spiritually wounding," for they have "outlived all that fantasy of interiority" and abandoned "epistemological paranoia" for the "brute objectivity of random subjectivity."<sup>20</sup>

Eagleton's views clearly resonate with Wang Ban's analysis of the "evaporation of subjectivity" in Chu T'ien-wen's fiction.<sup>21</sup> Much like Eagleton, Wang observes "the consumer of 'cultural goods' is less a subject, possessing a complex internal life and rich experience, than a particle adrift with the fashions of the moment in the stream of circumstances. The inner, integrated consciousness is erased."<sup>22</sup> This link between "the theater of consumption" and identity, so integral to *Notes of a Desolate Man*, is one of the dominant features of "post-al" society, a term coined by Mas'ud Zavarzadeh to expose how ideologically cultivated [illusions of] "[c]hoice in consumption, lifestyle, sexuality [...] as an assertion of identity" stymies collective politics by encouraging individuals to equate pathological acquisitiveness with identity, so they can "assert their difference from others."<sup>23</sup>

Eagleton, Wang, and Zavarzadeh share common critical ground in their vision of the "randomness" and "non-interiority" of the postmodern subject whose inner world is "complex" only in the *quantity* of its accretions—precisely the type of interiority found in Xiao Shao's narrative.<sup>24</sup> For Zavarzadeh, the

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20 See Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, modernism and postmodernism," in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (David Lodge, Ed. London: Longman, 1988), pp. 394, 395.

21 While Eagleton and Wang launch Marxist or quasi-Marxist assaults on many features of postmodernism, for the most rigorous, sustained, and implacable discursive pillorying of all things postmodern, see the work of Mas'ud Zavarzadeh. See also Peter Nicholls's excellent, nuanced efforts to formulate "an alternative postmodernism [...] which is fully historical," grounded in his careful readings of Toni Morrison's fiction, for an entirely different version of the postmodern.

22 See Ban Wang, "Reenchanting the Image in Global Culture: Reification and Nostalgia in Zhu Tianwen's Fiction," p. 380.

23 Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, "Post-Ality: The (Dis)Simulations of Cybercapitalism," *Transformation: Marxist Boundary Work in Theory, Economics, Politics and Culture*, vol. 1 (Spring, 1995), p. 13.

24 While definitions of postmodernity are largely in agreement that it is a global phenomenon,

postmodern "ludic" world view, deprived of appeal to "metanarratives" such as humanism, Hegelian history, or Marxism, appears as "socially flat [...] in which everything affects everything else without any one having (explanatory) priority over the others. Each social entity has its own immanent laws of intelligibility and is self-determining."<sup>25</sup> It is not coincidental that Zavarzadeh frequently points to the works of Foucault—one of Xiao Shao's heroes—as exemplifying postmodernism's "ludic deconstruction of binaries" such as "powerful-powerless, dominant-dominated, subjugating-subjugated, and above all [...] (social) 'class' (ruling-ruled)."<sup>26</sup>

Class is in fact effectively absent from *Notes of a Desolate Man*. The rendering of gay male subculture in the novel reifies the notion of "an incommensurable [social] 'inside'" and disavows "an 'outside' such as class or economics."<sup>27</sup> The non-alienated celebratory uber-consumerist lifestyles of the middle- and upper-middle class gay Taiwanese men presented in Chu T'ien-wen's

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many scholars have discussed the phenomenon in terms specific to Taiwan and/or PRC culture; see, e.g., Chang for a brief but rigorous analysis of literary and socio-political postmodernist discourse in Taiwan (*Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law* [New York: Columbia UP, 2004], pp. 183-186, 193-199; *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan*, pp. 179-180.); and June Yip for a more nuanced and upbeat take on postmodern Taiwan cosmopolitanism (*Envisioning Taiwan: Fiction, Cinema, and the Nation in the Cultural Imaginary*, pp. 211-248.). For a thorough-going definition and sustained rooting out of all things Chinese (PRC) postmodern, see Yang Xiaobing, *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002); Liu Kang provides an analysis of both the larger general and specific local-historical conditions of postmodernity in the PRC, with careful attention to the latter, see *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

25 Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, *Seeing Films Politically* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 35.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 34. See McGrath for some insightful comments on the appearance of ludic "postmodern irony" in some of Feng Xiaogang's New Year's films, within a larger argument linking 21<sup>st</sup>-century PRC postmodernity to "the fundamental dynamics of capitalist modernity itself" (Jason McGrath, *Postsocial Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* [Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008], p. 7). Dirlík and Zhang a decade earlier, problematized the notion of PRC postmodernism on the basis of the "coexistence of the precapitalist, the capitalist, and the postsocialist economic, political, and social forms" (Arif Dirlík and Xudong Zhang, "Introduction: Postmodernism and China," *Boundary 2*, vol. 24, no. 3 [1997], p. 3.); see also the many excellent essays collected in their edited volume on the topic.

27 Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, *Seeing Films Politically*, p. 40.

novel, ensconced as they are in "the cozy affluence of closeted yuppie gay" lifestyle that is fully "integrated into the [mainstream] social order" I would argue, are rendered incapable of authentic political empowerment.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the novel's incessant indulgence of their superficial pseudo-intellectualizing and narcissistic erotics disavows any "outside" perspective necessary for oppositional political practices based on ostracism from mainstream society (which Xiao Shao frequently laments) or on solidarity with other classes. In the world of Zhu's affluent gay characters, you essentially are what you can purchase, whether it be high-end anti-aging skin-care products and rituals, or the memories and mementos of sex-filled holidays in Rome, Rimini, New Orleans, San Francisco, etc. *Acquisitiveness* rather than "consumption" is the proper word for their postmodern [self-]branding, for they accessorize themselves both literally *and* figuratively, showing off a dead-sea mineral mud mask in the same fashion as recounting a trip to Fellini's hometown. This identity, built on the constant reiteration of accrued plenitude, is incompatible with alienation. As Liang-ya Liou succinctly puts it, "these well-off gay men live comfortably and happily with their sexual identities," and therefore "do not come out and stand up for the gay movement."<sup>29</sup>

The potential for oppositional politics, in this case for the imagining of an alternative to the consumerist and heterosexist status quos (Xiao Shao only wails against the latter), arises out of experiencing one's alienation from the "mainstream social order." This potential is further rendered moot at the stylistic level by the novel's acquisitive prose, which I would term *permanent orchestrated distraction*. Xiao Shao the spokesman for a self-described subaltern class, habitually inscribes his experience into encyclopedic laundry lists (both erudite and facile), overwhelming suffering and profundity with volubility. This conflation of high

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28 Liang-ya Liou, "At The Intersection of the Global and the Local: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Fictions by Pai Hsien-yung, Li Ang, Chu Tien-wen, and Chi Ta-wei," pp. 15-16.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

and low culture into a farrago of self-distraction, rather than questioning the distinction between the two or the function of either, dissolves the possibility of heteroglossic tension between the serious and the superficial, and deprives marginalized subjects an oppositional perspective on the center/mainstream. Otherness *sans* alienation is the result.

But, owing to the novel's identity politics and somewhat cagey rhetorical style, critics eager for a novel addressing the serious themes confronting gay subjects in Taiwan have chosen to overlook such issues. Indeed, at first blush the events and many characters in the novel do seem to affirmatively inscribe gay subjectivity into Taiwan's cultural imagination, bolstering the social visibility, viability, and prolificacy of a minority group that is frequently marginalized in mainstream society.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the narrative sympathetically manipulates the traumatic experiences of loss, ostracism, internalized homophobia,<sup>31</sup> and AIDS, to proleptically villainize any potential critique of this minority culture. But while Chu T'ien-wen appears to be erecting a balwark against homophobic censure, the converse is true. Her narrator's effusive, logorrheic, ludic monologue, in both its compulsive rhetorical excesses and its figuring of Taiwan's gay subculture as

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30 The desire for what Rey Chow terms "global visibility" of local cultural products and identity (in film) is arguably implicitly operative in Chu T'ien-wen's novel. See Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). My reading of *Notes* draws both from Chow's recent reflections on the general emergence (or lack thereof) of Chinese cultural visibility vis-a-vis globalization, and from Shih Shu-mei's earlier theorizing of how homosexual characters in Taiwan films are "marker[s] of advanced civilization in the West: by watching a film about homosexuality [...] one [a Taiwanese viewer] is qualified to become a global citizen," and that this dynamic imparts to viewers a sense of "Taiwan's successful globalisation [...] advanc[ing] the international image of Taiwan." See Shu-mei Shih, "Globalization and Minoritisation: Ang Lee and the Politics of Flexibility," in *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 40 (Spring, 2000), pp. 86-101, 94. To the insights of Chow and Shih, I hope to add an awareness of the more conservative, even potentially reactionary representations of phenomena such as ["western"] homosexuality and postmodernity that may be operative within local cultural products that aspire to or gain global visibility.

31 But one example of this self hatred can be found near the end of Chapter Eight, where Xiao Shao refers to himself, Ah Yao, and his lover Yan Yongjie as "sexual deviants who have exiled ourselves to the margins of society, generally come to grief because of the wasteland inside us [...]" (T'ien-wen Chu, *Huangren shouji [Notes of a Desolate Man]*, p. 119; Chinese original, p. 87).

threat or plague, actually undermines and even militates against readers' empathetic engagement. Consequently, even the most sympathetic reader who encounters this literary Petri dish is subtly but deliberately positioned to view with contempt the narrator and his cohort's prolix self-interruptions, and/or to find the traumas of desolate loneliness, AIDS, and familial ostracism mutating into mere melodramatic tropes.<sup>32</sup>

To sum up this discussion of alienation, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, rather than performing a postmodern intervention into or disruption of the artistic and social center from the margins, conversely incites readers to side with more conservative mainstream cultural attitudes and close ranks against non-traditional literary forms and peripheral minority subcultures.<sup>33</sup> It conjures up the specters of a viral literary style and socio-homosexual contagion. This corroborates the negative assessments of postmodern logic found in Eagleton, Wang, Zavarzadeh and others.<sup>34</sup>

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32 From a Lacanian perspective, the representation of gay hyper-consumerism and the novel's implicit heteronormativity can be seen as two facets of the same moibus strip: the gay characters fantasize an imaginary plenitude that comes from the acquisition of commodities, lovers, serial coupling, the perfect partner, movies, tourism, etc., while (heterosexual) readers can fantasize their own plenitude by dismissing these gay men as unwanted abject parts of society and self. In both cases, the gay or the reading subject disavows its constitutional loss and fantasizes its own completeness, whether by internalizing plenitude or by purging otherness.

33 Drawing from the work of Todd McGowan, I argue that fictional texts "internally posit their own [readers]," responding to and [re-]structuring collective fantasies and desires, and that the main "task of interpretation" is to reveal the ideological imperatives and contradictions underlying the text and develop an appropriate interpretation in response. See Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 23.

34 This is the well-known "incredulity toward metanarratives" found in Lyotard's influential definition of the postmodern (see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991], p. xxiv). Zavarzadeh faults Lyotard and others for promoting the idea that "the structures of post-capitalism have become so layered, complex and abstract that one cannot locate a single fixed center from which power issues" and in which "power is not even 'real'" (see Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, "Post-Ality: The (Dis)Simulations of Cybercapitalism," p. 19).



## Extant Criticism: Fran Martin

Taking a far different approach to that of Zhu Weicheng, Carlos Rojas, and Ban Wang, and especially from the leftist critics of postmodernity discussed thus far, Fran Martin, a prominent and astute theorists of queer fiction, film, and culture in Taiwan, subsumes the novel's grim specters of AIDS-related death and desolation under a "resistant, *tongzhi*-affirmative"<sup>35</sup> celebration of Xiao Shao as postmodern flâneur. In her postmodern Queer "interventionist" interpretation,<sup>36</sup> gay *tongzhi* culture in Taipei as documented in *Notes of a Desolate Man*, reappropriates AIDS and "viral *tongxinglian*" as a trope for the way that homosexuality "infects" the straight cultural spaces of Taiwan, via a kind of "homosexualized, anal penetration of [Taipei]."<sup>37</sup> Martin argues that the portals for this penetration are the "*mikou*" [祕口], or "'secret entryway[s]'" of boutiques and nightspots,<sup>38</sup> paradigms of Taiwan's postmodern urban consumer culture. By penetrating—that is patronizing—these secret entryways, a wandering gay urban

35 For an abbreviated litany of mostly *tongzhi* (同志 ≈ "queer") critics and the positions they have taken against the novel, please refer to Fran Martin's overview ("Postmodern Cities and Viral Subjects: Notes of a Desolate Man," p. 103). See also Kai-man Chang for a thorough summary of scholarship on the novel (2010). Chang's thought-provoking essay compares *Notes of a Desolate Man* to Qiu Miaojin's (邱妙津) 1994 novel—*Eyu Shouji* 鱷魚手記, translated by Sang and Martin as *The Crocodile's Journal*, but perhaps best translated for comparative purposes as *Notes of a Crocodile*. It is interesting to note that, in no less than three separate instances, the narrator of *Notes of a Desolate Man* refers to non-youthful gay men as "crocodiles" (鱷魚).

36 See Morton's "Queer and Ludic Sado-Masochism: Compulsory Consumption and the Emerging Post-al Queer"(in *Transformation: Marxist Boundary Work in Theory, Economics, Politics and Culture*, vol. 1 [Spring, 1995], pp. 189-215) for a careful delineation of the features of Queer theory, which he sees as nearly inseparable from postmodernity, both of which he exposes in their collaboration with contemporary consumer capitalism. Nicholas F. Radel also undertakes a pessimistic Marxist-informed interpretation of the increasingly homogenous representation of gender and (homo)sexuality in transnational gay cinema. Radel notes: "seen uncritically, they [certain gay films] may help us to evade the increasingly disturbing sense that within an affluent, global community, sex –and gayness itself—can be and is being commercialized by the West on an international scale" (see Nicholas F. Radel, "The Transnational Ga(y)ze: Constructing the East European Object of Desire in Gay Film and Pornography After the Fall of the Wall," *Cinema Journal*, 41, 1 [Fall, 2001], p. 56).

37 See Fran Martin, "Postmodern Cities and Viral Subjects: Notes of a Desolate Man," pp. 112, 110, 109.

38 Namely *gexingdian* [個性店], self-styled "quirky" boutiques, bars, and restaurants. Some forty-odd such businesses are listed in the last segment of Chapter Eleven.

subclass appropriates the rampant commodification and postmodernity taking over the city, using their "[...] virally structured homosexuality to infect the city in general."<sup>39</sup> In Martin's reading, this averred subversion of the dominant social order by the gay subculture allows readers to imagine Taipei and Taiwan as "an 'other' kind of [non-heterosexual] social space, neither purely familial nor purely national."<sup>40</sup>

In contrast, I would argue that the novel's geographic imaginary, its "map of the city [of Taipei]" (城市版圖, lit. "territory of the city") as Xiao Shao calls it, doesn't provide any appropriate foothold in the streets, spaces, doors of the *mikou*, or elsewhere to allow readers—queer or other—to intervene in its wholly negative representation of homosexuality and postmodernity.<sup>41</sup> Rather, as stories and images of anonymous serial couplings, predatory cruising of public spaces, and compulsively randy gay social life accrue, they superimpose upon the geographic imaginary of a sanitary, relatively prudent and tactful heterosexual city space a lurid anatomical-geographical chart of a superficial and hedonistic gay Taipei.

While she does not privilege the novel's serious content at the expense of neglecting its superficial style, Martin's "interventionist" reading privileges the scholar-reader's demands over what the text actually proffers, imposing an ill-fitting utopian redemptive *tongzhi* aesthetics on Chu T'ien-wen's narrative.<sup>42</sup>

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39 See Fran Martin, "Postmodern Cities and Viral Subjects: Notes of a Desolate Man," pp. 107, 104. Eagleton could in fact easily be addressing Chu's narrative when he decries how postmodern subjectivity "become[s] coextensive with ordinary commodified life itself, whose ceaseless exchanges and mutation [...] recognize no [...] borders" (Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," p. 393).

40 Fran Martin, "Postmodern Cities and Viral Subjects: Notes of a Desolate Man," pp. 104.

41 T'ien-wen Chu, *Huangren shouji* [*Notes of a Desolate Man*], p. 162; Chinese original, p. 121.

42 Despite my obvious disagreements with Martin's approach to the novel, my essay owes a great deal to the impetus and insights I have gained from reading and responding to her interpretation. See Wang Ban for an alternative interpretation of sexuality in *Notes of a Desolate Man*, which focuses on Chu's representation of the commodification of sexuality in contemporary [Taiwan (gay)] consumer culture and the evacuation of history from contemporary consciousness, in favor of collectible and exchangeable superficial versions of world cultures and histories, now "flattened into tourist postcards [of Italy, India, and elsewhere]" (see Ban Wang, "Reenchanting

Furthermore, Martin's procrustean effort to celebrate the "appropriation" of commodification and consumerism in *Notes of a Desolate Man* and the liberation of queer desire via counter-cultural *consumer* activities in a [non-heterosexual] social space in reality, I would argue, shackles desire into a narrow and well-established mainstream lifestyle of acquisitiveness and, in bad faith, consecrates that lifestyle as fundamentally resistant, cathartic, and ahistorical. In contrast, I draw on Donald Morton's pointed critique of postmodern queer theory to counter Martin's reading of the novel; in Morton's words, "[...] under the regime of late multinational capitalism...the ultimate determinate structure is not one which promotes compulsory heterosexuality but one which promotes *compulsory consumption* [...]. The queer subject is, in other words, the model 'consuming' subject for the regime of late capitalism."<sup>43</sup> Michael Warner's even more blunt assessment could also be applied to *Notes of a Desolate Man*: "Post-Stonewall gay men reek of the commodity...and give off the smell of capitalism in rut."<sup>44</sup>

## Notes of a Desolate Man as Infectious Postmodernism

To date, Fran Martin has provided what is arguably the most original and important interpretation as well as the most inclusive synthesis of the extant scholarship and popular reaction to *Notes of a Desolate Man*. I have positioned

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the Image in Global Culture: Reification and Nostalgia in Zhu Tianwen's Fiction," p. 382) One might productively contrast Chu Tien-wen's representation of globetrotting gay men from an affluent postmodern East Asia with Wong Kar-wai's version of same in his film *Happy Together*. I have discussed the latter in "Third World," in *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 13 (2001).

43 See Donald Morton, "Queer and Ludic Sado-Masochism: Compulsory Consumption and the Emerging Post-al Queer," pp. 192, 194. Morton further links the late capitalist promotion of risk-valORIZING financial speculation to queer theory's promotion of a risky "sexual politics of spectacle and immediacy" (op. cit., p. 213). Ban Wang comes to a similar conclusion regarding *Notes of a Desolate Man*: "[...] sex is abstracted and, thus, impoverished, on a par with a consumable, disposable commodity." (Ban Wang, "Reenchanting the Image in Global Culture: Reification and Nostalgia in Zhu Tianwen's Fiction," p. 33)

44 Cited in Donald Morton, "Queer and Ludic Sado-Masochism: Compulsory Consumption and the Emerging Post-al Queer," p. 192.

Martin's "interventionist" interpretation so as to put it into both productive dialogue and stark relief with my earlier sections addressing the novel's "Postmodern Features," its "solemn vs the quotidian" content, and an analysis of "postmodern [in-]alienation" in the novel.

To return to and synthesize those earlier sections, I would suggest that the novel's representation of a very non-traditional, non-Confucian, non-reproductive, serial-coupling gay male culture stigmatized by AIDS, and conveyed via a litany of glib global postmodern panoplies, insinuates that postmodern cosmopolitanism and postmodern fiction are twin representatives of a debauched, infected and contagious *lifestyle* and *literature*, both of which are frequently associated with the West, especially the US and Europe. As a result, the novel's parade of largely negative postmodern gay male stereotypes via an exhibitionistic postmodern narrative technique encourages the [Taiwan] reader to conflate the two and provokes a paranoid reaction against the dual alien spectres of a colonizing homosexual [sub-]culture and the colonization of native literary traditions.

Seen in this light, the *content* of the novel is reactionary in its representation of ubiquitous gay characters and dissemination of promiscuous gay subculture. Taipei (read, "Taiwan") is represented as being both literally and figuratively infected and overrun by foreign cultural contagion. Even the gay narrator's impressive academic credentials and erudition, which might appeal to (highly Western-) educated Taiwanese readers, are deliberately undermined by the shallowness of the protagonist, "a dissembling yuppie gay man"<sup>45</sup> and his cohort. This is made abundantly evident in passages where, for instance, the narrator returns a book on "southern Fukienese architecture" to a stage-designer friend, Parrot Gao (高鸚鵡). Xiao Shao finds the latter ensconced in his home workspace, having "strip[ped] naked, smear[ed] skin-tightening lotion all over his body, and wrap[ped] his belly with plastic after applying fat-reducing oil," in

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45 See Liang-ya Liou, "At The Intersection of the Global and the Local: Representations Of Male Homosexuality in Fictions by Pai Hsien-yung, Li Ang, Chu Tien-wen, and Chi Ta-wei," p. 12.

the effort to preserve his youthful appearance.<sup>46</sup> Nearly every other such appeal in the novel to elite culture and middle/upper-middle-class leisure pursuits (the study of Fukienese architecture, computer expertise, stage design, etc.) is besmirched by association with gay characters of exceeding vanity, vapidness, superficiality, narcissism, and even predatory quasi-pederasty (in Chapter Eight, Xiao Shao consensually flirts in a coffee shop with then follows home a beautiful young boy of middle- or high-school age; they do not have sex). In some of the most carefully-wrought and egregiously demeaning recurring passages, academic knowledge is conjoined with a similar passage that effectively soils it, such as that found in Chapter Four. Midway through the chapter, Xiao Shao receives a long-distance phone call from a drunken Ah Yao in New York City, during which he (Xiao Shao) shares a treasured passage from his "heartthrob" Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, on the art and society of the Caduveo tribe in the Brazilian jungle. Near the end of this extended quotation from Lévi-Strauss's lyrical academic prose, in which the Caduveo are reverentially depicted, Ah Yao apparently hangs up, whereupon Xiao Shao immediately embarks on one of many of his own Lévi-Straussian-inspired personal anthropologies of (Taiwanese) gay men, seemingly intent on repelling readers:

[Ah Yao's hoarseness] had to be the result of weekend bar-hopping followed by musical chairs with a dozen or more men in a steam bath. Before his member had turned completely flaccid, desire flared up again, but his worn-out dick forced him to give up. I knew only too well the frenzied rites of sucking and touching after spitting on your palms and getting down on your knees [...]. All those merging fluids sucked out of other bodies to smear on their own bodies, and on his, congealing to

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46 T'ien-wen Chu, *Huangren shouji* [*Notes of a Desolate Man*], p. 46; Chinese original, p. 30.

form a veil that smelled like foul mud in a ditch, impossible to get rid of entangling him like a spiderweb.<sup>47</sup>

Various similar iterations in other chapters convey a sense of intellectual-*cum*-personal degradation and defilement spreading from the West into Taiwan via the ingress of Taipei. This includes repeated references to homosexuality as the demise of the reproductive nuclear family and the [Lévi-Straussian] kinship system, contributing to an implicit but alarming presentiment that Taiwan's traditional family system and social structure are being infected by the Western-derived "illness" of homosexuality that severs sacred links between tradition and posterity.<sup>48</sup>

Likewise, the chosen *rhetorical style* of the gay autobiographical narrator shows the threat to be as much *cultural* as it is *societal*, in that the narrative's favored mode of postmodern pastiche, permeated with foreign (mostly Western) terms, spreads like an alien pandemic infecting local literary discourse and culture. Sometimes, the narrator even draws attention to the confluence of Western-infused postmodern culture and literary style. In Chapter Eleven, after three quarters of a page cataloguing Taipei's postmodern architecture, its boutiques, bars, clubs, restaurants, etc.: "KISS LA BOCCA," "Southern Comfort," "Tricks," "Alien Dust," "Postmodern Graveyard," "Mom's Cooking," "Postmodern Chinese style PUB," "Half of Paradise," "French Factory," "Unarmed," "Thirty-three Rooms," Xiao Shao waxes literary, likening these mostly Western-named Taipei locales to the hybrid mix of English and Chinese characters on the page, and making them transubstantial:

Sitting at my desk, I saw the feature and construction of the city composed by the arrangement of words materializing in front of me like

47 Ibid., pp. 44-45; Chinese original, p. 29.

48 This is precisely why Fran Martin has to recode as sanguine the novel's "virally structured homosexuality" that is "infecting" urban Taiwan, and label her recoding "interventionist".

icebergs rising out of the water, where the clouds and ocean met. The city appearing under my pen existed only in words, and when the words disappeared, so would the city.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

Contextualized within the island's resilient Mainlander/outsider [wai sheng ren 外省人] vs. Taiwanese/local [ben sheng ren 本省人] antagonisms, which often invoke the specter of the intruder encroaching and bringing ruin upon indigenous culture, language, and society, the novel's lack of Taiwanese rural or working class characters and settings, and celebration of the Mandarin- and Mainlander-associated capital city, further reinforce the sense that postmodern literature and lifestyle pose a double-edged threat to local Taiwanese culture. Furthermore, this postmodern writing style, alien to local literary and linguistic culture, is being introduced through the character of the outsider/mainlander Xiao Shao (we are informed that he is a Mainlander in Chapter Twelve), while the homosexual social contagions threatening to infiltrate the provincial culture and lifestyle of the island are Western-orienting (Ah Yao, who is of mixed Taiwanese-Japanese parentage, has been infected with AIDS in New York City or San Francisco).<sup>50</sup> These details add to the novel's careful construction of postmodern literature and homosexuality as outside threats insidiously infiltrating local Taiwanese culture.

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49 T'ien-wen Chu, *Huangren shouji* [*Notes of a Desolate Man*], p. 44-45; Chinese original, p. 29.

50 Only a few years after the publication of *Notes*, another example of this ben sheng [本省] wariness of homosexuality as a threat to local history and culture appeared in the the "unfortunate clash between Taiwanese nationalism and the gay/lesbian/queer movement," when the Tong-chi kong-chian hsing-tong chan-hsien (Gay/Lesbian/Queer Space Action Front) protested against against the Taipei Municipal government's decision to convert Taipei's New Park into the 2-2-8 (2/28; February 28) Memorial Park in 1996. (See Liang-ya Liou, "Queer Theory and Politics in Taiwan: The Cultural Translation and (Re)Production of Queerness in and beyond Taiwan Lesbian/Gay/ Queer Activism," p. 129; See also pp. 134-135).

(The author herself is arguably the island's most famous Mainlander writer, perhaps here coming out as a culturally conservative Taiwanese.)<sup>51</sup>

In conclusion, it is possible, though difficult to ascertain, whether or not Chu T'ien-wen may be implicitly caricaturing the faddish ways in which Western academic and popular culture have been embraced by her version of a decadent and superficial gay Taiwan subculture.<sup>52</sup> While the possibility puts some ironic distance between the author and her protagonist's postmodern discourse, it does little to redress her representation of tongzhi culture in Taiwan. It would seem that even Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, in her trenchant analysis of Chu T'ien-wen's oeuvre and this novel, has underestimated the staying power of Chu T'ien-wen's "conservative worldview."<sup>53♦</sup>

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51 One anonymous respondent to the current essay, who appears to be part of the local (Taiwan/Taipei) literary scene and is clearly familiar with the novel's local reception, has provided further commentary on the novel's conservative nature; he/she states that *Notes* is "implicitly reactionary, [...] a sort of highly calculated implicitly scathing reaction to the phenomena presented in the novel. It is her reaction to and commentary on an actual cadre of group of local gay postmodern intelligentsia." I am deeply thankful to this anonymous respondent for his/her careful reading of and thoughtful responses to my essay.

52 Similar conservative popular reactions to processes of social and economic modernity and globalization are often directly represented or encoded in cinematic works addressing issues of family, gender, sexuality, and identity in Taiwan cinematic culture, as I've discussed elsewhere. See Kaldis 2004 & 2010.

53 Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law*, p. 177.

♦ Responsible editor: Chun-wei Peng (彭俊維).



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