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Remapping Emotion and Desire: Same-Sex Romance in Ah Cheng's *The King of Chess**

Yanjie Wang†

ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of emotion and desire in Ah Cheng's *The King of Chess* (Qi wang). The interpretation of *The King of Chess* has been oriented toward an allegorical reading that revolves around grand cultural concepts, such as aesthetics, Taoist tradition, cultural consciousness, and national identity. In this paradigm of reading, the literary text has largely become a footnote of the master narrative of China's cultural reconstruction of the 1980s. Following the recent interpretative turn of this story from cultural to existential and from allegorical to corporeal, the article extends to yet another domain, that of emotion, intimacy, and desire, which is rarely addressed but crucial to further understanding the text. My analysis illuminates an account of same-sex romance in this novella. In analyzing the homoerotic narrative, this article explores how Ah Cheng's writing constitutes a counter-narrative to some dominant ideas concerning the world of emotion and desire under Maoism. Transcending the overfamiliar double image of either the political passion of activists or the emotional distress of underdogs, Ah Cheng's work calls for a rethinking of the domain of emotion and desire of that era in diverse forms, especially the nonconventional ones that may have existed but have been ruled out. The discourse of same-sex romance in Ah Cheng's *The King of Chess* ultimately delivers a subtle criticism of the Cultural Revolution whose hyperbolically political grand narratives facilely dismissed human desire into subtraction, abstraction, and disposal.

Key Words: *The King of Chess*, emotion, desire, same-sex intimacy, educated youth

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Since its publication, the interpretation of Ah Cheng's *The King of Chess* (1984) has been typically oriented toward an allegorical reading. The majority of discussions of the novella revolve around grand cultural concepts, such as aesthetics, Taoist tradition, cultural consciousness, and national identity.¹ In this paradigm of reading, the literary text has become a footnote of the master narrative of China's cultural reconstruction of the 1980s. Consequently, the complexity and other layers of meaning of the text are underplayed. Scholars such as Yue Gang and Chen Xiaoming challenge this interpretive model by focusing on the concrete elements of hunger and eating embedded in the text. Their works mark a significant turn in the interpretive history of this story from cultural to existential, and from allegorical to corporeal. Following their concern with lived experiences as opposed to abstract cultural allegorization, the current article extends to yet another domain, that of emotion, intimacy, and desire, which is rarely addressed but crucial to further understanding the text. In analyzing the narrative of romance, this article explores how Ah Cheng's writing constitutes a counter-narrative to some dominant ideas concerning the world of emotion and desire in the Mao and post-Mao eras.

In Mainland China, the exposition of *The King of Chess* has been firmly tied to the Root-Seeking Movement. This historical context bestows extraordinary meaning on the novella. Conversely, the novella is called upon to participate in the construction of the Root-Seeking discourse. However, critical attention was initially paid only to its aesthetics, such as the spare prose style and the transcendent air; critics commended these features to be pleasantly divergent from the cathartic sentimentality diffused in the abundant works in Scar Literature.² When the heat wave of the Root-Seeking Movement occurred in 1985, Ah Cheng's poetics became irreversibly linked to traditional Chinese culture. Su Ding and Zhong Chengxiang initially regard Ah Cheng's style of writing, which is evocative of the Taoist spirit, as the precise embodiment of Chinese national culture.³ Chen Sihe concludes that the novella's description of the way of chess, a prominent symbol of Chinese culture, functions as a powerful revitalization of Chinese tradition.⁴ When designating the style and content of this story as an indicator of Chinese culture, these critics place the novella in the Root-Seeking project, which endeavors to excavate the national tradition that Maoist campaigns had attempted to obliterate. The subsequent ongoing emphasis on the text's manifestation of Chinese national culture indicates an interpretive dwelling

1 Refer to, for instances, Su Ding and Zhong Chengxiang, "Lun Ah Cheng de meixue zhuiqiu" [On Ah Cheng's aesthetic pursuit], *Wenxue pingtun* 6 (1985), 53-60; Michael Duke, "Two Chess Masters, One Chinese Way: A Comparison of Chang Hsi-kuo's and Chung Ah-cheng's 'Chi Wang'," *Asian Culture Quarterly* 15 (1987), 41-63; Zhao Xianying, "Congdu Ah Cheng de sanwang" [A re-reading of Ah Cheng's three kings], *Nanjing shifan daxue wenxueyuan xuebao* 3 (2000), 26-32; and Li Xiaoling, "Lun Ah Cheng xiaoshuo zhong de daojia wenhua jingshen" [On the Taoist spirit in Ah Cheng's works], *Xiandai yuwen* 7(2007), 55-56.

2 Xu Zidong commends the prose style and the narrative containment of the novella. See Xu Zidong "Pingdan hu? Nonglie hu?" [Plain or poignant], *Wenhui* (July 25, 1984). Wang Meng affirms that the image of the protagonist is a correction to the self-absorptive type of characterization that prevailed in Scar Literature. See Wang, Meng, "Qieshuo 'Qi wang'" [A commentary on *The King of Chess*], *Wenyibao*: 10(1984), 43-45.

3 Su Ding and Zhong Chengxiang, "Lun Ah Cheng de meixue zhuiqiu" [On Ah Cheng's aesthetic pursuit].

4 Chen Sihe, *Dangdai zhongguo wenxueshi jiaocheng* [Course on history of contemporary Chinese literature] (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1999).

in the discourse of the “culture fever” of the 1980s.⁵ In this critical tradition, the cultural aspect of the novella has been disproportionately amplified and, consequently, the possibility of alternative readings has been largely precluded.⁶

The overseas reception of the novella generally concurs with that in Mainland China in applauding its embodiment of native Chinese culture. *The King of Chess* sparked an immediate sensation in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In 1985, the influential Hong Kong magazine, *The Nineties* (Jiushi niandai), hosted a special symposium on Ah Cheng’s works. Hong Kong-based director Tsui Hark, a participant of the symposium, later adapted this novella into a film of the same title.⁷ In Taiwan, Ah Cheng’s works were so immensely popular that they became best sellers on the book market.⁸ The enthusiastic acceptance of the novella in Hong Kong and Taiwan, as David Wang points out, illustrates a sense of nostalgia. The Chinese cultural tradition conveyed by the novella evokes images of a geographically separated and politically severed home; and it is this profound sense of homesickness that undergirds the widespread appreciation for Ah Cheng’s works.⁹ *The King of Chess* likewise received massive appreciation for its rendition of Chinese philosophical tradition in Western literary criticism. Michael Duke, for instance, wrote,

[The protagonist] Wang Yisheng’s way of chess is presented as embracing the three teachings of Chinese philosophy—Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—as well as the fundamental concepts of Chinese cosmology—vital essence and principle—and thus to be a comprehensive symbol of the priceless spiritual heritage of traditional China.¹⁰

Ah Cheng’s work provided Duke with what seemed to be a testimonial to the rich philosophical tradition of China. However, taking Chinese culture as timeless national essence, this reading borders on an essentialist imagination of a China from afar.¹¹

In challenging the authority of the prevailing allegorical approach that has attempted to subjugate the novella to discursive cultural constructs, Yue Gang and Chen Xiaoming provide alternative interpretations by re-focusing on the literary text itself. Yue foregrounds the theme of eating and reads the

5 Jing Wang defines the 1980s as a period of high culture fever during which cultural and literary elites widely and enthusiastically engaged in discussions and debates on aesthetics, culture as well as politics. See Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

6 With regard to the vague interpretation of this work as a sign of the revival of China’s Taoist tradition, Ah Cheng does not seem to be very satisfied. He writes in the preface to the reprint of *The King of Chess*, “perhaps it is because of the hackneyed tunes and expressions, many critics steered the understanding of this novella toward Taoism, but Taoism cannot solve the problem. . .” See Ah Cheng, “‘Qi wang’ zixu” [preface to the king of chess] (Beijing: Zuoqia chubanshe, 1999), 2.

7 Produced in 1991, Tsui Hark’s film was based on both Ah Cheng’s *The King of Chess* and Taiwanese writer Chang Hsi-kuo’s novel of the same title.

8 Refer to Chu Tien-wen, “Chu Tien-wen Tan Ah Cheng” [Chu Tien-wen comments on Ah Cheng], <<http://www.douban.com/group/topic/2474720/>>, last accessed on February 18, 2014.

9 David Der-Wei Wang, *Yuedu dangdai xiaoshuo: Taiwan, dalu, xianggang, haiwai* [Reading contemporary fiction: Taiwan, Mainland China, Hong Kong, and overseas] (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1991).

10 Michael Duke, “Two Chess Masters, One Chinese Way,” 57.

11 Theodore Hutters offers a more complex reading of the novella. He attempts to tackle the difficult question of how Ah Cheng manages to appeal to tradition, a “transhistorical entity,” and at the same time offer critiques of the state. However, Hutters’ analysis is built upon, and still dwells in, the cultural signification critics have accorded to the novella. Theodore Hutters, “Speaking of Many Things: Food, Kings, and the National Tradition in Ah Cheng’s ‘The Chess King.’” *Modern China* 14 (1988), 388-418.

story as a resistance to the entrenched practice of employing hunger to serve different political purposes. In Yue's words, "hunger is re-introduced as a 'nonpolitical' trope so that it can reconstitute its fundamental corporeality."¹² Similarly, Chen deconstructs the supposed inherent connection between the novella and the Root-Seeking Movement. He highlights the materiality of eating and the personal dimension of chess playing against the grain of the orthodox cultural signification.¹³ Concerned with the need of flesh-and-bone people, their work offers a point of departure to the exploration of specific human experiences reflected in the literary text. However, their emphasis remains in the corporeal domain.

In his collection of essays, *Causal Talks* (Xianhua xianshuo), Ah Cheng mentions that the ingredient of romance exists in *The King of Chess*, however, this component has been unnoticed.¹⁴ In response to Ah Cheng's remarks, some readers became utterly confused, wondering how a romance would be plausible in a novella with barely any female characters.¹⁵ Such a viewpoint is apparently still contained within the normative heterosexual paradigm. My analysis opens a possible detour from this paradigm and illuminates a romance not between male and female, but among same-sex peers. Indeed, Ah Cheng offers a rare account of same-sex romance in this novella—an aspect little addressed in previous scholarship.¹⁶

The scholarly oversight of this aspect is however not entirely unexpected for several reasons. First, same-sex love was a forbidden subject in the Mao era and quite a few years afterwards. As Tze-lan Sang describes, "In Mao's China, the category *same-sex love* was largely erased from the public arena, and it disappeared from the print media as well."¹⁷ Books about sexual psychology, sex education, and sexual behavior that started to include sections dealing with homosexuality—typically as a type of sexual perversion—emerged only in the mid-1980s. It is generally believed that the literary representation of same-sex love did not appear in print until the 1990s when gender and sexuality were more openly discussed in the public sphere.¹⁸ The

12 Yue Gang, *The Mouth That Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and Politics of Eating in Modern China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 217.

13 Chen Xiaoming, "Lun 'Qiwang': Weiwulun yiyi de chanshi huo xungen de qiyi" [On *The King of Chess*: a materialist interpretation or a different understanding of the Root-Seeking Movement], *Wenyi zhengming* 4 (2007), 128-142.

14 Ah Cheng, *Xianhua xianshuo: Zhongguo shisu yu zhongguo xiaoshuo* [Casual talks: Chinese secular life and Chinese novels] (Beijing: Zuoqia chubanshe, 1997), 179. In a recent interview, Ah Cheng made a more lucid mentioning of the same-sex relationship in *The King of Chess*, though as brief as a few words. Refer to <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUDOVA9AsdE>>, last accessed on February 17, 2014.

15 See <<http://book.douban.com/subject/1020961/discussion/1106418/>>, last accessed on February 17, 2014.

16 I should clarify the terminologies I use in this article. "Same-sex love" and "same-sex romance" are primarily used to refer to love between people of the same sex. I evoke "homoeroticism" and "homosexuality" as well, especially when I draw on other scholars' discussions. By using "homoeroticism" and "homosexuality," I am cautious about the narrow connotation and cultural specificity of the terms. I by no means intend to impose a modern Western notion onto Ah Cheng's work. Instead, I will situate Ah Cheng's writing in Chinese cultural context. I follow how Giovanni Vitiello uses the term "homosexuality" in his book on homosexuality in late imperial China—to use it "in its most generic sense," as referring to intimacy and sexual desire involving people of the same sex. Giovanni Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

17 Tze-lan Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 163.

18 Tze-lan Sang, for example, believes that Chen Ran's and Lin Bai's fiction in the 1990s broke the ground for writing female homoerotic desire in the post-Mao era. She also points out

hints of same-sex love in Ah Cheng's novella were thus either overlooked or vaguely understood in the category of friendship. Second, Ah Cheng wrote of same-sex love with an extremely condensed, displaced, and coded language, which disrupted an immediate association. This indirectness stems from both his artistic terseness in writing and his internalized self-censorship. After all, government control of cultural production, especially sexual content, remained rigid in 1984. The habituated heterosexual assumption and Ah Cheng's textual encryption resulted in the reality that the aspect of same-sex romance easily escaped the notice of readers and scholars.

Moreover, this interpretive hysteresis reflects problematics that are more profound in the understanding of the emotional world under high Maoism. The very thought of emotion during the Cultural Revolution immediately invokes the image of the irrational, zealous, politically fueled activists, especially the Red Guards.¹⁹ Emotion becomes synonymous with political passion, which is both contagious and destructive. Another major image of emotion comes from the deprived and the forsaken, such as the rightists and the sent-down youth. Distress, self-pity, and grief constitute the principal imagination of their sensibility. These two opposite images are nevertheless rooted similarly in a reductive view of people's emotional world during the Cultural Revolution. Ah Cheng's writing of same-sex romance goes beyond this double image and invites one to rethink the domain of emotion and desire of that era in diverse forms, especially the nonconventional ones that may have existed but have been dismissed. A close examination of the homoerotic narrative in *The King of Chess* elucidates how Ah Cheng's writing produces a dynamism of desire—the subtle affective and sexual interactions of the sent-down youths—that forms an interpretive maneuver to circumvent an understanding of his novella solely in national or allegorical terms. The discourse of same-sex romance in the novella contributes to a critique of the Cultural Revolution whose hyperbolically grand narratives facilely dismissed human desire into subtraction, abstraction, and disposal.

BOND OF TWO HUNGRY SOULS: FROM ENCHANTED GAZE TO CARNIVALESQUE FEAST

Born in 1949, Ah Cheng was one of the former *zhiquing*, or “educated youth.” In 1968, when the massive rustication of urban youths occurred under Mao's directive, he was sent down to a village in Shanxi province, then to Inner Mongolia, and finally settled on a state farm located in the border area of Yunnan province. After 11 years of rustication, he returned to Beijing in 1979 and worked as art editor at World Books. Ah Cheng proved to be a

that their work in fact appeared earlier than the public presence made by those male activists on homosexuality. Tze-Lan Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 173.

19 For instances, Anita Chan's study of children of Mao focuses on their passionate political activism. She discusses how young people from different family backgrounds developed into fervent activists, of various kinds, through the process of authoritarian socialization. Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985). In her analysis of model operas, Ellen Judd also focuses on the aspect of revolutionary passion and heroism to shed light on the ethos of that era. Ellen Judd, “Dramas of Passion: Heroism in the Cultural Revolution's Model Operas,” in William A. Joseph et al. eds., *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 265-282.

marvelous storyteller whose stories easily captivated his audience. He made his literary debut with the critically acclaimed novella *The King of Chess*.²⁰

The King of Chess tells a story of a group of educated youths and their life experience on a state farm in the southwestern borderland. It begins with the first-person narrator's encounter with Wang Yisheng on the train transporting both of them and a large number of other urban youths to their sent-down locales. Wang Yisheng, nicknamed "chess fool," demonstrates an idiosyncratic obsession with chess playing throughout the journey. Nevertheless, what strikes the narrator even more is Wang's nearly morbid fascination with food as well as his peculiar theory of eating. The narrator and Wang Yisheng engage in an intimate, occasionally contentious, discussion about chess, hunger, and eating during the train ride. The journey is brief. They part at the transit station before proceeding to their respective farms. The story reaches its climax when Wang Yisheng takes on nine finalists at once and plays blind chess with them in a chess tournament. As is customary in storytelling, Ah Cheng creates a tense, thrilling atmosphere of the chess match. At last, eight players are defeated and the final player, a mysterious hermit, comes to ask for a draw, which means in practice that Wang Yisheng wins.²¹

Previous criticism has focused primarily on Wang Yisheng, who is deemed to bring home the way of chess or the value of food. However, the image of Wang Yisheng notably takes on a compelling quality only through the narration of "I." It is via the narrator's eyes that Wang's obsessions with chess and eating are amplified and appear sensational. The intimate interaction and communication between the narrator and the protagonist Wang Yisheng therefore merits further investigation. How should we understand their relationship? Is the relationship portrayed as that of detachment and alienation between an observer and an object being observed? A closer examination of the narrator's gaze is required at this point to gain a better understanding of the relationship. As I will demonstrate below, instead of incurring alienation, the narrator's gaze points to a sense of affinity.

During his interaction with Wang Yisheng, one role that the narrator continuously performs is a viewer who closely observes Wang's behavior. The act of looking would typically create a boundary that separates the observer from the observed. On the contrary, the narrator's actual manner of looking, abates this presumed effect of alienation. I quote a memorable episode about Wang Yisheng's devoutly conducted mode of eating, and I call for a shift of attention from Wang's mannerism to the way it is captured:

20 Ah Cheng published *The King of Trees* (1985) and *The King of Children* (1985) soon afterwards. Together, the three pieces are famously called the "three kings" series. Ah Cheng's attempt at fiction writing began as early as his sent-down years, but those stories were not published until the late 1990s in a collection entitled *Biandifengliu* [Romance of the landscape] (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 1998). Notably, the topic of same-sex relationship already appeared in some of his earlier stories.

21 The chess hermit comes to lend his praise to Wang Yisheng, "I am most fortunate that in my declining years you have stepped forward to take my place. It is of no small moment to me that the game of chess has not wholly degenerated." The chess hermit's utterance for Ah Cheng, however, functions simply to "ease his self-embarrassment of being virtually defeated in the chess game." Ah Cheng writes, "I have met too many this type of people, who often come to tap me on the shoulder. This is a trick in common use among Chinese people. Their words are so exaggerated, just like the way of China." In a light-hearted manner, Ah Cheng discredits not only the hypocritical gesture of the chess hermit but also those criticisms prone to cast grandiose, abstract names such as "the way of China" on *The King of Chess*. Ah Cheng, *Xianhua xianshuo* [Casual talks], 29.

When his meal was served, he dove right into the food, eating very fast, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down at each mouthful, the muscles on his face tensed up. Sometimes he stopped and very carefully, using the full length of his forefinger, pushed a few grains of rice and oily globs of soup that were stuck on his face into his mouth. If a grain of rice fell onto his clothes, he instantly pressed it with his fingertip and popped it into his mouth. If it fell from his fingertip to the floor, he bent down to retrieve it, careful not to move his feet. If he happened to notice my gaze, he slowed down. When he finished eating, after licking his chopsticks clean, he filled up the lunchbox with hot water, sucked up the oily layer on top, and swallowed the rest in small sips with an air of having safely reached shore.²²

The narrator's gaze is so meticulous that it borders on the state of enchantment. Considering how every detail has been noticed and recorded, one is prompted to wonder: Is not the attentive gaze of the narrator equally, if not more, scrupulous as Wang Yisheng's mannerism? Commenting on the operation of the gaze in a different context, Slavoj Žižek writes, "the logic of the gaze qua object appears as such. The real object of fascination is not the displayed scene but the gaze of the naïve other absorbed, enchanted by it."²³ In other words, the way of looking at the object, not the object per se, is arguably the most important actor that deserves attention. Instead of alienating the object, the gaze, as Žižek suggests, draws the "other" into the world of the object, for the gaze takes the object seriously and truly believes in it. The narrator's enchanted gaze is a case in point. The narrator is intensely absorbed in looking, making one suspect that he has followed Wang Yisheng's rhythm and engaged himself in an imaginative eating process. The absorbed gaze only betrays the narrator's solemn attitude toward and deep-seated desire for food/eating that are quite similar to those of Wang Yisheng. In this sense, the narrator and Wang Yisheng are equally enchanted. Wang demonstrates such enchantment by re-enacting the eating mannerism, whereas the narrator displays the same enchantment through earnest watching. Thus, the gaze signifies a shared infatuation and an underlying affinity rather than distinction and distance.

More than a sense of affinity is at work in the relationship between the narrator and Wang Yisheng; they are involved in a romance, which begins with male bonding. A shared, keenly felt experience of hunger serves as the foundation for the special bond and the growing sense of closeness between them. Different from those young people who tearfully make their farewells on the platform, the narrator is overcome with relief regarding his impending rustication, for he knows that food will be guaranteed on the state farms. To his surprise, he finds a similar soul, Wang Yisheng, who does not seem to be so dismayed about leaving home either. Theodore Hutters notes, "That these two alone are sitting on the side of the carriage away from the platform filled with well-wishes instantly establishes them as 'doubles'—young men with a unique bond between them."²⁴ In response to the narrator's curious inquiry, Wang says in an indifferent tone, "Where we're going there's something to eat. What a fuss, all the whining and bawling."²⁵ Wang's reply strikes a chord with the narrator. Both young men have felt a gleam of hope with the promise of adequate food supply where they will be located.

22 Ah Cheng, *The King of Chess*, in Bonnie S. McDougall trans., *The King of Trees*. (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2010), 69. I primarily use McDougall's translation in this article.

23 Slavoj Žižek, "Looking Awry": *An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 114.

24 Theodore Hutters, "Speaking of Many Things," 394.

25 Ah Cheng, *The King of Chess*, 61.

A haunting memory of hunger lies behind their rosy view of being sent down. Since his intellectual parents died in the political upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, the narrator has been wandering homelessly “like a wolf in the wild,” uncertain about the source of his next meal. Hunger has constituted a daily ordeal for him. Despite the limited depiction of Wang’s hunger experience, the visual image of his build explicitly describes such an experience. On many occasions, the narrator calls the readers’ attention to Wang Yisheng’s skinny body—He is so emaciated to the degree that he seems to have no buttocks. If the broad and protruding buttocks connote material opulence in the vocabulary of Chinese imagery, Wang Yisheng’s lack of them proves to be what Yue Gang highlights “a sign of prolonged hunger and malnutrition.”²⁶ The narrator’s special attention to Wang Yisheng’s malnourished physique only attests to his acute sensitivity to this image, which easily reminds him of his own unsettling experience of hunger. Similarly, Wang Yisheng displays immense interest in every detail about how the narrator has managed to survive, as if such information would add to his own reserve of the means to combat hunger. The shared experience of hunger helps create a bond between the narrator and Wang Yisheng, as the former admits, “As our journey continued, I sensed a mutual trust growing between Wang Yisheng and me, thanks to our common experiences.”²⁷

Ah Cheng’s means of invoking hunger drastically differs from the rhetoric of hunger utilized in the Chinese Communist discourse, in which hunger was turned into a master trope to instigate starving peasants to revolt. In David Wang’s words, “Hunger is comparable to a libidinous drive—for revolution and for Communism.”²⁸ Mao and his political and literary cohorts promised to fill the stomachs of the hungry masses, however, not by providing food but by feeding them with the spiritual food of revolutionary ideals. The most fundamental human need for physical satisfaction was not only displaced but also dismissed. Ban Wang calls such a practice as sublimation through which “whatever smacks too much of the human creature—appetite, feeling, sensibility, sensuality, imagination, fear, passion, lust, self-interest—is purged and repressed so that the all-too human is sublimated with violence into the superhuman and even inhuman realm.”²⁹ Contrary to the ideological sublimation of hunger, Ah Cheng revisits the experience of hunger in its most basic bodily sense—the need for food, whose reconfirmation significantly turns “the superhuman” back to humans who are beings of appetite, feeling, emotion, sensibility, and sensuality.

Indeed, the common memory of hunger lurking in the consciousness of the narrator and Wang Yisheng creates an emotional intimacy that transcends ideology and politics. In their first encounter, the narrator’s mind is still largely bounded by the ideological indoctrination, but in contrast that of Wang Yisheng is prone to a pristine understanding of life. This divergence is best illustrated in their different approaches to Jack London’s story, “Love of Life,” which was widely received in China as a heroic ode, celebrating the

26 Yue Gang, *The Mouth That Begs*, 219.

27 Ah Cheng, *The King of Chess*, 67.

28 David Der-Wei Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 123.

29 Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2.

spiritual triumph over physical hardships.³⁰ The narrator follows this prevailing political reading of the story, whereas Wang Yisheng focuses on the character's physical trials and tribulations, particularly his experience of hunger. Significantly, such a difference in viewpoints neither strands the conversation nor restrains their deep desire for communication. The shared bodily ordeal of hunger seems to have touched their hearts and helps make the reconciliation. Sheer solicitude about each other saturates even in the midst of an impassioned debate. An unhappy expression on the narrator's face would make Wang Yisheng look crushed. Wang's look, in turn, causes the narrator to feel like "a lump in my (his) chest." The narrator expresses, "after all, I was quite fond of him."³¹ The train ride provides them with an intimate time and space within which they can share their personal experiences. A sense of reluctance surfaces when they have to part upon their arrival at the transfer station. The narrator begs Wang, "Don't forget our fellowship (jiaoqing). Let's keep in touch—whether or not there's any special reason to."³² Their sympathetic trust develops into subtle emotional closeness.

If the narrator's deep identification with Wang Yisheng, in regard to eating, has so far remained repressed, it eventually manifests itself in the carnival-like snake feast. After several months of working on their own farms, Wang Yisheng visits the narrator. The latter is ecstatic and exhausts his ingenuity in preparing a proper meal in the time of food scarcity: He takes out his year of oil quota from the public kitchen while sending his team members to catch whatever edible animal is out there in the wild. Two snakes were brought back to eat. The cooking process is lavishly deployed against the austerity of the remote farm. The snake meal is transformed into a feast. Everyone immediately gorges on the freshly cooked snake meat in a mannerism reminiscent of that of Wang Yisheng. No longer being laughed at, as what happened on the train, Wang's manner of eating is literally replicated and practiced. The feast is followed by boisterous laughter, banter, and levity, as well as suspenseful chess playing.

Such an occasion reminds one of what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the "carnavalesque." In his book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin analyzes the setting of carnival, a festivity characterized by a rowdy celebration of heterodoxy. In his view, carnival celebrates liberation from social norms and the epistemic truths prescribed by the dominant culture. During carnival time, the material bodily principle plays a predominant role. The snake feast has clearly conveyed the carnivalesque feature. The feast is riotous and unrestrained, driven by the most poignant bodily need for food and resistant toward the dominant revolutionary discourse of material asceticism and spiritual puritanism.

In addition to its effect of emancipation from the restrictions of ideology, this festive, nonconformist atmosphere permits free emotional contact uncommon in the politically sensitive circumstances of the Cultural Revolution. The deep communication of innermost feelings between the narrator and Wang Yisheng transpires during this carnival time. Wang Yisheng for the first time confides in the narrator his poverty-stricken and bleak family situation, whose memory he has been attempting hard to suppress from emerging. In his short narrative, Wang speaks feelingly of his mother who gives him

30 The American writer Jack London enjoyed an unparalleled reputation in Communist literature, partly owing to the Communist leader Lenin's exaltation of his works.

31 Ah Cheng, *The King of Chess*, 71.

32 *Ibid.*, 77.

profound love yet dies prematurely from years of overwork. Chess playing, Wang indicates, is his mental refuge that allows him to escape the disconcerting reality. The narrator, who is recently orphaned, deeply sympathizes with Wang upon hearing the story: "my nose pickled. I lowered my head and sighed. . ."³³ Such a release of pent-up emotions enables a deep connection between Wang Yisheng and the narrator, not through abstract knowledge or ideological ideas but through emotion, feeling, and empathy.

The male bonding is consolidated during the carnivalesque feast. The transformed role of the narrator from an observer to an active partaker is noteworthy. Instead of delineating how "he" (Wang Yisheng) eats, the narrator now speaks of how "we" consume the snake meat. According to Bakhtin,

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. . . It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.³⁴

Indeed, the carnivalesque feast has no outsiders. The enchanted gaze of the narrator has dissolved and translated into Wang Yisheng-style passionate biting and swallowing. His identification with Wang, previously betrayed by his gaze, has now externalized into action.

SAME-SEX ROMANCE: THROUGH CINEMATIC TECHNIQUE AND LITERARY TRADITION

The aforementioned bond between the narrator and Wang Yisheng can be easily categorized as friendship. My contention is that their relationship is of overt romantic and erotic quality, exceeding that of friendship. In what sense, then, is the story romanticized and eroticized? A close reading of two episodes below will explicate the ways in which Ah Cheng formulates the homoerotic liaison. With genius and elegance, Ah Cheng draws on filmic language as well as Chinese literary tradition to convey a sense of same-sex intimacy.

Working on a different branch farm other than where Wang Yisheng does, the narrator often thinks of him, wondering how he is doing. Particularly when the workload is at its peak, he becomes utterly concerned about whether the skinny Wang can cope with it. Ah Cheng reveals the narrator's secret longing for Wang via a cinematic technique in the following scene. On a summer day while the narrator is working on the mountain, he sees someone far off coming over. Everyone assumes the individual to be the boyfriend of the female educated youth, Little Mao, visiting her from another farm. Thus, the entire mountain shouts to Little Mao, saying that her boyfriend has arrived. The deftly arranged scene follows:

Little Mao dropped her mattock, rushed over, tripping over her own feet, and peered down. But before she had time to take a good look, *I* recognized Wang Yisheng, the Chess Fool. *I* let out such a shout the others jumped. (Italics added)

"Is it you he's looking for?" they asked.

I was very pleased.³⁵

Borrowing the filmic technique—montage—into literature, the author successfully sets the liaison of the narrator and Wang Yisheng within the frame-

33 *Ibid.*, 87.

34 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 7.

35 Ah Cheng, *The King of Chess*, 79.

work of a romantic narrative. Occupying Mao's position, it is indeed "I" who is expecting the boyfriend's visit. In classical Russian film theory, one significant role of montage is to allow new meanings to emerge from the collision of independent shots.³⁶ Employing a textual montage, Ah Cheng is able to maximize the romantic undertone of the setting, presumably for Little Mao and her boyfriend, and to convey the idea of a romantic relationship between the narrator and Wang Yisheng. The narrator and Wang's reunion appears no less affectionate in the narrative that follows. They complain that the reunion is long overdue in a fashion that normally characterizes a romantic relationship than friendship. The narrator lightly blames, "why didn't you come to see me before?!" Wang Yisheng responds in a similarly intimate fashion, "You never came to see me either. . ."³⁷ A profound longing for each other lies beneath this light-hearted complaint of not realizing one's emotional expectation.

Ah Cheng's application of filmic language into his literary creation is hardly surprising. Being the son of the famous film critic, Zhong Dianfei, Ah Cheng assisted his father in writing the monograph, *Film Aesthetics* (Dianying meixue). Wang Anyi comments that Ah Cheng's real interest undoubtedly lies in film so much that he is simply infatuated with it.³⁸ Such an infatuation prompted Ah Cheng to primarily work in film than in literature in his later career.³⁹

Ah Cheng's appropriation of the filmic language into his writing opens a different reading of the novella—that of the subtle romance embedded in the text. It helps bring to the surface the affective desires that may find satisfaction in same-sex relations, yet, have been written over by the dominant narratives. The inclusion of same-sex romance reflects Ah Cheng's keen, long-term concern with *zhiqing's* emotional experiences.⁴⁰ In his early works, "Rabbit"⁴¹ for example, Ah Cheng tells a story of a lonely educated youth, Li Yi, who seeks comfort and intimacy from his same-sex peers. The affection-shattering campaigns that occurred within households and schools during the Cultural Revolution bred millions of wounded souls, depleted and wanting. Having grown up in such a social environment, the educated youth were separated from their biological father and then forsaken by their spiritual father, Mao, to a collective exile during their adolescent years. In a time when same-sex proximity may have been less inhibited than pre-marital male-female intimate relations were, as well as on the remote farms where male *zhiqing* comprise the majority of laborers, the emotional attachment and physical closeness of same-sex individuals are not unexpected. Instead of treating same-sex desire as perversion, Ah Cheng narrates it as a natural ex-

36 Refer to Sergei Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," in Jay Leda ed., *Film Form* (New York: Harcourt, 1997), 45-63.

37 Ah Cheng, *The King of Chess*, 79.

38 Wang Anyi and Zhang Xinying, *Tanhua Lu* [Conversations] (Guilin, Guangxi: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008).

39 Ah Cheng served as the scriptwriter for Xie Jin's 1986 film *Hibiscus Town* (Furong zhen) and worked closely with Hou Hsiao-Hsian on a few film projects such as *Shanghai Flowers* (Haishang hua).

40 Ah Cheng confesses that *The King of Chess* registered his experience and reflection over his sent-down years. See Ah Cheng and Shi Shuqing etc., "Yu Ah Cheng dongglaxiche—Xianggangjiushiniandaizazi Ah Cheng Zuotanhui" [Casual talk with Ah Cheng—discussions on Ah Cheng's works held by Hong Kong *The Nineties* periodical], <<http://www.douban.com/group/topic/2377558/>>, last accessed on February 17, 2014.

41 Rabbit is a nickname for homosexuals. It usually refers to the one who takes a passive role in male-male sexual relationship.

pression of the educated youth's longing for love and intimacy in a time of desolation and repression in the countryside.

If the montage scene makes detectable the romantic nature of the relationship between the narrator and Wang Yisheng, Ah Cheng evokes literary tradition to further proclaim their love. Parallel to the climax of the narrative, the liaison of the lovers likewise peaks and becomes "officially" settled when Wang Yisheng single-handedly challenges nine chess experts. Wang Yisheng's chess set represents the token of their love. A brief introduction of Wang Yisheng's blank chess set is necessary to gain a better understanding of its role in the development of the relationship. Wang's mother is aware of his fascination with chess playing, yet is unable to afford any new sets. However, she makes a chess set whose pieces are crafted from worn-out toothbrushes. The un-carved blank chess set has existed under the shadow of the extravagant ebony chess set his fellow educated youth, Ni Bin, inherits from his upper-class family. Nonetheless, Wang regards his blank set as a priceless family treasure that embodies his mother's profound love; hence he "always guards it with his life." After learning that Ni Bin has traded his ebony chess set for a transfer back to the city, Wang Yisheng is deeply bothered. He finds unconceivable the idea of casually offering to others, and even using for a deal, a family asset regardless of its monetary value. During the games, Wang Yisheng passes his bag to the narrator, empathetically mentioning that the chess set from his mother is in it, and imploring the narrator to take care of it. The supreme value Wang Yisheng places on the blank chess set endows his gesture of entrusting it to the narrator with special significance.

In classical Chinese literature and culture, the transference of family heirlooms, especially those that carry personal and familial privacy, pledges a profound affection and, oftentimes, an established relationship. Ah Cheng is keenly aware of such traditional modes of expressing intimacy. He writes extensively on traditional Chinese literature in *Casual Talks* and conveys his high esteem for traditional Chinese fiction, such as *The Story of the Western Wing* (Xixiang ji), *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (Jin Pingmei), and especially *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng), which he extols for their sensitive portrayal of the subtlety of human relations. *The King of Chess*, by Ah Cheng's own admission, is greatly indebted to Chinese literary tradition.

Connecting with traditional Chinese fiction, Ah Cheng emphasizes the transference of family treasure as a means of conveying love between Wang Yisheng and the narrator. A survey of classical Chinese literature offers a reminder of how, in *The Story of the Western Wing*, the female protagonist Yingying sends her jade ring that she had about herself since she was an infant to reaffirm her love to Zhang, the scholar. Examples also abound in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The passing of Lin Daiyu's handkerchief stained with her tears to Jia Baoyu represents a forlorn sense of intimacy.⁴² In another episode, sensing an instant affection toward the male opera actor, Jiang Yuhan, Jia Baoyu offers his silk waistband to him in exchange of the one that Jiang wears. Similar to these cases, Wang Yisheng's passing of the chess set, his most private and cherished belonging, to the narrator, strongly connotes affection and romance. The narrator seems aware of the meaning of Wang's gesture, earnestly taking over the chess set. Such a connection with traditional literature and culture enables Ah Cheng to artfully convey a same-sex love that is being expressed and pledged at this narrative juncture.

42 Refer to *Dream of the Red Chamber* Chapters 19 and 32.

Notably, the features of the blank set of chess pieces are fully revealed only through the narrator's eyes. This insider's view symbolizes the narrator's entrance into Wang's domestic world.⁴³ From a psychoanalytical perspective, the narrator's looking at the chess set translates into a subjectivization process.⁴⁴ As the narrator examines the chess pieces, he finds that he is already gazed at by an eye-like chess piece. Ah Cheng offers a detailed account of this process:

I found myself reaching inside Wang Yisheng's bag. I groped about, then closed my fingers around a small bundle and drew it out. It was a small pouch made of old blue twill with a bat embroidered on it for luck. Each side was scalloped with very fine stitching. I took out one of the chess pieces, which was indeed tiny. In the sunlight it was translucent; like an eye, it stared at me tenderly. I clutched it in my hand.⁴⁵

The glossy surface of the chess piece performs as a special mirror that reflects who the narrator is at this moment. The appearance of his specular image on a chess piece becomes part of the organic whole with the chess set. Hence, the narrator can be interpreted as an invaluable treasure to Wang Yisheng, much similar to the chess set. In this sense, the imagined gaze of the chess piece constitutes the narrator's ideal image as the love of Wang Yisheng. As such, the narrator's intimate encounter with the chess set establishes the relationship between him and Wang Yisheng within a romantic framework.

SAME-SEX SEXUAL DESIRE: THE COMING OF AGE OF THE EDUCATED YOUTH

The same-sex romance Ah Cheng narrates in *The King of Chess* is hardly platonic. Although he refrains from writing any sexual act, sexual desire lurks and looms in the romantic narrative. Seeing Wang Yisheng covered with dust all over after his long travel for the visit, the narrator carries back a bucket of hot water and hastens him to take a bath. Through the narrator's eyes, a bathing scene is displayed: "Wang Yisheng stripped down to his underpants and washed himself, breathing heavily."⁴⁶ In a highly suggestive fashion, the narrator stands as a voyeur, watching the nearly naked Wang Yisheng cleansing himself. The suturing of the narrator's gaze and Wang Yisheng's body unaware of that gaze constitutes a narrative of desire.

Such eroticism exists not exclusively between the narrator and Wang. Rather, it is shared among the educated youths on the farm where the erotic gaze circulates and constructs a sexual space of the same-sex peers. The communal bath appears to be a usual conduct in the daily life of the narrator's cohorts. After returning to their dorm from work, "the team members shut the door, stripped off their underpants in sheer nude, and washed themselves from head to foot, cracking jokes about each other's bodies."⁴⁷ In this

43 Similar to the narrator's privileged view of Wang Yisheng's blank chess set, in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Xue Baochai gets to read carefully the inscriptions on Jia Baoyu's jade. Having access to, knowing and being able to reveal Jia Baoyu's privacy to a great degree prefigures Xue Baochai's position in the inner sphere of his life. Jia Baoyu's maid Hua Xiren (Aroma) is the other girl who has the chance to read the words on Baoyu's jade for she assumes the task of taking care of the jade. Despite Hua Xiren's illiteracy, her intimate exposure to the jade wins her a place in Baoyu's domestic realm.

44 I draw much inspiration from Rey Chow's analysis of the process of subjectivization in a different context. In her examination of the formation of desired image of the female protagonist in *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*, Rey Chow highlights the instrumental role the ATM screen plays in defining her identity. See Rey Chow *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 106-07.

45 Ah Cheng, *The King of Chess*, 114.

46 *Ibid.*, 80.

47 *Ibid.*, 89.

enclosed, self-contained space, the power of seeing belongs to everyone, who is instantly the subject and the object of the gaze/sexual desire. Hence, Ah Cheng carves out a sensual space brimming with desire.

The circulation of sexual desire addresses the *zhijing* generation's often-overlooked coming of age during their sent-down years. In the novella, the artist that Wang Yisheng befriends helps bring this desire to the conscious level. In another bathing scene that occurs in a river, the artist sketches the educated youths' body contours on his notebook. Ah Cheng writes,

When I noticed this, I went over and stood beside him [the artist], looking over his shoulder. It turned out that he was sketching us in the nude. From his drawing I discovered that we boys actually looked remarkably strong, given our hard work up in the mountains every day. I couldn't repress a sigh of admiration. The others also gathered around to look, their bottoms flashing white.⁴⁸

Looking at his own image in the painting, the narrator becomes self-conscious of his own manhood. This is a defining moment of the narrator's coming of age, characterized by not only his physical and sexual maturity, but also awareness of it. After his self-realization, the narrator redirects his attention to his fellows, fixing his eyes on their bare buttocks. Ah Cheng once again draws attention to the spontaneous rise of sexual desire at this moment.

The projection of desire toward same-sex peers reflects a natural expression of the educated youth's burgeoning yet thwarted sexuality. Instead of claiming for the education youth a homosexual identity, same-sex love in this work is presented in the form of contingency that prevents the homosexual or heterosexual labeling. Central to Ah Cheng's writing is a realistic portrayal of the educated youth's life during the Cultural Revolution. As Hong Kong-based writer Shi Shuqing observes, Ah Cheng allows his characters to "live their lives" rather than to be written about.⁴⁹ By writing about the "non-normative" desires in the *zhijing's* everyday life, his work opens up a space that provides an in-depth knowledge of the sensibility and sexuality of the sent-down youth, defying the sexual puritanism and orthodoxy of the revolution.⁵⁰

Moreover, Ah Cheng's narration of same-sex sexual desire in *The King of Chess* demands a re-configuration of the map of writing sexuality in the 1980s. Scholarly discussion of the literary representation of sexuality in the 1980s has been predominated by a heterosexual hypothesis. Zhang Xianliang's *Mimosa* (lūhuashu, 1984) and *Half of Man is Woman* (nanren de yibanshinüren, 1985) are usually considered to be the first works to include the aspects of desire and sexuality in the post-Mao literature, though Zhang's work mainly utilizes sexuality to address social issues. Helen Chen contends that Wang Anyi is arguably the first to "write about sexuality itself rather than its sociological implications" and to push the limits of sexual representation.⁵¹ Although scholarly discussion of these works contributes to the restitution of human desires, same-sex desire is less addressed. If the political removal of

48 *Ibid.*, 105.

49 Ah Cheng and Shi Shuqing etc., "Yu Ah Cheng dongla xiche" [Casual talk with Ah Cheng].

50 Starting to write around the same time as Ah Cheng, Wang Xiaobo also dealt with sexual matters during the Cultural Revolution. Noticeably, Wang's approach is an outrageous parody whereas Ah Cheng's is a distant observation.

51 Helen H Chen, "Gender, Subjectivity, Sexuality: Defining a Subversive Discourse in Wang Anyi's Four Tales of Sexual Transgression," in Yingjin Zhang ed., *China in a Polycentric World: Essays in Chinese Comparative Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 90-109.

any trace of homosexuality facilitated to produce the homosexual-free image of the liberated China in the Mao era, then the critical obliviousness to the same-sex sexual desire in *The King of Chess* only perpetuated this false presumption. Ah Cheng's narration of sexual desire among same-sex peers highlights this blind spot of scholarly discourse and expands the spectrum of the representation of sexuality in the literary world of the 1980s.

BEYOND IDENTITY POLITICS

The narrative of same-sex love in *The King of Chess* functions as a viable means for Ah Cheng to re-present *zhiqing's* sent-down experience in the affective and sexual aspects and to advance a critique of the hyper-political grand narratives of the Cultural Revolution. In the novella, loving and being loved among same-sex peers appears to be a natural yearning that follows a normal course of romance just as how it would unfold in many classic romance stories. Same-sex sexual desire is likewise portrayed as a spontaneous occurrence at the juncture when the educated youth came to age in the countryside. Ah Cheng's writing of same-sex intimacy complicates and deepens the understanding of the experience of the educated youth generation, especially their world of emotion and desire. The very existence of the homoerotic ingredient in this novella of the 1980s runs against the general assumption that literary works on same-sex desire did not appear until the 1990s.

However, it would be misleading to conveniently interpret Ah Cheng's representation of same-sex love as a post-Mao Chinese writer's pioneering enterprise to argue for homosexual identity. Ah Cheng is not so much concerned about contemporary identity politics. Rather, he portrays homoeroticism in a way that harks back to the pre-modern view of male-male relationship that was perceived with a great degree of tolerance. Male homosexuality, especially in the late imperial period, as Giovanni Vitiello suggests, was a "socially widespread practice."⁵² Homosexuality became pathologized in psychological terms only recently, in the first decades of the 20th century, with the introduction of Western sexology. Nevertheless, the interpretation of same-sex relationship at the time remained an actively disputed field. As Kang Wenqing's study on male homosexuality during the first half of the 20th century eloquently shows, Chinese intellectuals associated with different social agendas and political convictions—sexologists, nationalistic tabloid writers, May Fourth intellectuals—held distinct ideas about it. According to Kang, the discourse of homophobia that emerged in the last century is closely tied to the crisis of the nation and the discourse of its salvation.⁵³ Maoist China's complete obliteration of, and silence on, homosexuality almost successfully drove such a complicated history of same-sex relations into public oblivion.

Ah Cheng has keenly experienced the need to redeem the cultural ruptures resulting from iconoclastic movements such as the May Fourth movement and the Cultural Revolution. In his famous essay "Culture Restricts Human Beings" (*wenhua zhiyuezhe renlei*)—hailed by many as a manifesto of the Root-seeking Movement—Ah Cheng points out the urgent need for Chinese literature to base itself on a comprehensive exploration of Chinese

52 Giovanni Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend*, 5.

53 Kang Wenqing, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900-1950* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 148.

culture.⁵⁴ An understanding of same-sex relationship that is more fluid and much tolerated as in most pre-modern historical periods is probably one of the traditions that Ah Cheng attempts to invoke in *The King of Chess*.

The exegesis of Ah Cheng's writing of same-sex love also offers a perspective to rethink homosexuality in the context of contemporary China. Although homosexuality is now a field of negotiation in which social forces of repression, aversion, liberation, and celebration intersect in intricate ways, an alarming concern of today's homosexual discourse is its increasingly inevitable relationship with consumer culture and global capitalism. Homosexual identity has become less associated with an individual's sexual act than his consumption of gay bars and salons that have mushroomed in major cities. The neoliberal desiring machine of production and consumption has increasingly tyrannized the perception of homosexual desires.⁵⁵ In this cultural context, Ah Cheng's narrative of same-sex love and desire as a contingent occurrence fundamentally destabilizes the very concept of homosexual identity, thereby nullifying the manipulative power of consumer culture to label an identity as such. One hopes that a reading of Ah Cheng's homoerotic narrative can not only provide a deeper understanding of the emotional world of the sent-down youth but also prompt a rethinking of homosexuality in the context of contemporary China that immerses itself in consumerism and global capitalism.

54 Ah Cheng, "Wenhua zhiyue zhe renlei"[culture restricts human beings], *Wenyi bao* (July 6, 1985).

55 As Lisa Rofel argues in her book *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), the formation of transnational subjects in post-socialist China hinges on the historical and cultural constitution of desire.