Identity, Power and Politics: A Comparative Reading of *East Palace, West Palace* and *Angels in America*

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China and America are unarguably two representative countries in the East and the West. Both hosting large populations and possessing rich cultural heritage, they are stages for the discussion of various cultural and political issues. Homosexuality, as an important branch of gender politics which has become increasingly prominent during the 20th century, also receives attention in both countries. However, with distinct cultural and political environments, the development of the discussion of homosexuality appears uneven in China and America. By tracing the development of modern gay literature in China and America, the author tries to reveal the different features and focuses of gay literary works in the two countries. Such differences are confirmed and further examined with a comparative reading of two important works in modern gay literature in China and America: *East Palace, West Palace* by Wang Xiaobo and *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner. The differences between the two works reflect the different stages of development of gay politics in China and America.
I. An Overview of Development of Modern Gay Literature in China and America

While it is undeniable that gay literature, as a special branch of literature dealing with the experiences of homosexual people, has significantly developed in both China and the U.S. throughout the twentieth century with the rising trend of being more tolerant to various sexual preferences, the major concern of gay literature in China and the U.S. embraces different features. Generally speaking, gay literature in China tends to be more marginal, personal and homogeneous, whereas American gay-themed works are more open, political and diversified.

I. Struggling for Air: Modern Gay Literature in China

Although it is a popular belief that China possesses a glorious tradition of gay literature in ancient times when homosexual presence can be found in most renowned works, it is an undeniable fact that gay literature is not as thriving in modern China as in ancient times. Important works did emerge especially after the New Culture Movement and May Fourth Movement from the 1910s to the 1920s. Ye Lingfeng's fiction Forbidden Zone (1927), for example, is believed to have touched upon the tattoo of gay love. Yu Dafu's Boundless Night (1922) and its sequel Autumn Willow (1924) describe gay affections in a bold manner. These works mark the gay's presence on the stage of modern Chinese literature. However the impact of gay literature of this period is highly limited and marginalized from the mainstream, since "[traditional] ideology played a vital part in the interpretation and criticism of literary works, [...and] gay-themed works [...] received comparatively small attention from the critics." Even though the previous works could be categorized as gay literature, the portrayal of gay behaviours in these works is rather limited. As Wang Ling comments in her essay, "homosexual literature during the May Fourth era is limited only to very private circumstances, undiscovered and undisturbed by the society. Homosexuality is also more of a psychological description than actual action." The first literary work that depicts the actual life of gay people and their relationship with the society did not appear until the 1980s in Taiwan since "information on homosexuality has been almost completely unavailable in People's Republic of China" after 1949. In this influential novel entitled Crystal Boys (1988) by Hsien-yung Pai, the author explores the subtle relationship between
homosexuality and morality and tries to demonstrate the goodness in gay people who are traditionally regarded as evil. Ground-breaking as the novel is, it still has its limitations in that it “does not create a unique moral standard for homosexual people, but instead returns to traditional morality and attempts to find a way for homosexual people to be accepted by the traditional society”[6].

Gay literature in mainland China in the late 20th century can be represented mainly by the works of Wang Xiaobo, although more gay literary works such as Farewell My Concubine (1993) and Beijing Story (1998) have already begun to emerge. The importance of Wang Xiaobo’s works lie in the fact that they provide deeper insights into the sexuality as well as power structure associated with homosexual people. In his novel Love in the Revolutionary Period (1994), Wang discusses the ambiguous gay love between two workers during the “Cultural Revolution”, when hostility toward homosexuality in mainland China is at its most. Wang’s more blunt portrayal of homosexuality can be found in his play East Palace West Palace (1996). Based on the author’s knowledge in sociology and philosophy, Wang’s works in gay literature is more sophisticated and strikes a step further in the discussion of gay experience in modern Chinese literature.

In short, gay literature has gone through meaningful progress in China in the 20th century. Starting off as purely Platonic love involving no identity, gay literature has then moved on to discuss realistic topics concerning the conflicts between homosexuality and traditional morality before it becomes more insightful as an exploration into the implications of homosexuality as a status in power relations. However, gay literature in China throughout the 20th century is largely limited to the genre of fiction. Moreover, under the rule of Confucianism, gay literature is still not amply accepted by mainstream culture. As Cristini points out, many gay-themed literary works “tend to be […] invariably leading to catastrophic endings”[7]. This pessimism in Chinese gay literature reflects the still unfavourable environment the genre is faced with. To put it in Wang Ling’s words, the authors of Chinese gay literature is still struggling to “let in some fresh air for those with rigid minds”[8].

2. All the Way to the Spotlight: Modern Gay Literature in America

Compared with the situation in China, gay literature in America, with apparently more open cultural atmosphere and better public understanding of sex liberation, is more flourishing before and after the Stonewall Riots which mark the start of contemporary gay liberation movement. Studies and researches on modern American gay literature are hence much more in number and easier to access.
Briefly, it is an accepted fact that “frank and affirmative gay male American writing” existed at the start of the 20th century\(^9\), however such works, like their counterparts in China, were at first not welcomed by the mainstream and were “usually published abroad or by marginal presses or remained private and unpublished”\(^{10}\). This situation was later changed with “marked increases in both the amount of frank gay male American writing and the amount of it issued by mainstream publishers”\(^{11}\). From the 1940s to the 1960s, gay literature gained increasing popularity in the American society with some of the works becoming bestsellers; in the pre-Stonewall period, there was even “a flood of work”\(^{12}\) in gay literature. However, American gay literature in this period also had its weakness: the depiction of homosexuality seemed rather pessimistic in that writers had to compromise and confirm with homosexual stereotypes in order to win popularity.

American gay literature experienced a considerable boom after the Stonewall Riots, which have directly brought about a gay right movement in literature, covering the genres of poetry, fiction and drama. The year 1978, in particular, is considered as a watershed year of gay rights movement since it witnessed the successful publication of several gay novels both critically and financially and from that year on, “gay books have become a permanent part of many of the leading publishing houses”\(^{13}\). Furthermore, gay literature has also begun to focus on various aspects of gay experience such as sex, gay community and AIDS.

What is also worth mentioning is that with faster and more comprehensive development of modern American gay literature, gay drama has been established and studied as an independent genre of gay literature. John M. Clum has given in-depth analyses of a collection of gay dramas from closet or coded ones such as Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) to liberated ones like Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1993) in his celebrated book *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*. Obviously, the subject matter of modern American gay drama has changed with the developing gay culture. From the sentimental works or melodramas at the start of the century to the penetrating and powerful plays at the end, American gay drama has grown increasingly political and challenging. As Clum has concluded, gay literature in America is now “very much in the spotlight”\(^{14}\). It is better developed, better accepted and hence more influential than its counterpart in China.
II. East Palace, West Palace and Angels in America: A Comparative Reading

As representative works in gay drama, *East Palace, West Palace* written by Wang Xiaobo and *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner were both published in the 1990s. The former is regarded as the first publicly performed gay drama in mainland China and the latter is “the most talked about, written about, and awarded play”[15] in the 1990s. Analyses of the similarities and differences of these two plays reflect the same concerns about gay life and the diverging phases of the development of gay literature in China and America.

1. Out of the Closet: The Open Gayness in Both Plays

One thing that the readers as well as the audience of these two plays would not fail to notice is the open gayness. Unlike earlier works which only describes homosexuality in a vague and inexplicit manner as in *Farewell, My Concubine* or codes homosexuality into a predominantly heterosexual plot as in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *East Palace, West Palace* and *Angels in America* express homosexuality directly and even at ease.

At the very start of *East Palace, West Palace*, for instance, there are descriptions about one protagonist, A Lan, and the conditions he lives in. A Lan’s homosexuality is directly and most bluntly revealed with the line “A Lan is gay” spoken by himself, and his homosexual behaviours are subsequently described when he talks about the park that he usually visits: “A Lan would sit on this bench, and when he sees men whom he likes, he would follow them to an empty place and starts chatting [...] They do not just chat, they also do something else”[16]. Therefore as soon as the play begins, it identifies itself as a play about homosexuality. Such openness is shared in *Angels in America*. As early as in Act One, Scene Four in this two-part play, Prior and Louis, two protagonists in the play are revealed to be homosexual lovers[17]. This is echoed later in Act One, Scene Seven when Prior announces that he is “a homosexual”[18] and Harper’s husband Joe Pitt is also “a homo”[19]. Of course one cannot ignore the fact that the word “gay” is literally written in the play’s subtitle “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes”.

The open gayness in the two plays is not merely limited to the homosexual identities of their protagonists, but more importantly, it stretches to the homosexual experience, with which they confront their audience. As Clum points out, *Angels in America* “challenges the heterosexual in its audience to see with gay eyes”[20]. The play does this by presenting the audience with unique gay experiences: by taking them to Central Park where Joe and Louis encounter and start their sexual
relationship, which Clum believes to be "the central scene of Part I" [21], and by showing them the agony and fear only AIDS patient like Prior and Roy would understand. In other words, it is a play profoundly concerning on homosexuality: what it means and feels like as being homosexual in modern America. It is also true with East Palace, West Palace. When A Lan recounts his story in the interrogation, he is also showing the homosexual world to the audience. When he explains his mental growth, his encounters with different men and his sexual experiences and preferences, he is actually bringing the audience to a world that is openly and completely homosexual. Compared with their predecessors, these two plays are obviously more unabashed, more straightforward, and most importantly, more gay.

2. Gay Identity: Acceptance and Refusal

Another thread that runs through the two plays is the characters’ acceptance and non-acceptance of their gay identity. In both East Palace, West Palace and Angels in America, we can see such divided attitudes in different characters, who can be categorized into two types: one is represented by Xiao Shi, Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt, who, although harbouring homosexual desire, deny their identity as gay; the other includes A Lan, Belize, Prior and Louis, who have come to terms with their gay identity and are proud of it. The authors’ opinions concerning gay identity are also reflected in their different treatments of these two types of characters.

Wang’s Xiao Shi, Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt share striking similarities in that they symbolize the more traditional and conservative side of the society with Xiao Shi being a policeman and Roy and Joe members of the court. Evidently the traditional ideology they have accepted makes it difficult for them to welcome their own gay identity. As a potential homosexual, Xiao Shi’s job is, ironically, to search for and punish gay people in the park. During his interrogation with A Lan, he frequently calls gay people “sick” [22]. This reveals the fact that Xiao Shi does not recognize homosexuality as an identity. Even though he is deeply attracted by A Lan’s story of homoeroticism, he remains straight-acting, unable to step out of what Sedgwick would call a gay closet. The same situation happens to Joe, a character constantly struggling with his gay identity. In a monologue, Joe confesses: “I try to tighten my heart into a knot, a snarl, I try to learn to live dead, just numb, but then I see someone I want and it’s like a nail, like a hot spike right through my chest.” [23] The refusal of gay identity, the necessity of wearing a mask and living in a lie causes great pain for Joe, which partly explains Joe’s fascination of the picture of the wrestling with the angel: the angel symbolizes conservatism, and what Joe needs is
change and the courage to stand up against the convention before he can be truly happy.

Whereas those who deny gay identity do not seem to have a very happy ending, those who embrace it are definitely treated more kindly by the authors. A Lan, who expresses his fondness of Xiao Shi at the start of the play, finally gains Xiao Shi’s love at the end. More significantly, he also learns to use his own homosexuality to find happiness and pleasure, as can be seen from his confession: “I have finally learned that beauty can be easily obtained, and sex can also be easily obtained.”[24] In *Angels in America*, Belize, the character most comfortable with his gay identity, is portrayed as the most positive character in the play. As a former drag queen, he wears “defiantly bright and beautiful clothing” and is confident enough to suggest that drag queens “couldn’t be buried like a civilian” since they are “divine”[25]. The juxtaposition of the happiness, satisfaction and optimism of characters who accept their gay identity with the trouble, confusion and loneliness of those who do not exhibits a similar underlying theme of the two plays: only those who learn to accept their identity can get what they want. Or in Trudeau’s words, these two plays both “encompass the gay experience from repression and hypocrisy through denial and self-loathing to the ultimate goals of self-acceptance and self-love”[26].

3. Power and Subversion

It is generally accepted that identity is not an isolated concept, but is often associated with power. Indeed, in *East Palace, West Palace* and *Angels in America* we see characters who are traditionally in power: Xiao Shi, the policeman, Joe Pitt, the lawyer and Roy Cohn, the famous lawyer and powerbroker. All of these characters possess governmental power, or in Foucault’s term, bio-power. Curiously enough, in both plays the above-mentioned powerful characters lose their power in one way or another. By analyzing how power works in the two plays, we can discern their subversive nature and political concerns.

Foucault believes that bio-power aims at limiting people’s behaviours to the convention[27]. In this context, homosexuality is apparently ruled out from the powerful and the superior. Or in Connell’s words, it becomes subordinate[28]. This is the main reason why the more powerful characters reject their homosexuality: out of the fear that they may lose their power if found homosexual in a heterosexual-dominated society. This point is made quite obvious in Roy Cohn’s conversation with his doctor: “Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. […] I have clout. A lot. […] AIDS is what
homosexual have. I have liver cancer.”[29] As an influential lawyer who is connected even with the White House, Roy is clearly a believer of traditional power, the power only available to heterosexual men who incarnate hegemonic masculinity. Homosexual for Roy is not just a sexual preference; it is also a “label”: an indication of being inferior in the power system. This pattern of inferiority of homosexuality is repeated in East Palace, West Palace. For most part of the play, the policeman Xiao Shi holds more power. During the first half of his interrogation with A Lan, Xiao Shi appears authoritative and even threatening. He “urges” A Lan “in a cold tone”, “orders” him around, and uses his “police baton” to warn him or yells at him sternly[30]. The position of a policeman facing a “criminal”, and especially of a “normal” heterosexual confronting an “abnormal” homosexual, is the source of Xiao Shi’s authority. This conventional opposition of heterosexuality/homosexuality as the empowered/disempowered acts as the background as well as an overriding subject matter in both plays.

Such power structure is challenged and completely overthrown with the development of plot. In Angels in America this point can be exemplified by the interaction between Belize and Roy. Belize, as a former drag queen who is now a male nurse, defies sexual stereotypes: he is a man who used to dress up like woman and who is now doing a conventionally female job. The refusal of traditional gender roles shows Belize’s deviation from ruling heterosexual power structure. A conversation between him and AIDS-troubled Roy in the hospital betrays the power structure between the heterosexual and the homosexual:

Roy: You’re just a fucking nurse. Why should I listen to you over my very qualified, very expensive WASP doctor?
Belize: He’s not queer. I am. [31]

This conversation witnesses the transfer of power from the straight to the gay. Roy, who has chosen to ally himself with the heterosexual, is thrown into a strange world and becomes weak and dependent, while Belize, who is acquainted with AIDS symptoms and treatment, gains authority (even more authority than Roy’s professional straight doctor). The power structure at the beginning of the play is therefore subverted. Such subversion is also represented in Prior, the hero in the play. Again, Prior can be interpreted as a non-traditional and somewhat rebellious character since as an AIDS patient and a homosexual who is supposed to be among
the most marginalized group, he is chosen by the Angel to be the prophet. What is more significant about Prior lies in the fact that when he climbs up the ladders to Heaven and is tempted by the Angel with the offer of staying in Heaven and being free of physical pains in exchange of stasis and non-progress in the human world, Prior asserts that he “want[s] more life” and rejects the Angel’s offer. This kind of bravery proves Prior to be more powerful even than the higher powers. As Middlesworth comments, Prior’s choice to “endure, in the face of physical agony and emotional rejection, is an ‘act which induces heroic awe’” [32]. The immense power that the author gives to this homosexual and AIDS-infected hero shows the subversiveness of the play. As Gorney concludes, in Angels in America Kushner “attempts to dismantle the association of hegemonic masculinity with power by disempowering those who perpetuate hegemonic masculinity and empowering those who are marginalized as a result of it” [33].

The deconstruction of conventional power structure is also a major theme in East Palace, West Palace. In the play A Lan oftentimes refers to the story between a bailiff and a prisoner who is sentenced to death. The bailiff has the power over the prisoner, controlling her with chains and shackles and even deciding her death. However, in the process of the escort the bailiff falls in love with the prisoner and finally sets her free and marries her. The controlling power in the story is obviously shifted from the bailiff to the prisoner. The same is true with the relationship between Xiao Shi and A Lan. Though Xiao Shi appears overwhelmingly powerful at the start, he gradually loses this power and succumbs to A Lan’s sexual and emotional appeals. A simple example is that in the latter half of the story, although Xiao Shi “yells angrily” and tells A Lan to stop talking, A Lan “keeps murmuring”, evidently unaffected by Xiao Shi’s orders. The power subversion is ultimately reflected in A Lan’s line “prisoner loves the bailiff; we love you. Is there any other choices?” On the surface, A Lan seems to be confessing his love for Xiao Shi, but deeply we can sense that actually there are no other choices for Xiao Shi, who has been by this point completely dominated by his homosexual desire and has to give in to A Lan’s love and give up his heterosexual position and power. As Liu states in her paper, “East Palace, West Palace subverts the conventional male and heterosexual power dimensions and normalizes the phenomenon of homosexuality”.

In a nutshell, Angels in America and East Palace, West Palace appear highly coincident in their critique toward the existing power system and their efforts to
deconstruct it. The treatment of homosexuality as powerful and potentially subversive demonstrates both authors’ concerns about gay people and their hope for a more tolerant and diversified society.

4. Individuality and Community: Different Concerns

Despite the fact that *East Palace, West Palace* and *Angels in America* have many in common, they do, to a large extent, differ from each other. For a start *Angels in America* is obviously more ambitious and much grander in scale. Unlike the simpler plot in *East Palace, West Palace*, The complexity of *Angels in America* shows that it is not just a gay play, but as its title suggests, is a play “on national themes” and therefore open for interpretation from various perspectives. But even in the more specific field of homosexuality, *Angels in America* is still distinct from *East Palace, West Palace* in that it stresses the idea of “community” while *East Palace, West Palace* emphasizes “individuality”, the more private and personal concept.

Tony Kushner is quoted as saying that “the question I am trying to ask is how broad is a community’s embrace. How wide does it reach?”[38] Indeed in *Angels in America* homosexuality is not a unifying identity for all the central male characters, but has different dimensions. From the most loving and kind character Belize to the hated and evil Roy, and from the AIDS-infected but brave Prior to the healthy but guilt-driven Louis, Kushner skillfully puts together gay characters from different ethnic groups, religions, social status, political stances and health conditions to form a diversified community. The quarrels, betrayals and hostility among them symbolize the troubles and crisis of the old community in *Millennium Approaches* and in *Perestroika* there is the suggestion for a new order with the two key words “blessing” and “forgiveness”[39]: Roy is finally forgiven after his death by Belize; Prior forgives Louis, accepting the fact that his love has its limits. In short the conflicts in Part I are resolved by the establishment of a new community in Part II, a community that is, in Belize’s words, built on “love and justice”. This sense of community is reinforced at the end of the play, when Prior announces as a prophet that “[t]he world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. [...] You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: More Life. The Great Work begins”[40]. In this monologue Prior points out that real progress means that everyone should become “citizens”, or organic parts of a community. Furthermore, by directly blessing everyone in the theatre, Prior, as a representative of the author, is apparently suggesting a greater vision of an enlarged community which includes everyone. As Li remarks, “Prior’s ‘Great Work’ here is no longer
individual progress, instead, it's linked to the very political and public work of entire human kind\textsuperscript{[41]}. Evidently, the focus on the community serves as a recurrent as well as binding theme throughout the play.

In *East, Palace, West Palace*, however, the picture seems fundamentally different. This modern Chinese gay drama puts much more emphasis on personal experiences rather than collective ones. Although the author does briefly mention the social environment by describing the park and some of A Lan's friends, the central clues revolve around the experiences of the two main characters. On one hand, it is A Lan's memories: his difficult relationships with his mother, his fear of heterosexuality brought by a rape case and his sexual encounters with men as an adult. On the other hand, it is Xiao Shi's hearing of such homosexual stories and the gradual arousal of his inner homosexual desires. It is believed by some that *East Palace, West Palace* is in fact a play about homosexuality, Xiao Shi's voyeurism and the two protagonists' sadomasochism\textsuperscript{[42]}. Although it does involve gay identity and power subversion, these topics are discussed in a private manner. That is to say Xiao Shi and A Lan's experience appears highly individual, belonging only to themselves at a particular time in a particular space rather than a political issue that can be universalized. *East Palace, West Palace*’s difference from *Angels in America* is also made obvious at its ending when A Lan concludes the play by saying “Go and love him! Go and love him!”\textsuperscript{[43]} The singular form of “him” as contrasted to a broad term of “every one” in *Angels in America* and the more intimate nature of the word “love” compared with the visibly more political reference of “the Great Work” demonstrates the diverging focuses of these two plays. While Wang Xiaobo is attempting to make homosexuality acceptable by showing that it exists in human nature and is a matter of individual choice through an intriguing but somehow isolated case, Kushner “makes the gay alternative not only thinkable, but also necessary and inevitable”\textsuperscript{[44]} with grander design and in-depth analysis of the gay community. It is fair to say that to a certain extent, *East Palace, West Palace*, like many Chinese gay literary works, is still more private and personal, while *Angels in America* is undoubtedly public and political.

III. Conclusion

Through an overview of gay literature in modern China and America, we can see that the development of gay literature in 20\textsuperscript{th} century in the two countries is uneven. Modern Chinese gay literature is much less in number and more marginalized from
mainstream culture although important works did emerge in the 1920s, the 1980s and after the 1990s. The form of modern Chinese gay literature is also mainly confined to fiction with little development in other genres in most part of the 20th century. In the United States, gay literature becomes increasingly important during the past century with a balanced development in all genres. Additionally, while modern Chinese gay literature tends to be more marginal and personal, American gay literary works is more open and political. These diverging qualities are also reflected in the comparison between two important dramas in the East and the West in the 1990s: East Palace, West Palace by Wang Xiaobo and Angels in America by Tony Kushner. Although both of them address similar issues such as gay identity and power structure and are subversive in their nature, Angels in America is much more ambitious and political with a focus on the gay community while East Palace, West Palace is comparatively confined to personal experiences with the treatment of homosexuality as an individual preference. The similarities of these two plays show worldwide concerns about the issue of homosexuality: how gay people deal with their identity and how such identity becomes associated with power relations in the society. The differences between them are demonstration of different developmental phases of gay literature in China and America. Chinese gay literature still needs more tolerance and attention in the mainstream before it can truly speak for homosexual people. Homosexuality should be more than an experience or identity; it is also a political and social status and, more importantly, part of a larger and more diversified community.

Notes:

[1] [4] [6] [8] Wang Ling. “The Changes of the Description of Homosexuality in Modern and Contemporary Literature” (Diss. Northeast Normal University, 2005) 4, 7, 15, 19.

[2] Zhang Zhizhong. “On the Evil and Tyrannical Love in the Works of Yu Da-fu and Wang Xiao-bo”, Journal of Hainan Normal University 19.1 (2006) 33-39.

[3] Tian Xiaofei. “The Razor-edge of Half a Scissors”, Du Shu 4 (2004) 159-165.

[5] Fang Furuan. Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture (New York: Plenum, 1991) 141.

[7] Remy Cristi. “Gay Literature from China: in Search of a Happy Ending”, IIAS Newsletter 31(2003).

[9] [10] [11] [12] “American Literature: Gay Male, 1900-1960.” glbtq. n.d. Web. 6 Sept. 2012.

[13] “American Literature: Gay Male, Post-Stonewall.” glbtq. n.d. Web. 6 Sept. 2012.
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