

Schoolgirl Romance and Female Same-Sex love in Eileen Chang's *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian*: toward a tortured and tortuous Po's narrative

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Eileen Chang's autobiographical *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian*, which was published in Taiwan and China in 2004, has aroused debates about whether the work is authentic or not; it has also aroused the “Chang-fever” revealed in various cultural products.<sup>1</sup> One reason readers suspect that this is not actually written by Chang is the obvious homoerotic description. This is in direct contrast to the fact that readers' voyeuristic interest has mostly centered on Eileen Chang's two heterosexual romances and has neglected the possibility of her representation of same-sex love relationship<sup>2</sup> in the subsequent “Chang-fever”. Many scholars in Chang studies have even written articles from seemingly objective positions to prove that the heterosexual anecdotes in her novels did occur in her life, so that it has become a convention in Chang studies to connect her real life and her novels

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\*Thanks to Amie's turning my original version into a po-narrative, thanks for Ying's precise translation of "tortours po", thanks for Naifei Ding, Jen-peng Liu and Fran Martin's reading and suggestions.

1 See Tian Zhiling's critical comments. Four questions about Eileen Chang's posthumous work have been published in China: Nanfang Daily. 2004 Feb. 24. Arguing that *Tongxue shaonian dou buJian* is not published until Chang died several years ago to q Euro-American uestion it.

(<http://www.nanfangdaily.com.cn/southnews/tszk/nfdsb/whzg/200402240688.asp>.)

2 I use the term “same-sex love” instead of “homosexual” within Euro-American identity politics and following the point of Tze-lan D. Sang that this category refracted through the Japanese translation on romantic friendships between female students in modern educational institutions. In different view with Sang, I would describe a female sub-gender system within same-sex love later in this article.

primarily through her heterosexual experience. However, not surprisingly, the homosexual description in *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian* has rarely been discussed in Chang studies either in Taiwan or China.

*Tongxue shaonian dou bujian* is a first-person narrative about Zhao Jue and her intimate but competitive and jealous friendship with Enjuan from the 30s through the 70s. During their boarding school time in 30s Shanghai, Zhao Jue is at first a thin and weak girl who falls in love with the basketball player He Surong, but their relationship ends in homophobia. At the same time Enjuan falls in love with Zhiqi, who is good at dancing and sports, but all of them choose heterosexual marriage later in life. After going to college, Enjuan chooses the heterosexual marriage that Zhao Jue refuses; the different attitudes toward heterosexual marriage make them estranged from each other. Enjuan is accepted by the society because she conforms to the legal and cultural category of woman as a wife, but Zhao Jue becomes a single woman who supports herself. At the end of the novel, the two women meet in America, where Enjuan has already become the wife of a government official. Zhao Jue feels ashamed and angry about their socio-economic differences, and she cannot find any way in which she is not inferior to Enjuan. Therefore, she accuses Enjuan of not being able to forget her love for Zhiqi, which is why Enjuan is never really in love with her husband.

The homosexual description in *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian* has rarely been discussed in Chang studies in Taiwan until Zhou Fen-Ling's article in May 2005. In her article, Zhou Fen-Ling

defines Chang's two texts, *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian* and *Bu Shin de Ta*, as same-sex love pieces and argues that "same-sex love relationship takes shape in a secret world within heterosexual marriage, and heterosexual marriage in turn would not be sustainable without the same-sex love relationship"(Zhou Fen-Ling 2005: 69). While Zhou Fen-Ling interprets same-sex relationship in a positive way, Chinese Chang studies scholar Chen Zishan's reviews exhibit more anxiety. Chen Zishan takes the erotic same-sex relationship in *Bu Shin de Ta* as "strong attachment of innocent friendship" on the one hand, and on the other hand, he briefly explains the reason why Chang describes same-sex love by saying that "those famous writers in the 30s such as Ding ling, Yu Dafu, Ba Jin all wrote homosexual stories" (Chen Zishan 2004:177-181) to affirm that this is not a big deal. Taking these two readings into consideration, Zhou defines the relationship as same-sex love while Chen takes a reticent attitude and calls it same-sex friendship. Such different attitudes reflect the different reception of Chang's work within different geocultural contexts, which is a topic I would like to pursue in future research.

In Chang studies, Chang Hsiao-Hung is the only researcher who has tried to read Eileen Chang using American queer theory. She challenges heterocentric readings by using Eve Sedgwick's queer reading to bring out Eileen Chang. Furthermore, she borrows the "female homosocial networks" conception from Sedgwick to blur the boundary between female passionate friendship and lesbian identity, so as to contradict the saying "situational female same-sex love" (Chang Hsiao-Hung 2000: 13-18). Being limited by the textual evidence, *Tongxue shaonian* had not yet been published, although Chang Hsiao-Hung tries to bring out the queer subject and subtext in Eileen Chang's texts,

she still has to take Eileen Chang as a heterosexual writer. Following the publication of Eileen Chang's autobiographical novel *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian*, the heterocentric Chang studies scholars have become interested in Chang's sexual identity as Zhou Fen-Ling has noted, but still confirm Chang as a heterosexual woman because of her two heterosexual marriages. Such statements are based on the assumption that her eventual marriage is the result of a prior heterosexual identity, and repeat the "situational lesbian" concept in ignoring a married woman's intimate same-sex experience. However, Zhou Fen-Ling also points out that the intimate female friendships in Eileen Chang's same-sex love texts were quite romantic and sexless, whereas Chen Zishan reads it as portraying "boarding school girls' inner sexuality undisguised" (Zhou Fen-Ling 2005:70). As a Taiwan tongzhi studies researcher, I would like to follow Chang Hsiao-Hung's queer reading to bring out erotic feeling and passionate friendship in *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian* as a response to still largely heterocentric tendencied Chang studies. I read *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian* as a tortured and tortuous Po's story, a female same-sex love narrative, which occupies a top position in the "Chinese" female intellectual hierarchy; I would like to discuss how this narrative reflects Po's way of facing gender conformity and homophobia, as well as their struggle when they are conscious of their own desire toward a T.

### **May Fourth intellectual hierarchy and Same-sex love taboo**

In this discussion I would take May Fourth cultural hierarchy, or status-class, into important consideration and try to combine those arguments about what constitute the same-sex taboo in May

Fourth neologism. Tze-lan D. Sang emphasizes the influence of modernization introducing European sexological theory to China via Japanese translation in the 1920s and 1930s, by which opposite-sex romantic love was achieved in part through the abjection of same-sex love (Tze-lan D. Sang 2003:12-20). Sang's idea that binary gender system in May Fourth had aroused male intellectuals' anxiety about women's new opportunities confirms Liu's point about the Confucian "sage-king" moral hierarchy, one that supposes a pre-given totality naturalized heterosexual sex system "Yang(man)/Ying(woman) in accordance with existing political/social relations such as the king/subject, father/son, husband/wife binarisms. Within this hierarchy, the morally inferior are proposed as contrary or subordinate to the morally superior and yet are entirely encompassed by the latter. (Liu 2000:49-72) Liu demonstrates how such a pre-modern discourse pertaining to the modern notion of "quality" and replaces women under men in a Foucaudian perspective. I would carry the inquiry further that the same sex love taboo is not only shaped by the western modern sexological theory; the heterosexual "sage-king" moral hierarchy also forms and reforms it. This would help explain the May Fourth female intellectual Zhao's complicated attitude toward her best friend but also competitor in female intellectual hierarchy. On the surface Zhao takes a modern mind in believing in romantic love, accusing Enjuan of never loving her husband for she feels inferior to Enjuan; but the truth is that she hides her pre-modern belief of "sage-king" moral discipline that a woman should be heterosexual and loyal to her husband. The "sage-king" moral discipline works on the passionate and sensitive schoolgirl Zhao Jue, forcing her to hide her strong desire toward her classmate to the point of self disavowal. This deployment work through reticent

force as Jen-peng Liu and Naifei Ding explain “how a reticent deployment of homophobic repression works to allow those unspeakable things to exist as long as they remain in the shadow – the reticent hierarchic order is what is preserved. Such containment itself was, in the particular ‘Chinese’ space/time of 80’s and 90’s Taiwan, a sufficiently effective form of homophobia and discrimination (Jen-peng Liu and Naifei Ding 2005:19-20)” Chang never points out the same-sex love taboo and homophobia, but her reticent narrative shows the illiberal attitude in the May Fourth era. Homophobia is everywhere in the novel like a ghost. There is a great example when Zhao Jue cuts off her hair and dresses in a man’s suit to avoid the heterosexual marriage her parents propose; however, while hiding in a cemetery, she was asked to leave by the cemetery guard. The narrative explains that she was recognized as *mo-jian-dang* (Chang, Eileen 2004:24-25). *Mo-jian-dang* (mirror-rubbing gang) is the slang term for homosexual persons; this derogatory term is a heterosexual image of female same-sex sex intercourse in 30s Shanghai. That the narrative unintentionally uses this term in a passage that seems to reveal the homophobia of the 30s actually shows a more complicated narrative logic toward homosexuals; the homophobia in this narrative seems not to be mentioned anywhere specifically, but it is actually everywhere. On the one hand the school authority tacitly allows those passionate friendships in the school but establishes many rules such as “There is a rule that you can’t go to another’s room” (Chang, Eileen 2004:14) so as to avoid the sexual intercourse between school girls, but this reason is never stated. If we compare this rule with those sex relationships that happened between women described in sexology texts in the same era, such as the book on the history of sex written by Dr. Chang Jingsheng in 1926, clearly

this is a rule to prohibit two women from sleeping in the same bed and having sex. In phrasing the rule in this way, within the "sage-king" moral hierarchy which everyone bears in mind, the authority need not admit that there is the possibility of same-sex love relationship between school girls; it only has to establish some rules to avoid/prohibit it. Under such repression, only spiritual romantic love can be allowed because it can be understood as romantic friendship, like those common ceremonies repeated in May fourth texts, such as walking arm in arm or "sending someone a memorable gift after her graduating."

I hold that reticent homophobia can be read in Chang's text as well. Beyond romantic friendships, those erotic feelings between girls are feelings that couldn't be told; they are the unspeakables. Zhao Jue said "I didn't tell anybody about He Surong's letter, not even Enjuan" (Chang, Eileen 2004: 23); her own desire toward He caused the first homophobia to break out, which is also the first time she comes out to herself. Under the pressure of same-sex love taboo, she can only transfer her desire to He Surong's personal objects, to touching them in secret. It reflects two directions of homophobia, inside and outside; she is afraid of her own same-sex desire and knows that she would be punished if her same-sex desire were discovered. Although afraid of coming to the light, her same-sex desire is so strong that she cannot repress it. The narrative tells of same-sex erotic feeling in an "exaggerated" action: Zhou waits for He Surong outside the toilet stealthily in order to use the same lavatory seat He Surong has just used, so that she can have physical contact with He indirectly (Chang, Eileen 2004:19-20). Such a strongly erotic act is just what mainstream Chang scholars like Chen Zishan are afraid of, and is exactly what causes them to

refuse to admit that their great female heterosexual author Eileen Chang would write such a queer piece, not to mention the possibility of bringing out Eileen Chang as a bisexual writer.

### **T/Po reading and the love that was never forgotten**

Drawing the modern Chinese lesbian subcultural formation, Sang read the masculinized female protagonist Zheng Xiuyue in Yu Dafu's *Ta shi yige ruo nüzi* (She is a weak woman; 1932) as an inverse, third-sexed woman (Sang1003:153-154), and argues that Yu was influenced sexology. Not agreeing with her, Fran Martin in her recent work reads Yu's story as illustrating particularly clearly the bifurcating mechanism in modern representations of *nütongxinglian* that relies on a demonized same-sex love that is the property of gender-transgressive women in order to symbolically defend an idealized same-sex love that is the property of gender-normative women. In this sense, I borrow the conception from Fran Martin arguing about late twentieth century Taiwan *nütongxinglian*, and try to read the similar secondary T/Po in May Fourth Chinese. I would read Zhao Jue and Enjuan as Po, and Zhiqian and He Surong as T as secondary genders within female same-sex love to bring out the female same-sex relationship in this text. I read the relationship between Zhao Jue and He Surong, and Enjuan and Zhiqian as based on erotic desire rather than what Zhou defines as sexless romantic love, and of course different from Chen, who refuses to see it as going beyond friendship. Instead, I will read their relations as based on T/Po dynamics, and use the specific mode of same-sex desire based on paired gender differences to show how female same-sex desire works in this text.



He Surong is a superstar on campus. Being tall, good-looking, and short-haired, she is very articulate, good at basketball, and passionate about politics. Moreover, she is always straightforward with her feelings. After she leaves for Beijing to go to college, she writes a letter inviting Zhao Jue to join a camp fire. On the other hand, Zhao Jue, the Po, is a shy girl, she can only show her feelings quietly, or even tortuously. The overly direct passion of He Surong arouses Zhao's desire and pushes at the limits of May Fourth female intellectual taboo inside Zhao's mind. When Zhao Jue receives He Surong's invitation for the camp fire, this relationship ends in sexophobia and also homophobia. Zhao Jue explains to herself out of the blue that the camp fire that He Surong has invited her to is actually a gathering for communists, but there is not a single word about communism in He's letter; only romance (Eileen Chang 2004:22-23). That Zhao makes such a strange connection can only be explained by the anecdote that many years ago when Zhao Jue went to a little university city in the US with her husband to watch a camp fire during the anti-war movement, she was reminded of He Surong immediately and of the romantic feeling that she had felt (Chang, Eileen 2004:42-45). Zhao Jue accuses Enjuan for being a wife who nonetheless has never forgotten her female love. Zhao Jue herself is just the same as Enjuan but refuses to admit it to the extent that she announces that she had already forgotten her girls' school girlfriend after having two heterosexual relationships with men. I read this as actually an expression of her strong disavowal. If we read Zhao Jue as a tortured Po, such disavowal was not only directed toward the same-sex relationship but mainly toward her love for He Surong. Because Zhao Jue longs for someone to love her without wanting anything from her, she takes love as such a pure thing that she

does not allow anyone to contaminate it. So she ceaselessly searches for ulterior motives, and waits for someone to bring her true love. Unlike the girl school romance, marriage always involves other motivations, thus, through Zhao Jue's confession about relationships just after seeing He, Chang indirectly affirms that the feeling that is called friendship in the novel is love:

When love is a means to attain something it is not true love, she thinks. Those relationships that are based on other considerations, such as the fact that one should get married, or have a son to carry on the family name, or improve one's own life, are not love. (19)

I suggest that the intellectual Po takes a tortuous, indirect way to resist the powerful force of gender conformity and homophobia while T were forced to fight back in a painful, violent and loud way. The Po's different strategy is a reaction to being asked to be feminine **and** heterosexual. Although Pos look feminine, they are nonetheless under the pressure of gender conformity just as Judith Halberstam explains a gender conformity that is demanded of all girls, not just masculine girls. What is more important, Halberstam argues that gender conformity made adolescence for girls a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression.

Gender conformity is pressed onto all girls, not just tomboys, [ ..... ] Female adolescence represents the crisis of coming of age as a girl in a male-dominated society. If adolescence for boys represents a rite of passage (much celebrated in Western literature in the form of the bildungsroman), and an ascension to some

version (however attenuated) of social power, for in the context of female adolescence that the tomboy instincts of millions of girls are remodeled into compliant forms of femininity. ( Judith Halberstam 1998:6.)

Unlike masculine girls, that is, tomboys or Ts, who were banished from gender conformity in their early adolescence, growing up as a Po means to survive amidst restraint, punishment, and repression. Pos may seem to obey the gender conformity, but that is exactly the way they produce a secret space in the chink to hide their own desire under high homophobic pressure since adolescence. As I said before, the first time she knew her desire toward someone having same sex with her, is the first time her homophobia burst out. She comes out to herself at the same time but knows early on she has to show her desire or love with exceptional caution following the logic of the reticent 'sage-king' moral hierarchy, like Zhao who feels that she can only touch He's sweater or the toilet she used. This different survival strategy and real living situation is represented in intellectual T/po narratives. In the lecture that Fran Martin gave at NCU in April 2005 on Chinese Popular Cultures and the Lesbian Imaginary, she uses *memorial mode* to explain the endless nostalgia toward the lost and memorialized schoolgirl romance.

In this story, sentiment (qing)—which could be translated “love”—between women is always-already long-lost, receding ever further backward into memory's abyss.

Most powerfully present in the narrative through nostalgia's mediation, love between women is figured as the memorial subject par excellence.

Tortuous Po, as *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian* reveals, memorializes in an indirect way. She won't be reminded of her forbidden love in adolescence until a concrete scene suddenly shows up in front of her face from many years ago. Thus, a camp fire in a university city in the US in 70s reminds Zhao Jue of a romantic feeling He created, and all of a sudden, she has nowhere to run or avoid her own memory. The strange, unreasonable connection between this camp fire and her feeling about He displays the tortuous Po's complicated disavowal memory structure: her passionate love is deeply repressed but all the more remembered.

### **Tortuous and tortured Po's narrative**

In this article I suggest that the middle-class female same-sex love formation in May Fourth Chinese found in Eileen Chang' *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian* was not only influenced by western modernization through the introduction of European sexological theory in China via Japanese translation in the 1920s and 1930s, but also under strong power of inherent Chinese pre-modern institutional pressure like cultural hierarchy, and the "sage-king" moral discipline, which constitute same-sex love taboo. The specific female same-sex desire mode works in T/Po dynamics and produces different living strategy; while Ts tend to show their feelings directly, Pos would turn into a *memorial mode* as Fran Martin suggests. I would carry the inquiry further to call such Pos as tortured (by the institutional pressure) and tortuous. The protagonist Zhao Jue's depressive passion is never released and transforms into a never forgotten secret, to the point of becoming a wound that no one knows for 30 years, making out of her a tortured and tortuous Po. Not only is

the protagonist represented as tortuous, wordless, and self-disavowing character, but Eileen Chang's narrative also reflects such characteristics. Eileen Chang's strategy of depicting the characters' emotional intensity is not saying these emotions out loud, but rather revealing them indirectly, through the description of material details such as He's sweater or her short hair, and how Zhao is attached to them. Those words about love were all kept on the tip of the tongue, and never slipped out of protagonists' mouths.

Rethinking the different situation of intellectual T and Po under the pressure of gender conformity and compulsory heterosexuality, I will take Taiwan Lazi canonical text *Journal of a Crocodile* (Qiu Miaojin's: 1994) as an intellectual T narrative in contrast to Chang's intellectual Po narrative. Though written in 90s Taiwan, *Journal of a Crocodile* still reveals a similar intellectual school environment and the reticent pressure seen in *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian*. Fran Martin explains the similarities in schoolgirl romance between May Forth era and 70s Taiwan in terms of a reception. I would follow Fran Martin's opinion and take *Journal of a Crocodile* as a piece of Second Wave schoolgirl romance. *Journal of a Crocodile* was read as a violent T narrative, which directly reveals the protagonist's same-sex desire and passion, and furthermore, her wounds from being hurt by the authorities and social institutions. The loudness and repetition of passion or hurt feelings in *Journal of a Crocodile* are read by Jen-peng liu and Naifei Ding as the narrative staging of a "forced" confession (liu and Ding 1999) through juxtaposition with Elaine Scarry's analysis of the structure of pain in the context of (political) physical torture. In their reading, physical torture is a metaphor for gender conformity and compulsory heterosexuality forcing the prisoner to feel and

cry for pain, in order to display the torturer's great power. The prisoner's (the T protagonist's) voice and confession not only reflects how badly the prisoner hurts but can be understood as an act of self-betrayal.

Torture is a process which not only converts but announces the conversion of every conceivable aspect of the event and the environment into an agent of pain. It is not accidental that in the torturers' idiom the room in which the brutality occurs [ ..... ] built on these repeated acts of display and having as its purpose the production of a fantastic illusion of power, torture is a grotesque piece of compensatory drama (Elaine Scarry 1985: 28).

Torture is a display of the torturer's power through prisoner's pain. The level of the pain is beyond knowledge; the torturer can only figure it out through the prisoner's voice. The louder the prisoner cries the more powerful the torturer feels. The strong T narrative is like the voice of a prisoner, which thus satisfies the regime. But a tortured and tortuous Po endures; she keeps silent far beyond the pain she can sustain. In *Tongxue shaonian dou bujian*, Eileen Chang emphasizes the description of things that cannot be told, the unspeakables. This is achieved through the protagonist Zhao Jue's toughness, as she emphasizes once again "I didn't tell anybody about He Surong's letter, not even Enjuan" (23) but also through letting Zhao Jue transfer her desire to He Surong's personal objects, touching them in secret. The tortured and tortuous Po narrative shows a sensitive consciousness of the high pressure and costs of cultural hierarchy, 'sage-king' moral discipline,

gender conformity and compulsory heterosexuality and tries to survive in silence, even with the pain that no one knows.

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